

Sto-Rox may cut 29 teacher posts

School district officials also weigh paring administrative positions to save teachers

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By Brian David, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Sto-Rox school board is facing some hard choices in the next three weeks, with a preliminary budget that calls for cutting 29 teaching positions.

But the choice to cut some administrators instead may not be as easy as it sounds, despite the district's relatively high ratio of administrators to students.

"We have a lot more work to do with the number of special education and special needs children we have," Superintendent Fran Serenka said. "They need a lot more of our attention."

Countywide statistics tend to support that argument; school districts in struggling communities with high levels of children with special needs tend to have high administrative ratios.

According to statistics compiled by the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, Sto-Rox has 15 administrators for 1,417 students, a ratio of one administrator for every 94.5 students, which is among the highest in the county. Those with higher ratios also are poor, distressed districts: Duquesne at 87 students per administrator, Clairton at 81 and Wilkinsburg at 53.

Those at the other end of the scale -- the schools with the lowest per-student administration levels -- are mostly larger and wealthier districts: West Allegheny at 252 students per administrator, West Mifflin at 231, South Fayette at 227 and North Allegheny at 216. An exception is Carlynton, which has six administrators and 1,455 students for a ratio of 242.5.

The statistics are not perfect -- an AIU spokesperson said there was no defined way to say who is an "administrator" and who is not -- but the parallel is telling.

And it comes as no surprise to Stinson Stroup, executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators.

"Typically you see more administrators in places where you see more children with special needs," he said. "You have to coordinate a lot of special services for them, both inside the district and out, in putting together an individual education plan. It takes time, and it takes a real knowledge of how the systems work."

The budgetary impact of this disparity is significant; Mr. Stroup said the state reimburses districts for special education costs based on enrollment -- "on the assumption that at every district a given percentage of the students will have special needs."

So while high levels of need create high demands for administrative service, the districts with those high levels of need get no extra help meeting the demands.

Does this mean that no administrative positions will be cut at Sto-Rox? Not necessarily.

"It is an ongoing and deep conversation," Ms. Serenka said.

She noted, though, that to cut administrative positions, "we would need to define and understand what each job entails and find someone to assign it to who is not already working 20 hours a day."

Ms. Serenka also noted that the preliminary budget was a worst-case scenario -- what the district will have to do if the state government comes up with none of the money promised through several programs. Teaching positions will be added back in as money becomes available.

On a related matter, Ms. Serenka said consultants from Education Management Group finished collecting information this week for a state-funded study of all district operations.

No date has yet been set for EMG to report its findings, however.

Brian David can be reached at bdavid@post-gazette.com or 412-722-0086.

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