

School Cuts Are a Big Part of County Budget Savings

Cuts are within the council's authority, the state school board said on the eve of today's final vote.

By [Sean Sedam](#) | [Email the author](#) | 12:00pm

FILE --- County Council President Valerie Ervin said that she and council Vice President Roger Berliner (left) have been meeting with county school board President Christopher S. Barclay to discuss how to keep budget cuts to schools from hurting classroom instruction. Jacqui South
Photos (1)

Update, 11:28 a.m.: The Montgomery County Council approved the \$4.4 billion fiscal 2012 operating budget in a unanimous vote on Thursday morning.

[Click here](#) for budget details.

Original post, 6 a.m.:

On the eve of the Montgomery County Council's final vote on the county budget, the state Board of Education ruled on Wednesday that the council was within its authority to reduce spending on county schools.

The board's [7-1 vote](#) added legitimacy to an action that council President Valerie Ervin called the "biggest decision" county lawmakers made regarding [the \\$4.4 billion fiscal 2012 operating budget](#).

Last month, the county decided not to apply for a waiver from a state funding requirement that counties' per pupil spending on schools be at the same level or higher from year to year.

"This [state school board's] decision, in essence, allows the council to reset the schools' budget in a way that will not starve the rest of county government," Ervin said in a statement on Wednesday.

The council is scheduled to adopt a budget that county officials say will impact county spending and deficits far beyond fiscal 2012, which begins July 1.

"We've gone very, very deep into the structural fix," Ervin said during a briefing with reporters on Tuesday, in which she outlined cost-saving measures taken by the council in a preliminary vote last week.

The measures include cuts across all county agencies and changes to employee benefits that would require county employees to pay a greater portion of the costs of their health insurance and contribute more to their retirement plans.

The budget also includes a new property tax of 94.6 cents per \$100 of assessed value, an increase of 4.2 cents per \$100.

The council's savings package for the entire operating budget totals \$33.15 million in fiscal 2012 and a total of \$273.1 million in savings through fiscal 2017, according to analysis by council staff.

By comparison, County Executive Isiah Leggett's proposal would have saved \$29.6 million in fiscal 2012 and \$214.83 million through fiscal 2017, according to the analysis.

By spreading cuts to the school system, other county programs and services will remain intact, from grass mowing at parks to weekend hours at libraries, said Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring.

"All of those things would have suffered had we not made some of the decisions that we made on Friday and that we will make finally on this coming Thursday," she said.

The council cut the schools budget \$45 million beyond Leggett's spending proposal—a proposal in which Leggett declined the county school system's request for an \$82 million increase in county aid and instead recommended that schools funding stay at the same level as in fiscal 2011.

School officials said that they needed the increase in order to keep pace with student enrollment increases and to comply with the state's per-pupil spending law, known as maintenance of effort.

The council [announced on April 28 that it would not seek a waiver from the maintenance of effort requirement](#).

"The council's biggest decision in my opinion in this budget was to not file a waiver for maintenance of effort with the state Board of Education, because once we made that decision on April 28 it set up for the council lots of options going forward," Ervin said on Tuesday.

It is the county's "desired objective" that cuts to the school system's budget not affect classroom instruction, [Leggett \(D\) said on May 19](#).

"There needs to be some further discussion with the school system just to see how that will play out, but it is the expectation that that not be the case," he said.

Ervin, council Vice President Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac and county school board President Christopher S. Barclay (Dist. 4) of Takoma Park have met over the past

month to discuss the council's planned cuts and how to minimize the impact on students, Ervin said on Tuesday.

“[The school board has] agreed not to raise class size, for example, and not to do any harm inside the classroom,” she said. “We hope that by working together we will make sure that that occurs.”

In a petition filed with the state board in March, the county school board argued that the council did not have the authority to reduce its aid to schools below [the \\$1.4 billion schools budget recommended by Leggett](#).

After the state board's decision in favor of the council on Wednesday, Ervin struck a conciliatory tone in calling for cooperation with the county board, of which she is a former member.

“We look forward to working collaboratively with the board and the new superintendent to maintain the school system’s world-class quality and assure a stable, sustainable future for our schools and all other county agencies,” Ervin said in her statement.

Under the plan that the council will vote on today, the school system’s portion of the county tax-supported budget would be 56 percent, Ervin said. Under the current budget, schools make up 57 percent, she said.

School employees could bear the brunt of one of the council’s biggest cost-saving measures. Leggett’s proposal shifted a greater share of health care costs to county employees and called for employees to contribute more to their retirement plans, but recommended leaving health care cost share ratios and retirement contribution amounts for county school employees unchanged.

The county cannot make changes to county school employee benefits—only the county school board can do that—but the council can recommend changes and compel the board to make them by approving county aid to schools accordingly.

The council recommends increasing the share of health insurance costs paid by school employees who are members of health maintenance organizations from 5 percent of the cost to 10 percent and increasing the share of the costs for school employees on all other plans from 10 percent to 15 percent.

Under a council-backed health insurance package for county employees, the 20 percent of costs paid by HMO members would remain unchanged and the share of the cost for employees on point of service plans and for dental, vision and prescription drugs would increase from 20 percent of the costs to 25 percent.

“What this council did was something that was another very difficult decision,” Ervin said. “We decided that all employees across all agencies would participate in all of these changes.”

