

Enrollment drop prompts school staff cuts

Written by Steve Ostermann
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With 40 fewer students expected at high school, board pares teaching posts as part of ongoing budget reductions

With an eye on cost savings in the face of a pending budget crunch, the Grafton School Board on Monday continued to pare instructional staff for the 2011-12 school year.

The board agreed to reduce two full-time teaching positions at Grafton High School — cutting a social-studies post held by Lisa Wahl to a 6/10ths contract and a business-education post held by Tim Fandek to half time.

Supt. Jeff Pechura said both teachers have been notified of the contract reductions, which are being made in anticipation of declining enrollment at the school.

“We are projecting a reduction of 40 students at the high school, so we have to look at staff reductions,” he said.

Earlier this spring, the board approved two other staff cuts at the high school, eliminating one full-time math teacher and a half-time art post.

Like most area school districts, Grafton anticipates a major financial shortfall with the pending enactment of the state budget-repair law. Grafton is expected to lose \$1.3 million in per-pupil state aid under the new provisions and faces an additional \$1 million structural deficit in the budget.

However, school officials said the shortfall can be offset through a combination of cost savings and added revenue.

Under the new law, the district anticipates saving at least \$740,000 in pension costs and \$600,000 in health-insurance premiums. The district has \$339,000 remaining from federal Education Jobs Fund money it was awarded last fall.

In addition, the district has taken other cost-saving measures, including combining administrative posts to save more than \$100,000 and accepting early-retirement requests.

The budget-repair law will impose sweeping changes in contract negotiations between school districts and their teachers, stripping public-employee unions of collective bargaining rights on all contract terms except salaries. However, precise impact on Grafton’s budget won’t be known until the district explores its options, including health-insurance savings, Pechura said.

The current two-year contract with the Grafton Education Association teachers union expires in June. On Monday, the union offered to begin negotiations on a new deal, asking the board to consider extending current terms for one or two more years before the law goes into effect.

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The proposal was referred to the board's Finance and Negotiating Committee, which will next meet June 16. The next board meeting is scheduled for June 27.

"Both sides recognize that the budget-repair bill is going to become law," Pechura said. "At this point, it's a matter of how we're going to proceed, if anything will be done before then."

Pechura said the district administrative team has continued to work with the GEA, parent groups, aides and residents to obtain budget ideas. Based on current projections and cost-savings steps taken by the board, the district "is in pretty decent shape" for next year, he added.

"Right now, we anticipate being able to cut spending and balance the budget without having to lay off a teacher," Pechura said. "We're doing it through attrition and other reductions."

The board on Monday accepted the resignations of four food-service staff members. All are part-time employees and will be replaced, Pechura said.