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Colorado schools spread word on cuts

Warn of fewer teachers, reduced class offerings and larger class sizes

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The Denver Post

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School districts girding for draconian cuts in state funding are sending out surveys to parents, querying staff and asking community members to help figure out where to cut and how deeply.

Colorado districts have not yet finalized their 2010-11 budgets, which are being pared to close a state funding gap of at least \$260 million.

But they have begun to indicate dramatic cuts are approaching — fewer teachers, reduced class offerings and larger class sizes.

Some districts are mulling eliminating middle school sports, making families pay for children to ride the bus or reducing high school credit

requirements.

"It's penny-wise and pound-foolish," said Tad Stephens, whose sons attend Marshdale Elementary in Evergreen. "They are decreasing the level of services, and the state is mandating higher test scores. Something has to give."

Districts have posted online surveys to gauge support for specific cuts, convened focus groups with city leaders to help with decisions and are meeting with parents and staff to develop new ideas.

Aurora Public Schools' superintendent posted a podcast on the district's website explaining the process. Jefferson County has an online webcast about the budget crisis. And Boulder Valley Superintendent Chris King is hosting a dozen community forums to get the word out that his district faces a cut of \$12 million to \$25 million.

"This isn't going to be shaving here or there," said Briggs Gamblin, spokesman for Boulder Valley schools. "There are going to be significant cuts all through the district — every operational level and into every school."

"There is nothing good here"

Jefferson County — the state's largest district — expects nearly \$40 million in cuts over the next two years, on top of \$23 million the district plans to pull from its reserves.

The district has posted documents on its

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website of proposed cuts that, among other things, call for eliminating the positions of 59 elementary school teachers and 37 middle school teachers.

"There is nothing good here," Superintendent Cindy Stevenson said.

For most districts, large cuts will translate into layoffs, furloughs or pay reductions.

"For us, 83 percent is salary and benefits," Aurora Superintendent John Barry said. "This is the worst fiscal crisis that Aurora Public Schools has faced in modern memory. The cuts will be evident. We are trying to stay away from the classroom as much as we possibly can."

Today, the Aurora district is sending surveys home to parents, seeking their opinions about 29 potential cuts ranging from teacher layoffs to increasing the square footage custodians must cover.

Tonight, the district convenes a budget advisory committee that includes teachers union representatives, parents, Aurora City Manager Ron Miller and University of Colorado Denver chancellor Roy Wilson.

In the neighboring Cherry Creek School District, the news isn't so dire. But even with the help of a mill levy passed by voters in 2008, \$13 million must be cut from the budget.

School fees may be part of solution

Douglas County is still reeling from its failed 2008 bond issue, and the district expects to slice at least \$31 million from its budget next school year.

Douglas County, too, conducted an online survey. It showed, among other things, 68 percent of parents are against paying \$100 student fees for a language program, but 85 percent would support increased fees for their children to play high school athletics.

"I hate to say it, but the fees are going to be a small part of the solution," Douglas County school board member Dan Gerken said. "The lion's share is going to be a combination of dismissing employees or paying them less. You can't get around it when you are getting close to 10 percent being cut from your budget. That is the equivalent of a 100-year flood in education funding."

On Wednesday, Adams Five Star closed its online survey, which asked the community to rank preferences for each cut, such as layoffs over furloughs, fewer credit requirements for high school or an end to middle school sports.

In Denver, the state's second-largest district, school-level budgets will be cut 3.5 percent and the administration budget slashed 7 percent, for at least \$30 million in savings.

"Each school will decide on their priorities, based on the particular student needs," S

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uperintendent Tom Boasberg said. "Some schools, it will be an issue of a class size. Some schools it may be an issue of an interventionist for a struggling learner."

Denver is in better shape despite its large cut because of budget controls enacted more than a year ago, including freezing administrative salaries and restructuring retirement expenses.

Plus, the district's enrollment has been steadily growing — bringing in more per-pupil funding every year. Nevertheless, Boasberg said, all districts are learning to live with less.

"It's a very significant worry because Colorado ranks near last nationally in terms of our income devoted to K-12," he said.

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Under the knife

School districts statewide expect to make big budget cuts for the 2010-11 school year. Here's how much the 10 largest districts expect to trim:

1. Jefferson County, 86,250 students, at least \$20 million.

2. Denver Public Schools, 77,255 students, at least \$30 million.

3. Douglas County, 59,932 students, at least \$31 million.

4. Cherry Creek Schools, 51,708 students, at least \$13 million.

5. Adams 12 Five Star Schools, 41,949 students, at least \$24 million.

6. Aurora Public Schools, 36,967 students, at least \$18 million.

7. Colorado Springs D-11, 29,641 students, at least \$11 million.

8. Boulder Valley School District, 29,011 students, at least \$12 million.

9. St. Vrain Valley School District, 26,724 students, at least \$11 million.

10. Poudre School District, 26,520 students, at least \$12 million.

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