

Akron Beacon Journal

EDUCATION

Akron schools considering \$11 million in budget cuts. What we know:



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Key Points

Akron Public Schools must cut \$11 million from its budget to avoid a financial cliff.

Superintendent Mary Outley presented an outline on how she plans to do it.

Staffing cuts are included in the proposed reductions.

This story has been updated with additional information.

Akron school leaders plan to use a combination of staffing cuts, operational changes and program reductions to eliminate **an \$11 million budget gap** next school year.

Superintendent Mary Outley presented an outline of her proposed budget reductions on Feb. 23 to school board members for consideration. The board could vote on the recommendations as soon as its March 9 meeting.

The district of roughly 19,000 students must reduce its nearly \$386 million budget by at least \$11 million to avoid possible state oversight and exhausting its cash reserves in 2028. The school board **previously approved** a state-required financial forecast that reflected the \$11 million cut, but Feb. 23 was the first time Outley shared the recommendations publicly.

Superintendent's proposed staffing changes to save \$6.4 million

Outley, who plans to meet with district union leaders this week, did not name specific positions that may be eliminated in her recommendation. She said the person who may ultimately lose his or her job may not be the same person whose position is cut due to what's called bumping rights under union contracts that allow employees with more seniority to transfer to a position held by a less-senior employee.

She hopes most of the reductions can be made through not replacing people who retire or resign, or by moving employees into open positions.

Outley's recommendation calls for cutting:

16 administrator positions, including eight retired administrators who are used to fill in for administrators on leave, a college and career academies specialist, two special education coordinators and five support administrators to save roughly \$997,000. Outley also restructured three administrative positions to reduce their salary and benefits costs to save nearly \$97,000.

13 college and career academies teachers to save \$1.2 million.

Five other teachers to save \$455,000.

At least one substitute and online mentor and reducing the budget for mentors to save \$257,203.

The district also would seek to reassign 10.5 paraprofessionals to other roles not paid by the district's main operating fund and would not fill vacant technology support specialist positions.

The treasurer's office also expects to save \$88,717 by restructuring its staff.

Proposed operational efficiencies to cut \$4.2 million

Outley is asking nearly every district department to reduce its budget by 6.5% to save \$1.9 million. The departments exempt from the reduction include athletics,

transportation and environmental management.

The district, which already has cut its overtime costs by 10%, will seek to reduce overtime even further next school year by 11.6% to save \$823,000. Outley said the district still will approve overtime when needed, but supervisors are more mindful when approving it.

Other proposed changes include:

Relying on the district's current supply of 5,000 Chromebooks and not buying more next school year to save \$1 million.

Using district employees to provide pest control instead of an outside company to save \$114,232.

Adding energy efficiency lighting to two buildings to save \$80,000.

No longer allowing maintenance employees to drive district-owned vehicles home for an expected savings of \$99,505.

Replacing existing copper lines for building fire alarms with a wireless option to save \$70,000.

Negotiating a change in the union contract to reduce the number of hours a mechanic must be on call during student field trips to save \$53,336.

Proposed program reductions to save \$1.85 million

To save \$1.4 million next school year, the district hopes to split the payment for its new math textbooks over the next two school years.

Outley also has proposed to:

Reduce available seats in the SOAR program, which provides special education instruction and related services for students, to save \$105,000.

Reduce summer programming costs by \$100,000.

Cut program support by \$165,000.

Revert to online testing (instead of paper-and-pencil testing) for the district's cognitive abilities test to save \$20,000.

Reduce the budget for its optional 12th-grade ACT testing and its 10th-grade SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying test to reflect how many students tend to participate for a savings of roughly \$34,000.

Outley said the upcoming state performance audit, which is expected to be completed by this fall, also will help identify additional staffing adjustments and operational efficiencies.

Akron school board members share concerns

Board member Summer Hall expressed concern about cutting so many positions needed to help students succeed.

"I just don't know if I can agree with so many things being taken away from our students that they actually need, especially if we want to keep our students and bring more students to the district," she said.

Outley said she and her team have been mindful of continuing the district's academic progress and not moving backwards.

"I accept the challenge to try to stay away from the classroom, but I also know that by 2028, we have to reduce our budget by \$58 million and so we have to make some tough decisions," said Outley, who previously noted that personnel costs comprise 80% of district operating expenses.

Board President Barbara Sykes and member Gregory Harrison encouraged residents to urge their state lawmakers to fully fund public education so school districts are not faced with making such drastic reductions.

"We heard our superintendent talk about cuts, the \$11 million cuts, and she is struggling. You can hear it in her voice how painful this is," Sykes said. "It's painful for all of us."

Harrison said a recent visit to the statehouse with members of the Akron-Canton Advocacy Alliance didn't give him much hope for better state funding in the future.

He said lawmakers believe Ohio has too many school districts, too many buildings and too many administrators.

"There is a reality that we have to face as public school districts," he said. "Changes are coming and we have to be able to move with those changes."

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