

# The New York Times

## School Districts Brace for Cuts as Fiscal Crisis Looms

By MOTOKO RICH - Published: November 15, 2012

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During the campaign, both President Obama and Mitt Romney repeatedly extolled the value of schools and teachers. Mr. Romney, in their first debate last month, even vowed, “I’m not going to cut education funding.”

¶ But if his fellow Republicans in Congress and Mr. Obama cannot agree on a resolution for the country’s looming debt crisis, the automatic budget cuts and tax increases that will kick in next year could spawn another round of belt-tightening at public schools already battered by the recession and its aftermath.

¶ If the government is unable to come to a resolution, federal education programs for elementary and high schools would lose a little over \$2 billion — or close to 8 percent of the current budget — starting next fall, according to the Office of Management and Budget and the Education Department.

¶ School districts around the country are bracing for cutbacks. In Boston, programs for English language learners and students at risk of failing a grade would be curtailed. In Cleveland, where the district has already lopped 50 minutes off the school day and limited art and music, officials fear they would have to curtail a literary program for struggling fourth and fifth graders, and lay off more classroom teachers. Miami-Dade, which has so far avoided pink slips for teachers, would probably start issuing them.

¶ While federal funding generally represents about 10 percent of public school budgets, schools have already lost millions of dollars in state money. According to an analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal-leaning research and advocacy group, 26 states cut funding this school year, and two-thirds of states are providing less money for public education than they did five years ago. It may be several years before state coffers recover enough to restore funding to previous levels.

¶ At the same time, schools have been hobbled as another important source of financing — property tax collections — has plunged after the housing crisis.

¶ While declines in state and local funding affect most public schools, cuts in federal funding would jeopardize services at schools that serve the neediest children. Federal funding for elementary and secondary education is directed

primarily at low-income students as well as English language learners and those with special education needs.

¶ “It in essence widens the gaps between the haves and have-nots,” said Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators. “The wealthy suburban communities that receive very little federal funding — it’s not going to have much impact on them.”

¶ But at urban school districts where a majority of the students are poor, a decline in federal funding, he said, “is going to be catastrophic over the reductions they’ve had over the last four years.”

¶ At the Orchard Gardens K-8 Pilot School in Roxbury, Mass., a neighborhood of Boston, Andrew Bott, the principal, fears that the work the school has accomplished in recent years could be stalled. The school, which was one of the city’s worst performing a few years ago, has used federal funds to add an hour to the school day, establish academies during breaks in the school year for students who fall behind and bring in extra help for struggling readers. As a result, Mr. Bott said, test scores have improved. “Money isn’t always the answer,” he said. “But when you have a good plan and invest it well, it makes all the difference.”

¶ Conservatives have argued that federal education spending has more than doubled in the last four decades, while test scores have not risen much. “I think the evidence is pretty overwhelming that federal involvement in K-12 education has not resulted in meaningful academic gains,” said Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian policy group.

¶ But with schools being asked to raise students to higher standards, evaluate teachers more rigorously and compete internationally, education advocates say funding cuts are devastating.

¶ “It’s lunacy to talk about cutting an investment,” said Randi Weingarten, head of the American Federation of Teachers, “when we know that we need to make sure that educating all kids is as effective and efficient and as great as possible to move all kids to 21st-century learning skills.”

¶ In Cleveland, for example, where all students qualify for free or reduced lunch, the district has already slashed \$114 million — close to 9 percent — from its budget over the past two years. Automatic cuts in federal spending could imperil \$4 million more.

¶ “We’re counting on federal funding,” said Eric S. Gordon, chief executive of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, where class sizes are up to 40 students

in some schools. “Not to be able to do extras, but just to provide the basic instructional services that you would expect of a school district.”

¶ Mr. Gordon said he found the prospect of federal education cuts particularly troubling after local taxpayers just approved an increase in property tax rates for the first time in 16 years to aid education.

¶ Voters in several other states have also shown support for public schools, by either approving new taxes or rejecting measures that would have diminished education funding.

¶ In California, a ballot initiative to increase annual taxes by \$6 billion to help the state’s public schools passed easily this month. In Florida, voters defeated a measure that would have limited state revenues, and therefore endangered state education funding. And in North Dakota, voters rejected a ballot measure to eliminate local property taxes, a crucial source of school funding.

¶ In a notable exception, public school budgets took a hit in Arizona on Election Day, when voters rejected a proposal to extend a temporary 1-cent sales tax that would have raised close to \$80 million annually for both K-12 and higher education in the state. According to the Center on Budget report, state funding for elementary and secondary students has already fallen close to 22 percent in Arizona since 2008.

¶ Supporters of the measure argued that the state had already cut full-day kindergarten, eliminated librarians and guidance counselors and increased class sizes. “Some of those things will now get worse,” said Ann-Eve Pedersen, statewide chairwoman of a committee supporting the sales tax proposition. Opponents, who included the state treasurer, argued that education spending in the state was high enough, and that tough choices had to be made. What is more, said Jonathan Butcher, education director of the Goldwater Institute, which orchestrated the “no” campaign, the state had sought other ways to improve education, like broadening the number of charter schools. “Arizona has made bold steps to address the issue without just pouring money into the system and expecting money to solve the problem,” Mr. Butcher said.

¶ Even those who support changes in educational policy — including the expansion of charter schools — say that cutting funding would harm students.

¶ “Everyone should be strenuously advocating for changes that will improve the quality of teaching and instruction, but we should also recognize that those changes cost money,” said Jonah Edelman, chief executive of Stand for Children, a nonprofit advocacy group. It supported the sales tax in Arizona but has drawn fire from teachers unions and parent advocacy groups because it favors charter schools as well as other changes, including teacher evaluations tethered to test results.

¶ “You can’t do, quote-unquote, reform on the cheap,” Mr. Edelman said.

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