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School budget outlooks brighten

By: **LEAH FABEL**
Examiner Staff Writer
March 21, 2010

Area school systems are finding a more optimistic budget scenario than expected as the springtime brings more certainty to fiscal 2011 budgets.

Barring major moves from county leaders, Prince William County schools won't need to cut 700 positions, and no longer will Fairfax County need to silence music programs and foreign languages. In Montgomery County, cutting transportation to magnet programs is less likely than it once was, as is reducing elementary school librarians.

Every school system will have cuts, and average class sizes will grow. But partly because of lobbying efforts with Maryland and Virginia state lawmakers, cuts almost surely will be less than projected several months ago.

Not everyone is surprised, said Adam Schaeffer, an educational policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

"I don't think anyone in the country who follows education would dispute that school officials pick out for cuts the popular programs that people will get angry about," he said. "Most people don't think about how other [school] money is being spent, but just call their local or state official and flip out" about the popular program.

But while the short-term outlook is slightly rosier, this year's financial breaks make the long-term outlook more worrisome.

For example, Fairfax County will save about \$109 million next year because of the Virginia legislature's decision to ease the required contribution to the state's retirement system. But in two years, the district will need to start paying it off on top of the regular contribution.

"The decision is short-sighted and fiscally unsound," said Fairfax County Superintendent Jack Dale. Even so, the decision helped allow his district to scale back its budget request from the county by \$82 million last week.

In Montgomery County, the schools expect to make only about \$100 million in cuts, even as County Executive Ike Leggett technically cut \$138 million from the school board's request.

The difference is partly because of a little-discussed \$50 million the school district expects to receive in state aid after some moves from the state legislature.

Jennifer Cohen, an education analyst at the New America Foundation, said that as boards of education have scrambled to reduce cuts, hopes have come up short that a recession would force districts to rethink how they provide a public education.

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"It has seemed that many school systems just don't have the capacity to do that systematic rethinking," she said. "They're still in that 'cutting programs' mind-set."

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