JCPS approves central office overhaul, but Pollio is looking to more ambitious savings plan

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Within 10 years, as much as $100 million could be gutted from Jefferson County Public Schools' central office and redirected to classrooms, Superintendent Marty Pollio said.

"My goal has always been to support schools and students," Pollio said. "I believe that estimated cost savings over the next decade is possible."

Pollio's ambitious savings plan is already underway, with the Jefferson County Board of Education voting this week in favor of a central office overhaul the district said will funnel $8 million more into schools by 2030.

Under the reorganization, high-level jobs at the central office are on the chopping block. Some administrators will be demoted, while other positions will be eliminated.

JCPS had initially recommended a plan that would have saved the district $14 million. But after several board members reported constituent complaints — particularly over proposed changes affecting school psychologists and social workers — the district agreed to a scaled-back version of the plan.

The board approved the leaner version Tuesday night by a 5-2 vote after Pollio gave members verbal assurances that psychologists, social workers and staff supporting anti-truancy efforts would not be impacted.

"I know this is tough," Pollio said. "But we’re going to examine all of the dollars we have and make sure we’re doing the right things for our students and schools."

JCPS spokeswoman Renee Murphy on Wednesday said the overhaul will result in $824,000 in annual savings.

Under the changes, Murphy said, 45 positions will be reclassified down, meaning staff in those positions will take salary cuts. Ninety-two jobs are being eliminated, 75 of which are currently vacant.
Simultaneously, the district is creating 157 new positions and boosting salaries for 21 employees, Murphy said.

"We will see the largest impact with new hires to central office under this reorganization," Pollio said.

Several components of the central office overhaul were required by a corrective action plan mandated by the state. To improve its services for students with special needs, for example, JCPS has been required to hire a chief of special education.

Anticipated annual savings from the overhaul represent less than 1% of the district's nearly $2 billion operating budget.

JCPS' critics, including Gov. Matt Bevin, have attacked the district for having a bloated central office with too many staff making $100,000 or more each year.

A 2018 Courier Journal analysis found that about 600 of the district's 16,000 employees earned more than $100,000. But the majority of those employees worked in schools full time, including principals, assistant principals, counselors, school psychologists and nurses.

Reclassified administrators, the district had said, will be able to keep their current salaries for one year before the lower pay takes effect. Employees whose jobs are eliminated, but are protected by a collective bargaining agreement, will be guaranteed another position in the district.

During the public comment session of Tuesday's meeting, several people expressed concerns about the reorganization.

JCPS parent Autumn Neagle said cuts in the district's diversity, equity and poverty department, including community liaison positions, could have a negative impact on vulnerable students.

“We need more instead of less,” Neagle said. "We can't expect our students to succeed and close the achievement gap if we’re not giving them everything they need."

Board members also expressed frustrations with how the district communicated the changes to its employees, saying they received calls from upset constituents. The plan originally proposed changing school social workers' responsibilities and reducing the number of work days for school psychologists.
"There has to be a better process to communicate what is going on," said board Chairwoman Diane Porter.

Porter and Corrie Shull voted against the overhaul.

Board member James Craig, who said he voted "reluctantly" in favor of the overhaul, pressed the district to improve its communication and transparency.

"Whatever's the best way to do it, this is not the best way," Craig said.

The reorganization is the latest in a series of moves under Pollio to streamline district management.

Pollio said the changes were based largely on a report from the Council of the Great City Schools, an organization of the nation's largest urban school systems. JCPS commissioned the group during the 2017-18 school year to review its central office organization.

The council found in its 56-page report that though JCPS had a "wealth of talent," it suffered from an organizational structure that was "both redundant and incoherent."

Over the past year, Pollio has revamped the district's cabinet and realigned assistant superintendent positions — changes that, the district has said, provide better support to schools.

The JCPS board also on Tuesday approved a tentative budget for the 2019-20 school year.

Among the big-ticket items in the $1.7 billion budget:

- $1.2 million for the district's new summer learning program
- $4.4 million for mental health counselors
- $3.5 million for the Academies of Louisville
- $9.6 million for the district's Accelerated Improvement Schools
- $18.2 million to support English language learners
- $200 million for major renovations and construction on four new schools