

Budget Cuts Reach Bone for Philadelphia Schools

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By Trip Gabriel
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PHILADELPHIA — When a second grader came to the [Andrew Jackson School](#) too agitated to eat breakfast on Friday, an aide alerted the school counselor, who engaged him in an art project in her office. When he was still overwrought at 11, a secretary called the boy's family, and soon a monitor at the front door buzzed in an older brother to take him home.

Under a [draconian budget](#) passed by the Philadelphia School District last month, none of these supporting players — aide, counselor, secretary, [security monitor](#) — will remain at the school by September, nor will there be money for books, paper, a nurse or the school's locally celebrated rock band.

"I am worried sick," said Lisa Ciaranca [Kaplan](#), the principal, whose homey school in South Philadelphia serves 410 students, speaking 14 languages, all of whom qualify for free meals. "How do I relieve teachers for lunch if I have no one in the lunchroom? I'll be the only person in this building who's not in a class."

Pink slips were recently sent to 19 percent of the school-based work force, including all 127 assistant principals, 646 teachers and more than 1,200 aides. Principals are contemplating opening in September with larger classes but no one to answer [phones](#), keep order on the playground, coach sports, check out library books or send transcripts for seniors applying to college.

"You're not even looking at a school that any of us went to," said Lori Shorr, the mayor's chief education officer. "It's an atrocity, and we should all be ashamed of ourselves if the schools open with these budgets."

William R. Hite Jr., the first-year superintendent, said the \$2.4 billion budget reflected the consequences of shortsighted fiscal decisions in the past. "The point is there's not enough revenue to adequately serve the children of the city," he said.

Mr. Hite and Mayor Michael A. Nutter are seeking \$304 million in extra revenue from the city, the state and teachers' givebacks. So far the parties that have been asked to contribute have fallen short of coming up with the requested money.

Despite five visits to Harrisburg to lobby Gov. Tom Corbett, a Republican, and the General Assembly, the mayor made little progress: last Thursday the House passed a budget with just \$10 million extra for Philadelphia schools.

“At this moment there’s no obvious path to reach the outcome being sought by the Philadelphia School District,” said Erik Arneson, a spokesman for the Republican majority in the Senate.

The superintendent, citing the need for “shared sacrifice,” is asking for salary cuts from teachers of 5 to 13 percent and a wage freeze through 2017. Jerry Jordan, president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, called the cuts unreasonable. “Our members have done a tremendous amount of sacrificing,” Mr. Jordan said. “They were sacrificing before we started sharing.”

Philadelphia’s schools, whose chronic budget problems led to a state takeover in 2002, have not been this close to the abyss in memory. The troubles have many causes: rising pension costs, high debt payments for past borrowing that papered over budget gaps, a flight to charter schools and a block-grant formula for state aid that has fallen behind enrollments, which have increased 5,000 a year between charter and traditional schools, according to Mr. Hite.

State aid to Philadelphia schools declined by \$274 million in the past three years, according to the Pennsylvania State Education Association.

“The state has never funded the city of Philadelphia and its schools very well,” said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools. “For decades now it has been the subject of lawsuits and partisan politics and pushing and shoving, and the chickens are finally coming home to roost.”

With 33 percent of its 200,000 students in charter schools, the district made a long-delayed decision in March to close about 30 underused schools, over the objections of hundreds of protesters and Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who was arrested during a demonstration.

The mayor is making the most progress in coming up with more money. With a goal of \$95 million, the city identified \$28 million it would go after from delinquent taxpayers. On Friday, the City Council approved a \$2 fee per pack of cigarettes, expected to raise \$40 million. But the day before, a bill to raise the alcohol tax, opposed by bar owners, stalled.

“We are at a critical moment in terms of the future of this city,” said Mark McDonald, the mayor’s spokesman.

So far the new revenues fall far short of what is needed to recall the 3,783 laid-off school staff members and reverse the cuts to supplies and programs. The morale of teachers and principals ranges from grim resolve to near despair. “I’ve been a no-nonsense, really dedicated principal; I’ll get the job done,” said William Wade, principal of Martin Luther King High School, who is losing 48 staff members.

Marielle Casanova, the counselor at Andrew Jackson School, whose morning was given over to the unruly second-grader, predicted chaos. “There’s only so much a classroom teacher can do for behavior issues or emotional outbursts,” said Ms. Casanova, who has received a pink slip along with all 282 counselors in the district.

Ms. Kaplan, the principal, returned often to the same word to describe the cuts: “devastating.”

“Do we just want a building that houses children until they get to the new prison they’re building?” she said.

As parents arrived for an international literacy day on Friday, they set out a potluck lunch of Mexican empanadas and Vietnamese banh mi sandwiches. Ms. Kaplan greeted the room of about 40 mothers and a few fathers in three foreign languages: “Hola. Ni hao. Salaam aleikum.”

The real purpose of the gathering was to encourage parents to read to children over the summer because the budget cuts had eliminated summer school. It was a serious blow because research shows that children lose a significant level of skills during the summer when not in class.

“Make sure your children read and you read with your children,” said Ms. Kaplan as student helpers passed out donated coloring books and three Hannah Montana adventures.

“I’m sorry if you have boys,” she said. “These were all I could get. They were free.”