

The Huntsville Times

Schools demand a 'real' budget

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'We can't take another year of proration'

After two straight years of dealing with slashed budgets, school leaders in Alabama want a budget from Montgomery that won't be cut.

"We can't take another year of proration," said Susan Lockwood, executive director of the School Superintendents of Alabama.

At a Monday meeting with Times reporters and editors, Lockwood and others said Alabama schools need a "real" 2011 education budget that better reflects the state's projected tax revenues.

School systems have struggled with inconsistent state funding since December 2008. Low tax collections forced Gov. Bob Riley to reduce school funding by 9 percent.

Another 2 percent was reduced last February 2009, and 7.5 percent was cut for fiscal 2010, which started in October.

Huntsville City Schools, for example, has lost about \$19 million during that span.

The cuts have forced school systems to trim their budgets, drain all or part of their savings accounts, or use local tax money to offset the cuts. Lockwood argued for a realistic budget so schools don't scramble to cover unexpected costs.

"We want every dollar we can get to serve boys and girls," Lockwood said, "but if (you) don't have a dollar, don't give it to us as if you do."

Sally Brewer Howell, executive director of the Alabama Association of School Boards, expressed concern over Riley's proposed budget, which she said reflects an uptick.

The governor's communications director confirmed growth projections in the budget. Jeff Emerson said top economists from the state and federal level always help shape the budget based on several economic factors.

"That's how budgeting is done," Emerson said. "This is how the state does it every year."

The proposed budget also includes federal stimulus money that hasn't yet been approved by Congress.

Meanwhile, 65 of the state's 132 school systems have secured lines of credit to make ends meet this year.

Ann Roy Moore, superintendent of Huntsville schools, said her system will also need to borrow money, probably by summer. Some teachers and support staff likely won't be rehired, either, she said.

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