

Voters must demand better budgets

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How bad has the funding crisis for education become? Worse than most people realize because school officials are doing everything possible to avoid laying off teachers and hurting classroom instruction. It has become a house of cards that a little wind could knock down.

Meanwhile, in Montgomery, a hurricane is brewing that may blow across the state.

The budgets for the state General Fund and the Education Trust Fund proposed by Gov. Bob Riley in January assume a new round of federal stimulus money is on its way. Now that isn't looking so likely. Of particular concern is \$345 million that Riley's budget relies on for schools.

Lawmakers have not gotten around to considering state budgets yet.

This being an election year, there isn't much stomach in Montgomery for passing a realistic budget. That has school officials across the state scared. If the Legislature passes a budget that assumes federal help that isn't coming, or builds in overly optimistic assumptions about tax revenues, then a third year of proration is certain.

The problem with proration — retroactive cuts in state funding — is that school systems must decide in May how many teachers they will hire for the next school year. Those teacher contracts lock school systems in on their biggest expense — payroll.

Discretionary expenses already have been cut to the bone. At one Lamar County school, the principal has an ice cream cart he wheels out into the hall between classes. The money raised by selling treats to the students is used to buy wax for the floors and toilet paper for the bathrooms.

The Tuscaloosa County School System hasn't been buying new textbooks. Since enrollment is growing, not every student has a textbook in some classes. And more students are in portable classrooms even though a new school stands vacant because there isn't enough money for support staff and operations.

A growing number of school systems are borrowing money from banks to cover payroll on the expectation they will be repaid from state allocations. The Tuscaloosa County School System will spend about \$2.7 million more this fiscal year than it will receive in funding. Next year, that is expected to double. And double again in fiscal year 2012. You can see where this trend is heading. And since school systems have no direct way of raising money — beyond ice cream carts in the hallways — what happens when banks decide this is too risky?

Voters should not accept vague or rosy projections when it comes to how we will fund schools and other essential services. Lawmakers need to pass a budget that doesn't have proration already baked in. Teachers may need to accept some concessions, such as contributing more to rising health-care costs. And school systems will need to make some tough choices, some that won't be popular.