



Teacher layoffs, consolidations likely for some local schools

By Steve Campbell

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HUNTSVILLE, AL -- More than a year ago, when a slumping economy promised budget cuts from the state, local school leaders figured 2010 would be a lean year like 2009.

They were right.

Due to low tax collections, all school systems in Alabama are getting 7.5 percent less money from the state this year than originally anticipated. The cuts are compounded by reductions in last year's budgets, which were **slashed 11 percent**.

For Madison County's three school systems, the New Year brings the challenge of cutting costs while preparing for additional students, many of whom could be children of military transfers from northern Virginia.

Huntsville City

The budget crunch may hit Huntsville schools the hardest. With no savings to offset roughly \$8 million in cuts this school year, teacher layoffs are likely, Superintendent Ann Roy Moore said.

"That's not something you want to do, but that's the reality," Moore said Thursday. Layoffs could come in May or possibly late summer, she added.

The schools' reserve fund, once at \$16 million, plugged last year's \$12 million gap and holes in the budget this school year. Could the school board have saved the fund? One board member said better planning wouldn't have hurt.

"I think we have not been willing to confront the reality we're under," Jennie Robinson said of the schools' money troubles.

Robinson cited a meeting in 2007 where the board voted to raise teacher salaries. Without her vote, the board committed to spending an extra \$1.5 million a year of local tax money, plus about \$2 million more to defray the cost of state-mandated raises. Those costs hurt the fund, Robinson said.

That's why, in 2010, she wants the board to follow a strong business plan that provides "a sense of where we're going and how we're going to get there."



File photo

Huntsville City Schools Superintendent Ann Roy Moore

"We need to ensure the financial solvency of the school system," Robinson said. "That's not something we can take for granted anymore."

Moore and Robinson also hope to discuss closing two schools this summer to save money. Last summer, the board closed two elementary schools and one middle school and sent their students to nearby schools. Moore has promised **discussion on closing two small elementary schools** - East Clinton and Lincoln - to save more cash.

"I think (consolidation) is a reasonable and prudent thing to do in light of everything that's going on," Moore said. The mergers would need board approval.

Also in Huntsville, two middle schools could get longer school days next fall. Moore said Westlawn and Davis Hills schools have shown interest in an extended day program implemented in Massachusetts and other states. The program isn't merely extra time in the classroom but a longer, revamped school day designed to boost student achievement.

Moore said the program would need grant money or another funding source. At this point, school leaders are only looking at the possibility of designing a revamped schedule at the two schools. Moore noted the struggles her system and others are facing.

"We're no different from the 131 other systems in the state," she said. "We're really going to have to tighten our belts and do it with the least amount of pain possible for our students."

In building news, two schools will be under construction for most of the year. Goldsmith-Schiffman Elementary School in Big Cove and the new Lee High School in northeast Huntsville are expected to open as early as fall 2011.

In campaign news, board president Doug Martinson Jr. has said he will not seek a third term in the August municipal elections. Martinson represents parts of south and northeast Huntsville.

Robinson, of south Huntsville, and board member Topper Birney, who represents much of the inner city, will seek third terms.

Madison County

The Madison County school board may reduce staff as well, but layoffs are unlikely, a board member said. Kenny Johnson said the board's goal is to save by not replacing some retirees or employees who leave the school system.

And unlike Huntsville, the county has saved much of its reserve fund, which stands at about \$14 million. Johnson said the fund has been largely spared by trimming the budget in other areas.

"We look forward to being able to keep the small luxuries we have," Johnson said.

But perhaps the biggest news this year in the county system will be its intermediate schools. This summer, Buckhorn Middle School will open for grades 7 and 8 on the Buckhorn High School campus in New Market. The board plans a shake-up of surrounding schools to get the most out of its space without building new schools for its growing student body.

Here's the plan: Mount Carmel and Riverton elementary schools, which serve students in kindergarten through fifth grade, would be revamped for K-3 students. Riverton Middle would serve students in grades 4-6; New Market School would convert from a K-8 school to a K-6.

Board members have considered a similar shake-up among schools in the Hazel Green area. "I think that will set the tone for what we hope to do in the future," he said.

Meanwhile, in the Harvest area, more students keep packing into Sparkman High School, which already has about 2,700 students in two buildings along two-lane Jeff Road.

Board members want a new high school but can't afford it. Johnson said the board would have liked to apply for interest-free federal loans for a new school, but because of the economy, there's no way for the board to pay back the loan.

So the answer for now, Johnson said, is to keep adding more students.

On the political front, board members and the Alabama Association of School Boards may nudge the Legislature this year to end the practice of elected superintendents. Board members have said, and county schools Superintendent Terry Davis has agreed, that a school chief doesn't need the distraction of politics when running a system.

Most superintendents in Alabama are already appointed. All 65 superintendents in urban school systems are appointed, including in Huntsville and Madison. However, while 28 county superintendents are appointed, 39 are elected.

Also on the subject of politics, board member Rickey Stafford said he will not seek election to his seat representing northwest Madison County. Jeff Anderson, who represents the southern part of the county, will seek a third four-year term in the November elections.

Madison City

After years of talk, Madison leaders look forward to breaking ground on their new high school on County Line Road. The city refinanced its debt and secured federal loans to borrow enough for the school, budgeted at roughly \$65 million. However, school leaders hope to save a few million on the school.

Madison leaders view the new school as imperative to the city's growth. Bob Jones High School is crowded with more than 2,200 students in grades 10-12. Superintendent Dee Fowler has said that when the new high school opens, both high schools could begin the year with about 1,500 students in grades 9-12.

The school system's reserve fund stands at roughly \$10 million, about \$2 million of which has been spent to offset cuts from the state, Fowler said. He said good planning and careful cutbacks have eased financial pain.

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