

SCHOOL BOARD OF POLK COUNTY

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Superintendent of Schools

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February 24, 2009

Dear Staff Members,

The economic status of our state and district budget continues to look bleak.

Since I last communicated with you the financial news has gone from bad to worse. School districts were told previously that no more budget cuts would be needed in the current school year. However, within the last few weeks, this information changed and we are now anticipating another 2% reduction by the end of this fiscal year, June 30th. That equates to over \$12 million for our district.

In addition, we have recently been informed that the estimated reduction for the 2009-2010 school year has increased from 10% as previously communicated, to between 15 – 18%. This reduction means a cut in excess of \$90 million to our operating budget. Add this latest projected cut to all previous cuts beginning in 2007 and the total is over \$165 million reduced from our budget.

When we first became aware of the impending financial cuts, our school board identified their highest priorities: 1) not adversely impacting the instruction being delivered in the classroom and 2) keeping staff employed and not affecting their health benefits. While we have been able to make these cuts without affecting these two goals, if the projected shortfalls become a reality, we will not be able to safeguard these two priorities.

There is a glimmer of hope on the horizon for us but it will involve a waiver from the U.S. Secretary of Education. The recent federal stimulus plan includes money earmarked for education and that money could help us with our general operational needs for the short term. However, for a state to receive this stabilization money, the state's education budget must be at a 2005-06 funding level. Unfortunately, Florida's education budget falls below that level at a 2004-05 funding level. Governor Crist and other elected officials have asked for the waiver but only time will tell if the waiver will be granted. We cannot afford to assume that money will become a reality; it may not come our way.

Thanks to the leadership of our parent groups such as PTA and School Advisory Councils, we have been holding informational meetings around the county to get the word out about the financial picture. Attendance at these meetings has been favorable and we have more planned. Many people in

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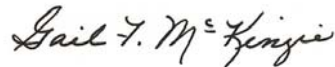
attendance have committed to taking action by communicating with our elected officials and sharing their concerns. I hope each of you has taken on this responsibility as well. It is imperative that our legislators: 1) identify a consistent and adequate source of revenue for public education, 2) grant flexibility as it relates to the Class Size Amendment and use of education dollars, 3) delay implementation of additional state mandates and 4) allow for local control so that school boards can make sound decisions relevant to their district's needs.

Attached you will find a *Classrooms in Crisis Questions and Answers* communication piece. I hope you find this information helpful. You will also find updated information on our homepage website at <http://www.polk-fl.net> under the section of District Budget Info.

These are unprecedented times and consequently, we are being forced to take unprecedented action as it relates to delivering instruction to our students. Consequently, we are in the process of identifying POTENTIAL budget cuts that could occur if additional funding sources to support education are not made available by the state. Thank you to those of you who have sent your ideas and suggestions on how we may realize savings. Your responses, along with input from the community, are being carefully considered throughout this process. You can still send suggestions and questions to Budgetquestionsandsuggestions@polk-fl.net. With the legislative session beginning in March, final plans as to how we will achieve these cuts should be completed in mid-April.

I commit to keeping you fully informed on this ongoing and important situation that affects not only our students but you, our staff members.

Sincerely,


Gail F. McKinzie, Ph.D.
Superintendent

Classrooms in Crisis

Questions and Answers Polk County Public Schools

1. How are decisions being made regarding the recommended budget reductions for the 2009-10 school year?

We are in the process of identifying POTENTIAL budget cuts that could occur if additional funding sources to support education are not made available by the State. If necessary, the district will consider all POTENTIAL budget reductions as well as suggestions submitted by employees and the community to meet the required reduction in budget.

2. The potential budget reductions for the 2009-10 school year are estimated to be in excess of \$92.9 million. How did you determine the number of dollars needed to cover the potential revenue shortfall?

The Florida Commissioner of Education informed school districts that funding for the 2009-10 school year could be as much as 16% less than current year funding. This reduction is in addition to several reductions already taken since July 1, 2007 totaling over \$70 million dollars.

3. How many of Polk Public Schools' current employees may be affected by these potential budget cuts?

All current employees have already been affected by budget cuts because the District could not afford to give any pay raises to any employees in the 2008-09 school year. It is very difficult to say how many employees will be affected until decisions are made about what programs can be offered and those that have to be reduced or eliminated. It is fair to say that these reductions will affect every employee in some way. To provide a perspective as to the significance of the estimated reductions, if the District was to achieve this loss only through reductions in personnel, this would be **equivalent** to the loss of over 1,700 teaching positions. However, it is important to note that teachers would not be the only staff members affected – reductions in positions would also occur in administration plus other division/department areas. It is also important to note that it is not likely that a reduction of personnel would be the only strategy used to meet these reductions.

4. Is the District considering the elimination of all field trips, athletic and arts programs?

The District has supplemented the cost of field trips in past years. However, in 2008-09 the District has been charging the full cost to any organization

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that sponsors a field trip. At this time, the District has reduced the number of field trips, competition for junior varsity athletics and District arts programs. The District's goal is to offer a full academic experience for all students.

5. What can I do to prevent these potential budget reductions from happening?

Act now. Obviously, there is a serious financial problem in the state of Florida. Education is primarily funded by the state and consequently these potential budget reductions will become a reality unless the legislators increase funding for schools. You need to communicate your concerns in a personal letter or e-mail to the legislators and governor. District personnel may not use Polk Public Schools' resources at their worksite or during work time for communicating these concerns.

6. What are you suggesting that the legislators do to lessen the financial impact on education?

Legislators must find additional revenue resources to support our schools, grant flexibility with existing dollars, and allow more local control regarding expenditures and curriculum requirements.

7. New schools are still being planned, built and additions and renovations are still going on at existing schools. Can't a moratorium be placed on construction and the money used elsewhere?

Some projects that are currently under construction will proceed to completion. The capital outlay funds are restricted as to how they can be used. The District will still have projects such as building permanent structures to replace portables and renovations to older schools that will continue to take place. The District has spending requirements on funds that have been borrowed through the issuance of bonds. When those funds were borrowed, the District was obligated to build the identified projects. The District is not allowed to pay for salaries or other operating expenses from these funds.

8. Why don't we use the federal stimulus money to assist with our situation?

The proposals announced thus far would provide additional funding for Title I, IDEA (exceptional education students) and construction. It is important to understand that the stimulus package revenue has restrictions on how the money may be spent. Consequently, funds allocated to Title I and IDEA cannot be used for the general operation of our schools. In addition, current provisions of these federal programs generally require maintenance of existing local effort to qualify for these funds. With reductions in state funding for education for the last two years, Florida does not qualify for stabilization funds in the stimulus package. The Governor will have to request a waiver and have it approved by the U.S. Secretary of Education.

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9. Can we decrease the number of administrative positions at the District level to off-set the expenses?

Polk County Schools has one of the lowest per student administrative costs in Central Florida. We always strive to put more dollars directly into the classroom and are looking at all positions that are not directly assigned students.

10. Why does the District continue to provide free breakfast for all students? Wouldn't eliminating this service provide significant savings to the District?

State law requires the District to provide breakfast to all elementary students. Polk is very fortunate to receive Federal funding for this service at no cost to the District. Therefore, no savings would be gained by eliminating breakfast and thousands of students would not benefit from this free program.

11. Can the District eliminate FCAT testing to help schools reduce costs?

No. The District does not have the authority to eliminate FCAT testing, which is a critical component of the state's educational accountability program. FCAT is mandated by Florida statute.

12. Can we use money to pay teachers instead of buying Smart Boards and other technology?

Smart Boards and other capital equipment are purchased with funds currently prohibited from other uses.

13. What is LCI money? Is this money that can be used for operational purposes?

LCI funds are Local Capital Improvement monies that are raised for payment of debt service on outstanding bonds, purchase of capital equipment, purchase of school buses and other capital improvement projects. This money is prohibited from being used for any operational costs such as salaries.

14. What about eliminating KAPLAN or other testing?

The state of Florida requires districts to provide Progress Monitoring resources to schools. All schools are required to progress monitor the achievement of the students relative to their mastery of the Sunshine State Standards. The Kaplan Achievement Planner was purchased through a selection process for this purpose. This tool was purchased with an Instructional Materials allocation that cannot be used for operational costs,

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such as salaries. Polk County does not conduct any testing that is not required by the state. KAPLAN has been purchased from an approved list of programs that is required to be implemented into schools that are not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). This is a Federal requirement under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and has been purchased with grant funds.

15. How will District personnel implement the Strategic Plan and uphold the vision of rigor, relevance and results for every student?

We wouldn't. The level of funding that we are projected to receive for the 2009-10 school year would severely impact the level of instruction that our students receive. Without funding, educational opportunities and experiences that have enhanced academic student achievement in Polk County will not be available for students.

16. Is the District considering eliminating Choice and Magnet schools and reverting to all traditional schools?

No. The District has no plans to eliminate the magnet and choice programs because they are an integral part of the Desegregation Lawsuit that received Unitary status in 2004.

17. When will everyone know more definitely what is going to happen?

Plans will continue to be developed throughout the upcoming legislative session. Final plans should be completed by mid-April. The District will continue to post updates on the Polk County Schools website at www.polk-fl.net