

Lawmakers Briefed On Public School Funding

From NCASA Legislative Link 2-20-09

Lawmakers attended a briefing on public school spending Wednesday to review the impact the state budget shortfall will have on that funding for the 2009-2011 biennium and to begin determining what costs might be avoided.

North Carolina will save about \$50 million in the upcoming fiscal year because of a new law delaying the enrollment of some kindergartners. The change in the enrollment age of kindergartners means that student enrollment in North Carolina schools is projected to experience a one-year drop, from 1,476,566 students this year to 1,464,914 in the 2009-10 school year. The number of children in schools has grown steadily since at least 1999. The reason for the drop, said legislative analyst Kristopher Nordstrom, is that the state now requires kindergarten students to be 5 years old on or before August 31. Previously, students could enroll if they turned 5 by Oct. 16. While the kindergarten enrollment changes will result in a one-time savings of \$50 million, Nordstrom and legislative analyst Brian Matteson told lawmakers that other components of public school funding for 2009-2010 will require lawmakers to make tough decisions.

Raising teacher pay an average of 3 percent, as occurred for the current fiscal year, would cost \$110.6 million, while ABC bonuses are estimated to cost another \$94 million.

Nordstrom told legislators that increasing public school class sizes by one student would save the state \$170 million. Teacher-student ratios have been going down since 1985, meaning that an increase in the ratio would reverse a 24-year trend. Former Gov. Mike Easley made reducing class size in lower grades a top priority during his terms in office.

A complete look at the February 18 "Public Education Funding Overview and Update" presented by the Fiscal Research Division is at: <http://www.ncasa.net/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=199>, along with other documents that outline possible reduction options for public school funding and information on each school district's proposed impact for those reduction options.

The Appropriations Subcommittee on Education of both the House and Senate have scheduled joint meetings for next week to begin crafting the education budget proposal for 2009-2011. The meetings will feature a discussion on the federal stimulus package on Tuesday, community college funding on Wednesday and public school funding on Thursday.