



Montclair schools face \$7.5 million budget gap for 2020-2021



IMAGE COURTESY THOMAS BREHER/PIXABAY
Montclair is heading into the 2020-2021 budget season with the prospect of a \$7.5 million shortfall in its budget. The district presented

several adjustments, but which would still leave a \$2.28 million shortfall.

By ERIN ROLL

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The Montclair School District is heading into the 2020-2021 budget season facing a \$7.5 million shortfall: more than triple the shortfall that needed to be closed at the start of last year's budget season.

The 2010-21 budget presented is \$131,150,939, but currently with a shortfall of \$7,512,982.

Last year, the budget was \$128,320,769, but with a shortfall of \$2,227,541.

That year, the district received a reduction in health insurance premiums, which helped reduce the gap, and the district decided to cut 13 staff positions to reduce the gap further.

This year, district officials have suggested cuts and modifications to help reduce the shortfall for 2020-2021, including a proposal to eliminate \$600,000 from the overall category of equity, curriculum and instruction.

That particular cut, discussed at the Feb. 19 Board of Education meeting, made many parents and staff uneasy.

Even with the adjustments, the budget would still be facing a shortfall of \$2,289,446.

The state aid numbers were expected to be released following the governor's budget address on Feb. 25. Last year, Montclair received \$7,605,632 in aid. Officials expected the same amount. According to the state funding formula. Montclair is entitled to \$9,038,249.

The anticipated \$120,625,307 tax levy accounts for 91.97 percent of the budget's revenue. Last year, the tax levy was \$118,260,105: about 92 percent of that year's revenue.

For the 2019-2020 school year, for a Montclair household with the average 2018 assessed value of \$626,135, the school tax bill was \$10,518, an increase of \$206 from the previous year. What that same household would pay with the projected budget has not been released by the district.

Contracted salaries are expected to account for 60.24 percent of expenditures.

District officials said the major drivers of the budget are contracted salary increases – 3.5 percent for teachers, 3 percent for head custodians and 2.75 percent for principals – and increases in health benefits.

At the start of the previous year's budget season, the district was facing a \$2.2 million shortfall.

Budget adjustments

The district has presented \$3,923,536 in proposed budget adjustments.

The largest cut, and the one that raised the most concerns from members of the audience, was a proposal to eliminate \$600,000 from equity, curriculum and instruction.

In response, Interim Superintendent Nathan Parker claimed later in the meeting that none of the cuts from that category would be for equity-related positions, but would mainly be from curriculum and instruction items, including new textbooks.

But the discussion of the \$600,000 cut came shortly after the budget presentation showed demographic data comparing recent performance between white students and black or African American students on recent standardized tests. The data showed a continuing gap between white students and black students on test scores. On the ELA portion of the 2018-2019 NJSLA/PARCC test, 79 percent of white students met or exceeded expectations compared to 44 percent of black students at the elementary level; 77 percent to 41 percent at the middle school level; and 89 percent to 48 percent at the high school level. On the math portion, 76 percent of white students met or exceeded expectations, compared to 39 percent of black students at the elementary school level; 63 percent to 22 percent at the middle school level; and 36 percent to 1 percent at the high school level.

“It is time for us to dust off that achievement gap panel recommendation whether we agree with it or not,” Diane Anglin, the acting chair of the NAACP’s education committee, said later in the meeting. She also urged the district not to dismantle any current initiatives for equity unless a better plan was put in place first.

The next largest cut was to transportation: \$535,000, followed by \$524,000 from health benefits, \$500,000 from technology, \$450,731 from the high school’s budget, \$414,109 from out-of-district tuition, and \$200,000 from judgements against the district.

Greg Woodruff, the treasurer for the Montclair Education Association, said the revenue section did not appear to include \$5 million that the MEA is paying back in order to reduce health benefit costs. He also voiced concerns that reducing the transportation budget would pose an equity issue, since the school community has repeatedly called for bus service to be expanded to include the South End.

The budget adjustments mentioned only two specific staff positions. The district has proposed eliminating one secretary position, at a salary of \$62,698, and one operational aide position, at a salary of \$56,020.

The first budget draft is set to be presented to the executive county superintendent on March 4, and the BOE is set to tentatively adopt it on March 16. From there, the budget will go to the Board of School Estimate on March 23.