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## Easthampton school panel OKs budget, expects cuts

By CATHERINE BAUM  
Staff Writer

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Friday, March 13, 2009

EASTHAMPTON - School officials anticipate the city will not fund their proposed \$16.1 million level-service budget, which could mean 30 fewer staff positions, increased class sizes and fees for parents, and decreases in supplies and services.

The School Committee Thursday unanimously approved a fiscal 2010 \$16.1 million school budget, which Mayor Michael Tautznik will consider when he processes the city budget next month or in May. Committee members reached consensus on the figure in two public budget work sessions.

"While we understand that this budget may not be totally realistic, we feel it's really important for the city to understand that these kids are our future and we need to give them the best education we can, so that's why we're asking for a level-funded budget," said Lori Ingraham, of the finance subcommittee. "We want them to be great citizens."

The request represents a 5 percent increase, or \$750,000, to the School Department's current \$15.3 million budget. This level-service budget would allow the department to maintain what it has provided for Easthampton students, taking into account increased costs for contracted employee benefits, mandates and other obligations.

### A balancing act

Member Eric Yates noted the challenge in developing a budget with both expensive requirements and quality education for students in mind.

"There are some really tough pills to swallow here," Yates said. "We continue to see other costs skyrocketing around the educational mandates ... It's important for us to be advocates for the district and that's why I'm pleased to endorse the budget."

The reality, school officials say, is that the city will not be able to support it. To reduce by \$750,000 back to this year's budget, the panel plans to account for \$65,000 in elimination and retirements of secretarial positions; \$30,000 in increased bus fees of \$100 per student; and \$320,000 in elimination of sixth-grade middle school alternative education and special education teachers, elementary math and reading specialists, half-time high school guidance and social studies teachers and day tutors.

Also included is \$17,000 in increased sports and building-use fees and reduction in custodial overtime; the use of \$70,000 anticipated in special needs reimbursements; and \$40,000 saved from an outside food service contractor, to be hired to help offset food service deficits.

If the city cannot provide funds for next fiscal year at the level of this fiscal year, school officials plan to cut \$600,000 in seventh- and eighth-grade staff, technician work, high school special education, six paraprofessionals; tutors, instructional and general supplies; and five additional professional staff.

"It's incomplete - the cuts could be deeper or they could be less," said Superintendent of Schools Deborah Carter.



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Meanwhile, federal funds on the horizon may assist in retaining some positions, but with restrictions. State Secretary of Education Paul Reville expects the state to receive \$1.8 billion, \$3 billion for schools in President Obama's stimulus package.

"We certainly hope to use it, but I'm not sure how it's all going to work in the long run," Carter said.

Before the committee approved the budget, member Peter Gunn noted modest additional needs not included in the budget proposal, among them library and math instructional materials and an elementary after-school remedial program.

"These would be things that in good times we'd like to include in our budget," Gunn said. "It's extraordinary that we can't afford to even consider those, but we're anxious to include them in the future."

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