

Area schools not beset by woes facing Greenfield educators

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[Originally published on: Wednesday, February 13, 2008]

Factors contributing to a crisis in school financing in Greenfield do not appear to be causing similar trouble in other area schools.

Spot checks with school officials in Hampshire County find that while money is tight, districts are on track with their spending plans.

But trouble is on the horizon for some.

"We have no deficits. We have a fine budget for this year," said Easthampton Superintendent Deborah Carter. "The problem comes for next year."

Greenfield's crisis stems from the \$945,000 budget deficit that arose midyear in the town's school spending plan. The deficit developed because of higher than expected salary expenses, energy and transportation costs and tuition for special education students, among other factors.

Greenfield Mayor Christine Forgey announced Monday that she plans to apply \$500,000 from a stabilization account to the deficit, reducing by about half the need for midyear staffing cuts. Her plan needs Town Council approval.

Amherst on track

In Amherst, there are no known shortfalls in this year's regional schools budgets, Superintendent Jere Hochman said.

"Right now we are on course within budget planning to end the year within each budget," Hochman said in an email.

"The Pelham and Amherst budgets are being expended as planned and should end the year on target. The Regional Schools budget, too, is on target and we just now are receiving midyear updates on tuitions and other variables that cause the budget to fluctuate," Hochman said.

"In short, as we monitor expenditures, encumbrances and balances, all three budgets seem to be on course," he said.

Northampton picture

Susan Wright, business manager for Northampton schools, said the budget will be tight from now until June 30, but she does not foresee deficits. "But I'm not anticipating a surplus, either," she said.

"History is your best guide," she said, in mapping out long-term budgetary issues. "If you're monitoring everything on a monthly basis, you can catch a problem before it become an issue."

The biggest unforeseen issue recently, Wright said, was the \$40,000 outlay to repair a series of cracks in the boiler at JFK Middle School.

The regular checks done on the equipment may have prevented a much greater cost, she said. To balance that expenditure, some routine maintenance requests may have to be put on hold until June, said Wright.

A report for this fiscal year prepared by Wright shows expenditures of \$11,151,661 from an original budget of \$22,732,823, including the payroll of Feb. 7.

The report shows Northampton as having used 49.2 percent of the budget thus far, with \$11,654,422 still available, she said last week.

Wright said payroll is the biggest unknown when preparing budgets, particularly when an employee on extended sick leave is factored in.

"Budgeting accurately from the beginning and not hiring people that haven't been budgeted for is very important," said Wright.

Hoped-for increase

In Easthampton, Carter said her department will be looking for a 6.3 percent increase, representing about \$953,000, in next year's budget, to accommodate required special needs services, program needs and to increase part-time staffing. The budget increase includes \$453,000 in level services needed to function - with no positions planned for cuts or program additions.

This year's school budget in Easthampton comes to \$15 million.

"It's not a lot of money when you think of a budget the size of our budget," Carter said. "We made it modest because we knew it was a tight year."

Two special needs students have to go from their out-of-district day placement program to a residential placement program based on their educational needs, costing \$300,000 more to the district. "That has a big impact on our level-service budget," Carter said. "There's not much we can do about it."

The department plans to request \$200,000 for program needs and to increase part-time staffing. Requests for the high school include a library paraprofessional, a half-time social studies teacher, a half-time guidance counselor and supervisors for Saturday detention and a student support center.

The high school is receiving top priority, she said, because it has the largest enrollment increase. Carter noted the high school has grown from 406 students in the 2003-2004 school year to 526 students this year. "I believe the money has to follow the kids."

Other requests included in the \$200,000 are busing for the after-school remedial program, after-school enrichment program needs for elementary students, a half-time elementary technology specialist, a media specialist at the White Brook Middle School library and a half-time adjustment counselor and half-time Title I teacher for elementary schools.

"We know we're not going to get all this money," Carter said. "It's a very tight year for the city, for the state - and we're going to have to go back to the drawing board and make some difficult decisions."

Gazette reporter Mary Carey contributed to this story.