

Easthampton schools facing new round of belt-tightening

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer



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EASTHAMPTON - A \$535,000 cut in the School Department translates to a 7 percent reduction in staff, working with more students and less money than the district had two years ago, according to Superintendent of Schools Deborah Carter.

Mayor Michael Tautznik has proposed a fiscal 2010 school budget of \$14.8 million, which is about \$1.3 million less than the School Committee's \$16.1 million level-service budget request, and half a million dollars less than what the city proposed for the schools for fiscal 2009.

"Common sense dictates there's nothing normal about what's coming out," said Carter. "You can't operate normally with less money than you had two years ago."

A combination of layoffs, nonrenewals and resignations will add up to the loss of nine teachers, seven paraprofessionals, one support staff position and the district's grant facilitator.

"Because we have kept a very tight budget for a long, long time, creatively distributing funds gets harder and harder to do every year," Carter said. "Every year you scratch your head."

Last year the city proposed \$15.3 million for schools for fiscal 2009, but took back about \$370,000 midyear due to a budget shortfall, leaving the current school budget under \$14.9 million.

Carter will present a shortened version of the budget and its implications to the City Council Finance Subcommittee in a budget review session Wednesday at 6 p.m. in the Municipal Building.

"It isn't pretty, but it isn't desperate," Carter said. "We'll survive this. We did this to try to have the least impact on students as we possibly could."

Staff, program cuts at five schools

Cuts in custodial overtime, MCAS tutoring, professional development, instructional materials and computer technician hours were made before school officials mailed pink slips to staff last week.

On the bright side, about \$275,000 in federal stimulus money is anticipated to save three positions and transfer three others.

Staffing cuts are spread throughout the district, but are most prominent at White Brook Middle School. Layoffs at White Brook include a half-time guidance counselor, full-time alternative classroom teacher, sixth-grade teacher, seventh- and eighth-grade English language arts teacher, special education teacher and internal suspension paraprofessional.

On the chopping block at Easthampton High School are about four and a half positions, with losses in guidance, social studies, drama, special education and science. Some half-time positions will be gone while other full-time positions will be reduced to half-time positions. One full-time position will be laid off, according to Principal Jeffrey Sealander.

"There will be a slight increase in some class sizes and an increase in the number of students

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guidance counselors are responsible for," Sealander said. "Anytime you cut personnel you have an effect."

The elementary schools will lose six kindergarten paraprofessionals, a literary specialist and a second-grade teacher at Center Elementary School. About three to four students will be added to the district's remaining five second-grade classes.

The loss of kindergarten paraprofessionals is a big loss, said Maple Elementary School Principal Timothy Luce, because with students that young, "two adults in the room make it possible for individual attention."

Center and Pepin Elementary Schools principal Robert Orlando said he is looking into an alternative volunteer reading program to take the place of a reading program for kindergartners.

"We can't use the lack of funding as an excuse to not provide educational opportunities for our kids," Orlando said.

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