



IMPACT OF STATE IMPASSE ON SCHOOLS

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The term will start on time but schools won't be immune from the impacts of the impasse.

State aid to school districts must continue during a shutdown of the Minnesota state government, according to a ruling Wednesday morning by Ramsey County District Court Judge Kathleen Gearing.

That news came as a relief to the Minnetonka School District, which receives 78 percent of its \$89 million annual budget from state funds.

STATE AID EXPECTED—BUT ONLY IN PART

Because the Minnesota constitution requires a “general and uniform system of public schools,” the ruling makes funding education a critical core function of government. Consequently, many—but not all—state payments earmarked for education will continue to flow to school districts during the shutdown.

One of the payments that will not be made to schools during the shutdown is designated to fund special education. And without the approval of a K-12 budget bill at the statehouse, state school districts might be left picking up the slack for those unfunded programs, like special education, should the shutdown continue into the start of the school year.

Special education funding is a sizeable chunk of the Minnetonka school's district's annual budget, according to Minnetonka Schools Spokeswoman Janet Swiecichowski. During the 2010-2011 school year, she said, Minnetonka schools spent more than \$14 million on special education services for local students.

CONTINGENCY PLANS

Mere hours before the shutdown went into effect, the Minnetonka School Board passed a cash flow borrowing plan, approving the use of \$6 million in Aid Anticipation Certificates to make up for any withheld state funding. That, added to a \$7.5 million line of credit with Associated Bank, which was secured earlier this year, and the \$8 million in other funds the district maintains on a continuous basis, means that the school district has a total of \$21.5 million in accessible emergency cash to use through August 2012.

“We hope those funds would be enough to cover the costs of any programs that would not be funded, like special education, because of the shutdown,” Swiecichowski said.

Last night, the Minnetonka School Board also passed next year's operating budget. Spending will remain flat, even with a 2 percent increase in student enrollment.

In a statement after the meeting, the school board concluded, “It is prudent for us to ensure that we utilize all options available for school districts to have cash on hand to meet our obligations during the pending shutdown.”

LICENSING WOES

In addition to hitting school district budgets, the state shutdown has essentially closed the doors to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE). Because only a six-person skeleton crew remains at the MDE, the Minnesota Board of Teaching (MBT) cannot

renew existing teacher licenses or approve new ones. That could mean that once school is back in session, some schools across the state might find themselves without licensed teachers.

Unlike many other districts, Minnetonka conducts most of its hiring in March and April. Hiring teachers early, Swiecichowski said, means securing the intellectual capital essential in a well-performing school district.

A byproduct of that standard practice to hire early in the year, was that new and existing teachers in Minnetonka had ample notice of the looming shutdown. As a result, of the more than district 600 teachers on staff, only seven new graduate teacher hires have licenses pending and only 11 current teachers have provisional licenses.

When school starts next month, few, if any, Minnetonka teachers will be without valid teaching licenses, according to Swiecichowski.

STATE TESTING WORRIES

The results of critical state and federal student tests, the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) and the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) assessment, could also be delayed during the shutdown. The absence of those test scores would have a two-fold effect.

Firstly, because many districts statewide decide on curriculum changes in August, after the results of the MCAs are published, without those results, schools across the state will be without a way to see where educational gaps exist in their curriculum.

Locally, Minnetonka schools don't rely on state tests for feedback to set their teaching plans. Instead, the district contracts out an independent student assessment, the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test, which is administered locally each fall and spring. Because those tests have a turn-around time of just 24 hours, Minnetonka administrators and teachers are able to use the data for curriculum changes right away.

"They really tell us about a child," Swiecichowski said.

Secondly, because the state of Minnesota is responsible for submitting the local AYP test results to the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) for evaluation, without the staff to submit those results, an extended shutdown could mean Minnesota schools would miss the mandated federal deadline to turn in their AYP scores. That deadline is less than two weeks from today.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, school districts who receive Title I funding and who fail to meet AYP goals, can face a battery of potential consequences.

MDE Acting Director of School Improvement Steve Dibb spoke to Patch just a few hours before the department's doors were to close Thursday. He said it was unclear exactly how the shutdown would affect or delay test scores because the impact was contingent on how long the shutdown lasts.

"If the shutdown lasts a day or two, there probably won't be much of an effect. If it turns into a few weeks of a shutdown then the reports would be delayed, then we don't know. We haven't had this happen before," he said. "We're not feeling very positive around here."

A spokeswoman with the USDOE told Patch that if the shutdown continues, the MDE can apply for a waiver of the federal reporting deadline, calling the shutdown an "unforeseen, mitigating circumstance".

She predicted that a school district "would get a sympathetic review from the USDOE since it would get the same treatment as a natural disaster that impedes state operations."

The Minnetonka School District does not have any schools in danger of failing to meet their AYP goals, so the test results for the 2010-2011 school year will have no impact on the schools in the short-term future—with or without the shutdown.

But the same can't be said for many schools across the state, including in the Hopkins School District, which had four schools that missed AYP targets in at least one area last year.

"We'll have to wait until the shutdown is over," Swiecichowski said. "We'll just take it as it comes and do our best."