

MONTGOMERY COUNTY

Economic Downturn Hits School Budget

Leggett Proposes Trims in Spending

By DANIEL DE VISE
Washington Post Staff Writer

The budget for Montgomery County's public schools has doubled in 10 years, a massive investment in smaller classes, better-paid teachers and specialized programs to serve growing ranks of low-income and immigrant children.

That era might be coming to an end. The County Council will adopt an education budget this month that provides the smallest year-to-year increase in a decade for public schools. County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) has recommended trimming \$31 million from the \$2.11 billion spending plan submitted by the Board of Education.

County leaders say the budget can no longer keep up with the spending pace of Superintendent Jerry D. West, who has overseen a billion-dollar expansion since his arrival in 1999. West has reduced elementary class sizes, expanded preschool and kindergarten programs and invested heavily in the high-poverty areas of the county known around his office as the Red Zone.

"Laudable goals, objectives, nobody's going to argue with that," Leggett said in a recent interview at his Rockville office. "But is it affordable?"

It's a question being asked of every department in a county whose overall budget has swelled from \$2.1 billion in fiscal 1998 to \$4.3 billion this year, a growth rate Leggett terms "unsustainable."

Up to now, the mounting cost of Montgomery County education has not posed much of a problem. The suburban county is largely defined by its superior public schools. Over the past 10 years, a time of virtually unfettered real estate growth and rising test scores, the County Council has approved annual spending increases of 7 and 8 percent with barely a second thought.

"We could probably have a good school system for less," said Michael Knapp (D), the County Council president. "Could we have a great school system for less? I doubt it."

This year, facing an economic downturn, the school board seeks an increase of \$126 million, or about 6 percent. County leaders say they cannot afford even that. Leggett recommends trimming the requested increase to \$75 million. The council's education committee favors something in between: \$55 million to \$105 million, Knapp said.

Similar negotiations have played out this spring in Anne Arundel, Loudoun, Fairfax and Prince William counties. Each faces a gap of at least \$20 million between the amount the local school board says it needs in the coming school year and the sum county leaders say they are willing to spend.

Montgomery County is coping with an almost \$200 million shortfall in the current budget year. To make ends meet next year, Leggett proposes raising property taxes by an average 8 percent, the largest increase since the Reagan administration.

Rank-and-file parents are being mobilized to lobby the council for full funding. One recent e-mail blast to parents at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda advertised a three-day call-a-thon. "[M]ake the point that you are calling during Twister Appreciation Week, and let the council know that honoring [teacher] contracts is important to you."

Among community activists, the school budget is a target of increasing criticism. One County Council candidate captured the mood recently by circulating a chart, obtained via a

public information request, that shows 1,067 of the 26,844 school-system employees earning more than \$100,000.

"They all say the same thing. They all want more. And they have a right to want more," said Marvin Weisman, president of the Montgomery County Taxpayers League. "But the question is, how much more do they need? Not want, but need?"

The amount spent to educate a Montgomery student has almost doubled since 1986, from \$2,698 to \$13,704, during an era of virtually flat student enrollment. Top pay for a teacher is \$98,700, a 50 percent increase over 10 years.

The school system requires almost \$100 million in new funds next year just to meet payroll. Teachers are in the first year of a three-year agreement that guarantees pay raises of 5 percent in 2009 and 5.3 percent in 2010. Coupled with step increases available to most teachers, the raises will total about 8 percent a year.

A handful of elected officials have spoken out against the raises, a danger in a county where most politicians rely on labor for reelection.

Two County Council members, Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg/Rockville) and Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At Large), have publicly proposed that all employees, including teachers, take a 2-percentage-point reduction in their raises.

But West and most elected officials say they have no intention of breaking labor agreements. Instead, the County Council is targeting other reductions that could trim \$20 million to \$30 million from the school board's request. These include eliminating about half of West's academic initiatives, such as hiring more assistant principals and guidance counselors in elementary schools and adding math and reading specialists in middle schools.

Parents, students and teachers are feeling the effects of the downturn. More than 130 long-term substitutes are filling in for departing teachers, whose jobs are being held open as part of a countywide spending freeze. Many other jobs are going unfilled.

Teachers in magnet programs are being asked to teach additional classes and combine under-enrolled classes next year, part of a \$10 million package in cuts made before the school board submitted its budget.

Larry Bowers, West's chief operating officer, said the school system could cut \$21 million from its budget request only by breaking union contracts or laying people off. The system "could live with" the smaller cuts recommended by the education committee, he said. But, he added, the most visible effect on students might be an upward drift in class sizes at schools with unexpected enrollment gains. The school system normally can dispatch extra teachers to relieve such schools but might not be able to do so in the fall.

School officials remain skeptical of the county's budgeting process, which relies on projections of future revenue. County staff members have underestimated income tax receipts in each of the past four fiscal years, school officials contend, by amounts ranging from \$32 million to \$186 million. Another under-projection could mean the difference between \$81 million in cuts and none at all.

School employee union leaders and Leggett's formal public records request yesterday for income tax revenue figures.

Leggett, for his part, says the county cannot afford to gamble on revenue projections. "They're going to change," he said. "But they may change going the other way."