

Proposed State Budget Negatively Impacts Council Rock

(Disclaimer: Information in this article is based on public information available through April 26.)

The 2011-12 Pennsylvania state budget proposed by Governor Tom Corbett decreases education funding across the state by \$1 billion dollars. This statewide reduction translates to a \$3.7 million loss in education funding for the Council Rock School District (CRSD) across four categories of funding: Basic Education Subsidy, Social Security Reimbursement, Charter School Payments, and Accountability Block Grants. In 2010-11, Council Rock received an estimated \$18.9 million from the state for these four expenditures. If the proposed budget is passed, this amount will be reduced to \$15.2 million in 2011-12.

State education funding cuts exacerbate an already difficult budgetary environment. On February 3, before the Governor's budget reductions were known, but after an \$11 million CRSD budget deficit was already understood, the School Board voted unanimously to limit local tax increases to 1.4% in compliance with the Act 1 index. The Governor's cuts, announced on March 8, increased the total budget deficit to \$14.2 million. The presumed 1.4% local tax increase would bring the district \$1.96 million in additional revenues. To close the deficit, the district has been actively evaluating \$9.1 million in spending cuts and the use of \$4 million from fund balance reserves. Spending cuts are achieved in part by proposed teacher salary concessions totaling approximately \$1.1 million, the proposed elimination of over 60 staff including 52.4 classroom positions for \$3,435,000, and \$1 million in facilities and maintenance savings.

The proposed state funding reduction of \$3.7 million is broken down as follows:

- **\$1.7 million in Basic Education Subsidy**, the major grant program through which funds are distributed from the state to school districts, primarily for basic instruction and operations. In 2010-11 CRSD received \$14.4 million; the proposed subsidy for 2011-12 is \$12.7 million.
- **\$1.53 million for Social Security Reimbursement**, which reflects the state's share of employers' social security. Previously the state paid 50% of every school district's Social Security costs. The proposed budget only reimburses each district at its 'aid ratio' for personnel employed after July 1, 1994. Aid ratios are determined by a formula based on personal income and property values within each district. CR's aid ratio is 15%, much lower than other districts, which can have aid ratios up to 85%. This would result in a deeper cut for CRSD and similar suburban school districts.
- **\$75,000 in Charter School Payments** will be eliminated because the state intends to change the way charter schools operate and are funded.
- **\$425,000 in Accountability Block Grants** will be eliminated. In the past Council Rock has used these funds to implement Reading Recovery, which has been in place since 2000-01. With the elimination of this grant money, CR plans to eliminate the program entirely, which will not only reduce CR's programming cost but also provide an additional savings of \$285,000 with the elimination of 3.8 Reading Recovery trained elementary teachers.

The proposed elimination of Reading Recovery would remove a short-term early intervention program for the lowest achieving first graders. Through Reading Recovery, students receive a half-hour, one-on-one lesson, every school day for 12-20 weeks with a specially trained teacher. CR's tracking of participating students finds that, post-Reading Recovery, students sustain proficient levels at approximately 75% in 2nd grade and just over 50% in 3rd grade.

CRSD proposes that the lowest achieving first graders be helped with an "early assessment/reading club" strategy to replace Reading Recovery. The "early assessment"

indicator will be used to identify students in need of reading help, and then those identified will be assigned to a “Reading Club”. Reading Clubs are small group instructional sessions, led by the Literacy Specialists, that the district currently implements as a pull-out program for elementary school students who do not qualify for Reading Recovery but who need assistance with reading skills. Going forward, students who would have been in Reading Recovery will be absorbed into these small instructional groups.

What effect the transition to “early intervention/Reading Club” will have on struggling readers is unclear. At the time of this publication this new reading strategy has neither been presented in any public forum nor piloted before next year’s plan for full implementation. While this strategy was used prior to the implementation of Reading Recovery, success rates can only be determined when and if the district does comparable testing with students who previously would have qualified for Reading Recovery, and compares the results to those who will be in Reading Clubs, instead of Reading Recovery, next year. Citizens For Education advocates that this be done.

Additional cuts in the proposed CRSD budget, which will come up for a vote on June 9th, can directly impact students. The impacts of proposed budget cuts at the time of this publication are still unknown:

- It is expected that the 52.4 classroom cuts will result in less total classroom sections and more sections close to maximum student enrollment guidelines.
- More high school classes are being dropped or shuttled between North and South because of lower than minimum required enrollments.
- In elementary schools with non-learning support special education students, a new policy of no longer counting these students in the calculations to determine the number of classroom sections per grade will result in some reduction in the total number of sections. Taking these special education students who are often included in the regular education classes out of the total count will bring class sizes closer to or slightly over maximums at some schools (for schools that might be affected, see the Special Education chart on page ____).
- Both Richboro and Holland Middle Schools will no longer have assistant principals.
- Ninth grade sports teams are to be eliminated, which will affect athletic opportunities.
- Participation in extra-curricular offerings may be reduced now that 5:00 pm buses for after school activities are proposed to be eliminated.

Citizens For Education will be tracking and reporting impacts at all grade levels in future newsletters.

There are legislative proposals that would increase state funding for education. Although the state budget is still being considered and it is not known when it will come up for a vote, many legislators are voicing concerns that the Governor’s budget places too heavy a burden on students while giving oil and gas companies a free ride. While Governor Corbett continues to repeat his ‘no new taxes’ pledge from his campaign, some lawmakers are requesting the Governor impose a gas severance tax on natural gas drillers in Pennsylvania as other states do. The \$250-300 million in revenue it would generate, along with revenue from other proposed reductions, would help mitigate some of the severe cuts being imposed on public schools. Residents concerned about the impacts of funding cuts on CRSD should contact their state representatives to request that they prioritize state funding of education:

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