



More teacher losses feared; Schools bracing for possibility of hundreds of cuts this summer

By Rena Havner Philips

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MOBILE, Ala. -- Mobile-area school superintendents are bracing for the loss of hundreds more teachers this summer, despite the fact that Gov. Bob Riley has remained optimistic, submitting a budget that doesn't include teachers losing their jobs.



That's partly because state education officials have said they may have to raise the student-teacher divisor by which teaching units are funded, so that 1.5 more students are in each classroom.

And that would mean a total loss of about 3,855 teachers statewide, according to the Alabama Department of Education.

Mobile County could lose about 340 teaching positions and Baldwin County, 234.

"We need to plan for that number, even if they put on their rose-colored glasses and come out with a more ambitious budget," Mobile County schools Superintendent Roy Nichols said.

I just don't believe the economy's going to grow like the governor's predicting," Nichols added.

The Mobile County system has already cut almost 800 teaching and other positions since the spring of 2008. And Baldwin County has cut nearly 500.

The budget that Riley has proposed to the Alabama Legislature includes \$245 million in proposed federal money for job training; a 2.42 percent growth in state revenue, which equals \$125 million; and a decrease in health insurance costs for teachers.

But if those three items don't come through, officials are looking at a loss of \$360 million, according to state Assistant Superintendent Craig Pouncey. As a result, the state would change its divisors so that it funds one teacher for every:

14.3 kindergarten through third-graders.

22.9 fourth- through sixth-graders.

21.5 seventh- through eighth-graders.

19.5 high-schoolers.

The School Superintendents of Alabama group has asked the state Legislature to be realistic in the budget it passes this year. For the past two years, the Legislature has passed budgets based on revenue projections that were too high. As a result, the state had to come back later and cut funding in a process known as proration.

Alabama's tenure laws make it difficult for school systems to get rid of teachers mid-year.

In fact, superintendents are supposed to notify any teachers or other employees who will not be asked back for the next academic year by the last day of school in May. Sometimes, a state budget hasn't been passed by that point, so local school systems send out more pink slips than the number of positions they wind up cutting.

Nichols said Mobile County would lose some teachers due to the state divisor and also because of a decrease in population of about 500 students.

He said he expects about 200 teachers to retire, so about half of the positions lost would be covered through attrition.

In Baldwin County, which has found itself especially cash-strapped this academic year, voters are heading to the polls next month to vote on a 1-cent sales tax increase. Baldwin schools spokesman Terry Wilhite said that if the tax doesn't pass, 400 jobs funded through local revenue will be lost.

Regardless of the outcome of the vote, the district could lose 234 teachers if the state changes its funding divisors.

"That would be excruciatingly painful at the worse possible time," Wilhite said.

Non-tenured teachers -- who have worked less than three years on the job -- would be the first to go. Wilhite said positions lost would include everything from classroom teachers to assistant principals, career-technical education teachers to special-education teachers.

Riley spokesman Jeff Emerson said that if the governor's budget is approved by the Legislature, "there shouldn't be any layoffs. ... That's the worst-case scenario."

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