

Public Schools Feel Impact of State Budget Deficit

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North Carolina's 115 public school systems have been instructed to revert \$58 million in state funding while charter schools must return \$1.4 million as part of state agencies' efforts to make up a budget shortfall expected to exceed \$1 billion for the current fiscal year. School systems, notified of the decision on Monday afternoon, must identify the money to be reverted by Dec. 19. The amount represents 0.75 percent of their state appropriation.

A memo Associate State Superintendent Philip Price sent to school districts calls for the cuts and urges that every effort be made to avoid impacting classroom operations. The memo also says the Department of Public Instruction will make roughly \$59 million in cuts to the State Public School Fund without passing that amount on to school districts. The department is handling those cuts mainly through reverting the difference in budgeted versus actual salaries.

The total cuts of \$117 million for local school districts and the Department of Public Instruction reflect 4 percent of the total state funding for public schools for the current fiscal year and are in response to a directive Governor Mike Easley has sent all state agencies, in which he asked most to trim as much as 5 percent.

The cuts for local school systems range from \$5.5 million for Wake County to \$40,114 for Weldon City Schools. Pine Lake Preparatory in Mooresville will take the biggest cut among the state's charter schools, having to revert \$51,262. For most charter schools, the reversions are less than \$30,000.

Price said that school systems at least get the benefit of getting the news relatively early in the fiscal year.

"The longer you wait, the more difficult it becomes for them," Price told Raleigh area media. "We are hoping this will be all that's asked of the public schools."

NCASA Executive Director Bill McNeal expressed the same hope.

"Any cuts to public schools ultimately impact children and personnel," McNeal said. "This organization will do everything we can to ensure that our lawmakers and our state education leaders understand the true ramifications of the current cuts and realize that additional cuts for North Carolina's public schools simply are not feasible."