

Teacher layoffs discussed by CMS

As board launches budget talks, consultant suggests CMS increase class size or cut some electives.

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Another round of teacher layoffs looms as Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools heads into a bleak budget year, a consultant told the school board Tuesday night. Much remains unclear about the district's 2010-11 budget, but Superintendent Peter Gorman said he could summarize the prospects in three words: "It isn't pretty."

The board, which includes five new members, kicked off budget talks Tuesday. Jonathan Travers, a consultant working with CMS on ways to boost achievement while the budget shrinks, outlined two prospects: increasing class size and eliminating sparsely attended high school electives. Both mean eliminating teachers, he told the board. He recommended that CMS start early working with principals to identify the least effective teachers, who would be cut when class sizes increase. CMS has about 19,000 employees, including more than 9,000 teachers. State and county money make up most of its \$1 billion-plus budget.

The governor has asked state agencies to outline budget scenarios for a 3 percent increase and cuts of 3, 5 and 7 percent. Gorman and Chief Financial Officer Sheila Shirley said that means the odds are that CMS will face a cut. Seven percent would mean losing \$45 million, Shirley said. She said the county is unlikely to be able to cover the additional \$15 million to \$20 million that CMS will need to pay for growth, new schools and rising costs of current services.

Travers, director of the nonprofit Education Resource Strategies, outlined three scenarios for small increases in class sizes. The most dramatic would cut 197 teachers and save almost \$10 million. The smallest would cut 101 and save about \$5 million. He said national research shows small changes in class sizes don't affect student performance.

His other recommendation involves eliminating advanced and specialized electives that draw very small classes. Vocational/career courses, arts and music, ROTC and advanced foreign language tend to have small enrollment and high per-pupil costs. Smaller high schools, such as Harding and Waddell, have higher concentrations of those "expensive" courses, Travers said. Eliminating those classes would mean getting rid of some specialty teachers who would be unlikely to find other jobs in CMS, he said.

Last year, as the recession hit home, Gorman laid off hundreds of teachers and other employees. Many were rehired when the state approved a tax hike and federal stimulus money arrived. Travers acknowledged that another year of layoffs would be tough on morale.

Travers said some cost-cutting measures he has recommended to other districts - such as cutting teacher pay and benefits or shrinking central-office staff - don't make sense for CMS. CMS is already lean on central administration, compared with other districts he's studied, he said.

He noted that CMS will be figuring out a new approach to teacher pay, based on performance, as part of Gorman's five-year plan, and said CMS has little control over the cost of benefits.

The board will hold a special work session Jan. 25 to talk more about the budget. Gorman expects to present a plan in March.