

Bleak fiscal outlook threatens local aid

By Brenda J. Buote
GLOBE STAFF

Classes forced to meet in cramped hallways. Faulty windows covered with sheets of plexiglass. Antiquated heating systems and dilapidated cafeteria equipment.

These are some of the challenges that Revere school Superintendent Paul S. Dakin would like to eliminate with a state-approved \$83.5 million school building program. There's just one hitch: The state's fiscal woes.

Although Governor Mitt Romney has said he would try to preserve money for education as he reduces local aid, he has not ruled out cuts that could slash state spending on school construction. Education aid, which includes the state's \$381.9 million School Building Assistance Program, accounts for nearly 75 percent of local aid — \$5.5 billion that flows to cities and towns from state coffers.

"Governor Romney has not yet determined how any cuts will be applied," said Shawn Feddeman, a spokeswoman for the governor. "However, he has made it clear that he needs to take steps to close the budget shortfall — and that one-third of the cuts would come from local aid. The governor will be announcing any cuts that will be made to the balance of the budget in the next few weeks."

The Legislature last week gave the governor power to slash local aid, a move that gave Romney the freedom he was seeking to address a budget deficit that could reach \$600 million this year, putting local aid on the chopping block for as much as \$200 million. The remainder of the deficit would be made up primarily through cuts to health care and human service programs.

"We're watching what happens on Beacon Hill very closely, and believing Romney's campaign promises that education is one of his priorities," said Dakin, who oversees Revere's eight public schools. "If that's true, then I would venture to say that when the budget cuts come, public education will not bear the brunt of the state's financial troubles."

Dakin is hopeful that his 5,941-student district will receive a commitment letter this year, a written promise that state funds will be available next year — in fiscal 2005 — for construction of a new Whelan Elementary School, the first of five schools to be rebuilt in Revere. But, Dakin has been told, he may have to wait several years for that money, even though the city's plan to replace the 42-year-old Whelan school was approved by state education officials nearly three years ago.

Dozens of school districts throughout



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Nancy Mulligan, a teacher in Revere, checks out plugs. Teachers say rooms have inadequate outlets.

the Commonwealth, including Beverly, Wakefield and Newbury, are still waiting for School Building Assistance payments promised last year — payments that are due by June 30 but may be delayed because of the state's bleak financial picture.

"I don't know what the governor's plan is, whether he'll propose cuts to this program," said Christine Lynch, administrator of the School Building Assistance program. "I suspect it might happen because he's proposed local aid cuts, but I don't know. I wish I did."

According to Lynch, the state typically helps communities pay for school construction by making annual payments to cities and towns over a period of 20 years. And once the state starts to make payments on a particular project, those payments are seen as guaranteed in subsequent years, she said.

However, some school officials believe the Commonwealth's financial hardships could force the Department of Education to postpone or eliminate payments—once considered fall-safe. Several superintendents pointed to the recent decision by Education Commissioner David P. Driscoll to reduce state reimbursement for tuition costs for special education students who are placed in private, residential schools. In the past, the state reimbursed communities for half of each student's tuition.

"Our city leaders made certain assumptions when they started to build these schools, based on the level of funding they were promised by the state, and they made certain assumptions when they adopted their budget for this year," said William H. Lupini, superintendent of Beverly's public schools. "I understand the

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state's fiscal crisis, but I think it's patently unfair for the state to go back on that commitment now."

Lupini noted that Beverly is scheduled to receive a total of \$968,590 from the state by June 30 for construction of three elementary schools — Centerville, Hannah, and Cove. In all, Beverly is renovating five elementary schools and building a sixth. The city's extensive school building program was budgeted in 1995 for \$37 million; today, construction is expected to cost between \$55 and \$60 million, Lupini said.

"If local aid is reduced . . . I don't know where we'll get the money," said Lupini. "We could be looking at layoffs midyear, and we'd have to look at staffing across the board, including teachers. I'm not even sure how you do that. We're putting those kinds of plans together now, talking about them internally, but it's very, very ugly."

As Lupini puts together a contingency plan, others remain optimistic, hopeful that Romney will not cut money for school construction from this year's budget.

"I doubt very seriously that we won't get the money we've been

promised. If that were to happen, it would cause all kinds of problems, and could even call into question our bond rating," said Frederick F. Foresteire, superintendent of Everett's 5,600-student school district. The city is scheduled to receive an \$822,090 check from the state this fiscal year to help pay for renovations at the Keverian School, formerly called the Hamilton School.

Meanwhile, Dakin is crossing his fingers, hoping the governor not only leaves intact state school construction funds for this fiscal year, but that Romney is also able to set aside additional dollars for school construction in next year's budget. The state would have to come up with at least \$6 million in new money for the program in the fiscal 2004 budget for Dakin to begin construction of the Whelan school.

"If our building plans are not funded, we will be leaving children behind because we'll have to spend an inordinate amount of money on maintenance and repairs — money that we'll be taking away from the classroom," Dakin said.

Financial shortfalls

The following communities are still waiting for the state to reimburse them for school construction and major repair costs already incurred. The state is supposed to pay the amounts shown below during fiscal 2003, which ends June 30:

Community	Project	Amount due
Beverly	Centerville Elementary	\$298,673
	Hannah Elementary	\$306,307
	Cove Elementary	\$363,610
Danvers	Highlands Elementary	\$290,534
	Great Oak Elementary	\$262,377
Everett	Keverian (grades 3-8)	\$822,090
Lynn	Pickering Middle School*	\$5,823
	Pickering Middle School	\$16,143
	Classical High School	\$2,333,025
	English High School	\$1,475,505
Malden	Tech High School	\$1,325,970
	Beebe Elementary	\$2,271,767
	Salemwood Elementary	\$1,334,790
	Linden (prekindergarten-8)	\$1,457,695
Newbury	Forestdale (prekindergarten-8)	\$1,228,802
	Elementary	\$871,953
Wakefield	Woodville Elementary	\$561,079
Winthrop	Fort Banks Elementary	\$897,508

* —Lynn applied for two reimbursements for the Pickering School, one for energy costs, the other for new roofs.

SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Platte North 4/23/03

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