

State cuts could lead to lost jobs

Written by George Browning

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Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels is proposing \$300 million in education budget cuts. With those cuts, he is urging schools to trim staff as only a last resort.

Local superintendents don't want to make cuts, but they aren't exactly sure how to trim the already tight budgets even more without using the "J" word.

"Most likely these cuts will cost jobs," said West Washington Superintendent Gerald Jackson.

Jackson said he hasn't been able to find specifics about what the cuts will be exactly and he said it could be March before all the details are finalized.

He said he thinks the \$300 million will equal approximately \$300 per student.

"I don't care what school you are talking about, 80-90 percent of their costs are personnel," he said. "How are you going to cut \$300,000 out of 10 percent of your budget. That's just the way it is.

"We're going to try to do anything else we can do to make the cuts, but when it comes right down to it, personal makes up a large portion of any schools budget."

Things are even tighter at East Washington. Superintendent Phyllis Amick said that in addition to the state's three percent cut, EW had a decline in enrollment this season, which will cost approximately \$130,000 in funding.

Amick expects the school corporation to receive about \$700,000 less in 2010 than they did in 2009.

Like Jackson, Amick said there isn't a lot of other places to trim money from school budgets.

"Only about 10 percent of our budget offers flexibility," she said. "It is going to get down to staffing in some form as we look to the future. In a district our size you don't spend \$700,000 on papers and supplies."

Alick's reference was to Daniels' office putting the public on notice to watch to make sure school corporations are exhausting all other options before they layoff employees.

According to the Citizens' Checklist released by Daniels, school districts should have taken the following steps to increase savings and efficiency before turning to teacher layoffs: Refrained from all salary and benefits increases for all school employees; Reduced insurance costs by changing plans, including joining the state health plan; Reduced school administration and school board compensation packages; Suspended retirement plan matches for employees; Instituted a corporation hiring freeze; Eliminated memberships in professional associations and reduced travel expenses; Effectively outsourced transportation and custodial services and directed savings to the Rainy Day Fund; Sold, leased or closed underutilized buildings; Reduced or rolled back operational and programmatic budgets to previous year levels and reviewed school consolidation options within the corporation and between corporations.

Alick said one of the things listed was to limit cell phone use and while in a larger school corporation, that might save money, in a school system East Washington's size, that won't help.

"We do have a couple of cell phones we use on the buses for emergency, but the total yearly cost of those is probably about \$1,300," she said.

The only option in many cases will be to cut jobs.

"Regardless of what we would like to in order to stay in the black, it does mean that we are going to have to look really hard at personnel," Amick said. "We're going to work really hard to not reduce teaching staff, but that is going to be a challenge for us."

Salem is not immune to the cuts. Superintendent Lynn Reed said she expects SCS to take

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a more than \$600,000 hit. If that's the case, she sees no other way to trim that kind of money than personnel.

“The larger school systems may be able to reduce some administrative personal and support personnel and make some changes, but we are going to feel it,” she said. “We're going to really feel these cuts. We don't have \$600,000 in supplies and things like that and you can only dial the furnace back so far.”

Like Jackson and Amick, Reed said she and the staff of the school along with the board will look at every way to trim the money.

That discussion with the board will begin at the Salem school board's regular meeting Jan. 11.

“We are looking for ways to save money and not reduce student services,” Reed said. “We'll look at absolutely everything.”

East Washington's school board will hold a special meeting Jan. 7 at 5 p.m. in the board room of the corporation's administrative building.

The West Washington school board's next meeting will be Jan. 19.