

Daniel Boone School Board to take vote on kindergarten

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By Denise Larive, News Writer

The Pennsylvania Department of Education has granted permission to the Daniel Boone School District to curtail its full day kindergarten to a half day program for 2011-12, said district Superintendent Dr. Gary L. Otto at the Jan. 10 school board meeting.

Board members said they will vote soon on the curtailment, which could reduce the district's 2011-12 \$6.7 million deficit by \$420,000 to \$450,000 with the reduction in salaries and benefits.

Otto said the savings estimate includes school bus transportation for half-day students.

The board's next budget meeting is at 7 p.m., Jan. 18, at the Daniel Boone Middle School auditorium.

"By next Tuesday, the board will make our thoughts to close the gap clear. It's going to be very, very difficult," said Otto.

Parents said they need to know now about the kindergarten program in order to make preschool and day care decisions for next year.

One Douglassville parent said she would consider an alternative for her son than Daniel Boone's half-day kindergarten program, which would be a shorter academic day than a three-hour preschool session.

Assistant Superintendent Anne Marie Traynor said she would need to inform seven kindergarten teachers that they may be furloughed, the district would need to realign staff and administration would need at least four months to re-write the curriculum.

Another possible expenditure cut is to reduce extracurricular activities and save the district approximately \$900,000.

"It has nothing to do with the [\$3 million] stadium [construction], and nothing to do with the teacher contract," said board Member Walter Sheehan. "The state has given us a significant gap in funding. We're now at a \$6.5 million gap and there are no more playground aides [to let go]." Board members said they will list potential expenditure cuts of \$3 million to \$4 million that would reduce the \$6.7 million budget gap but that nothing would be "final" until the board votes on the final budget that is due by June 30.

The board said it will vote in February if it will consider a voter referendum to raise taxes above the district's index of 1.9 percent.

The district's 2010-11 deficit of \$1.5 million (after \$2.5 million of expenditure cuts) was reduced last June to a balanced budget with a millage increase of .7718 mills and the transfer of \$766,931 from the district's \$3.6 million fund balance.

Although faced with reducing a \$4 million deficit last year, the board voted last March to not seek a voter referendum to raise taxes above the 3.8 percent index to pay for district programs.

Business Manager Danielle Penza said the preliminary budget will be posted by Jan. 24 and the board's referendum vote is scheduled for Feb. 14.

The district must notify the county election board by March 8 if it wants to include a referendum question on the ballot.

Penza said the referendum question would indicate the district expenses (programs) that would be cut without a tax increase.

She said the district is facing a \$2.6 million decrease in revenue that includes a \$205,000 decrease in assessments, a \$100,000 decrease in interest earnings, a \$50,000 decrease in tuition, the loss of a \$220,000 block grant and a possible \$1.8 million decrease in basic education funding.

Expenditures have increased \$3.4 million.

"There is significant savings by going to half day kindergarten," said Sheehan, adding, "We don't take this lightly but we need to bring everything to the table."

"My child was one of the first students to go through full-day kindergarten," said Jennifer DeMild, Douglassville. "I was opposed to it then but was sold on it and now I'm told something different. They had a great education and now you're saying that full-day kindergarten really isn't that good."

"We don't dispute that full-day kindergarten was a good thing, but the state provided extra funding and that funding is no longer with us," said Otto. "This is a decision that is a lesser of two evils and this is a financial decision and I invite you to come and listen to a budget meeting. The future is not bright. There are educational realities and fiscal realities and you will hear that a lot over the next couple of weeks."

"Last year at this time we had a \$5 million deficit and now we're facing an additional \$6.8 million debt," said Otto. "We will be facing the same issues next year and decisions made this year will have a ripple effect on future years. People really need to go to their state legislators. The state isn't funding these programs the way they should. Get a letter-writing campaign going because we really need help from beyond."

"This isn't a programming issue—it's a fiscal issue," said board President Andre Basile, adding, "If we raise taxes the maximum that is allowed, how do you get from \$5.3 to zero?"

Monica Hammill, a Birdsboro resident, said her children — now in seventh and ninth grades — had excellent half-day kindergarten teachers and her kids are still doing very well in school.

"The teachers were excellent and so focused and dedicated to what they do whether it's a half day or

full day," said Hammill. "You have to look at this because that is a substantial amount of money, and if you keep nickel-and-diming everything hopefully you can get to that \$7 million without taking away everything."