



PROPOSED STATE CUTS WILL BE DEVASTATING FOR SALEM CITY SCHOOLS

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Salem School Division's "Children First – Every Child, Every Day" way of doing business was not reflected in the budget bills released by the state legislature this week.

The General Assembly's proposed budget cuts are threatening to severely alter the landscape of our schools for years to come, setting state funding for K-12 public education back 4 years to levels not seen since 2006.

"A reduction of this magnitude cannot be achieved without a negative impact on children," says Salem School Superintendent, Dr. Alan Seibert. "My only solace is that we have terrific people who will do everything they possibly can to help minimize the impact."

While there is still work to be done by the Conference Committee charged with reconciling the differences between the two budget bills, it appears that the Commonwealth will reduce its share of school funding for Salem's children by an estimated \$2 million. The Senate version reduces Salem's state aid by 8.7% requiring cuts of \$1,742,024, while the House version is much worse. It proposes cuts of more than 11% that would reduce the state money coming to Salem's schools by \$2,268,321.

"We elected not to speculate on these numbers and we appreciate the patience and trust our parents and teachers have shown both me and the school board during this process," says Seibert. "We have been working hard to plan for a range of possibilities and we will now meet the challenge."

Reconciling this reduction will be particularly difficult for an already efficient and student-centered system that provides a high quality education for nearly \$1,100 less per pupil than the state average. In addition, administrative costs at central office account for less than 3.5% of the division budget, so when you already are lean the cuts start with meat and bone.

"Every effort will be made to close the budget gap through attrition and non-personnel budget reductions," says Seibert. "But considering that it will likely require several years to reduce enough positions through attrition, we will need to make especially painful cuts in other areas to protect as many of the positions as possible of the caring and committed professionals who serve our students."

Like all school divisions, about 80% of Salem's annual budget is comprised of salaries and benefits for its valued employees, and much of the remaining 20% is for fixed costs including utilities, maintenance and debt service. In 2009, Salem was able to weather the state's budget storm without lay-offs when federal economic stimulus dollars mitigated the reduction, but this year the cuts are greater and the state has already used most of its stabilization funds.

"The division emphasis has always been on recruiting and retaining the best people by focusing on competitive pay scales," says Seibert. "Because we have purposefully and wisely invested resources in the remarkable people who serve in the school division we have no choice but to reduce salary and benefits now that the state is renegeing on its responsibility."

“These cuts are so severe that there’s no way they can be absorbed without reducing personnel costs,” says Michael Crew, Salem School’s Director of Business Services. “The magnitude will be felt in every school system in the Commonwealth, but smaller divisions like Salem with a long history of being good stewards of resources will be hit especially hard.”

Seibert has been burning up the road and the phone lines to Richmond for weeks trying to get lawmakers to comprehend the long-term negative impact these types of reductions will have on Virginia’s school children. Of particular concern is that the House Budget Bill makes the proposed cuts permanent by changing the funding formula for state basic aid to education. The Senate Bill recommends a two-year reduction to give the economy a chance to recover.

“This is not something a School Board or a City Council can fix,” says Seibert. “Our community’s commitment to children is longstanding and proven. This is a problem at the state-level and children should not be expected to bear the burden. It is especially frustrating considering that both the causes of the economic downturn and the fact that the state is backtracking from it responsibility are out of our control.

“How we choose to respond is within our control, and while we acknowledge that the decisions forced upon us will be profoundly difficult, we will do everything we can to protect Salem’s children.”

In recent weeks, Seibert personally facilitated a series of “Budget Discussions” with staff at each school to describe the magnitude of the reductions in state funding. At each of Salem’s 6 schools, Seibert answered questions, solicited ideas and engaged all staff members in prioritizing reductions in salary and benefits. Ninety-five percent of the 362 employees who completed the survey reported that they would rather see their own pay reduced in order to help keep fellow employees from being laid-off.

“Their selflessness and willingness to do whatever it takes not to sacrifice our students reveals the true caliber and character of the people who have answered the call to serve Salem’s children,” says Seibert. “Other organizations have adopted vision statements similar to ‘*Children First*’ but the good people who serve in Salem Schools have stepped up as the state has backed down to put their money where their hearts have always been.”

The staff members who responded to the survey also said they would be willing to pay part of their health insurance and/or VRS retirement pension cost in order to reduce or eliminate any layoffs.

“It is inspiring and instructive to reflect on the feedback given by our employees. It is inspiring that our school division is staffed by people with hearts so big that, even though there were no increases in pay this school year, that they are willing to earn less while doing more because still more vacant positions will go unfilled next year,” says Seibert. “It is instructive because our employees recognize that the biggest difference-maker in the life of a child is the presence of skilled, caring, and committed people. For this reason, they know the best way to help safeguard Salem’s children from these unprecedented reductions is to help save as many jobs as possible, so that people who change lives are still here to do just that.”

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