

# MontCo teachers saved in revised budget plan

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Montgomery County teachers have been spared from the budget ax this year, as Superintendent Jerry Weast retreated from a plan to cut 168 teaching positions and increase class sizes.

Instead, he is proposing to cut school employees' annual "step" pay raises for the second consecutive year, shave 34 positions from the central office, cut dozens of support positions, and trim support for special education, English as a second language and struggling students.

Weast also plans to reduce employee benefits and the school system's contributions to retiree health benefits.

The proposed \$25 million in cuts in the central administration and programs from the school board's February budget request would claim about 320 positions, if the school board approved it in June. However, Weast plans to add about 165 positions to offset climbing enrollment, for a net loss of about 155 positions.

The council, which just closed a \$300 million shortfall for fiscal 2012, tentatively approved a \$2.09 billion budget for the school system's coming year -- a 0.8 percent cut of \$17.4 million over this year and less than the \$2.21 billion budget than the school board requested.

Local funding for the nationally acclaimed school system, which comprises 57 percent of the county's budget, is set to be cut nearly \$45 million below current levels. The drop runs counter to a Maryland law requiring counties to maintain their level of per-pupil spending; the school board has petitioned state school officials to clarify the measure, which they are expected to do Wednesday -- and which many perceive as a precursor to a lawsuit.

"This has been one of the most difficult budget years in the history of MCPS," Weast wrote in a memo to the school board. "The fiscal effects of the 'Great Recession' have increased each year to a point that may threaten the future quality of the school system."

Among the revised cuts are 51 "staff development" positions, 34 media assistants, 34 central administrators and 14 academic intervention teachers, who work with students requiring additional reading and math support and try to close performance gaps for black and Hispanic students.

"What the County Council did to the school system is going to have a huge impact on classrooms, and any talk otherwise ignores reality," said Doug Prouty, president of the teachers union.

But Councilman Marc Elrich, D-at large, said the budget preserving class size proved that the school system can afford to trim its budget, "which is what we said all along."

"I still think they haven't done enough on administration," he said.

Weast's proposal is contingent on reaching an agreement with employee unions, which Prouty said should be settled soon, as most teachers did not expect their annual raises.