

# Akron Beacon Journal

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## EDUCATION

# Grim Akron Public Schools financial forecast predicts budget shortfall ahead



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### Key Points

Akron Public Schools Interim Treasurer Wayne Bowers gave a grim outlook for the district's finances as part of his state-required five-year forecast.

He said the district's expenses are expected to grow faster than revenue.

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Akron Public Schools could face significant [financial trouble](#) as early as 2028, despite voters approving a new property tax levy in November and [recent staffing cuts](#).

Interim Treasurer [Wayne Bowers](#) presented the district's grim financial picture on Sept. 22 to the school board before it approved its latest five-year forecast, which must be submitted to the state by Oct. 15.

Bowers encouraged the board and administration to take corrective action sooner rather than later.

“It isn’t too late to make decisions that will positively influence this path, and I recommend that we start doing that now,” Bowers said. “The sooner we do that, the better off we will be and the sooner we can get things back on course.”

He said district officials have evaluated how to reduce employee overtime, and his office has started looking through every purchased services contract for savings. He

recommended the district look at its physical footprint and the number of students in class for possible cost savings.

At the direction of the school board, Bowers, a former assistant state auditor, also contacted the Ohio Auditor's Office to conduct a performance audit of the district, which will examine the efficiency and effectiveness of district operations and make recommendations on how to improve them.

Bowers said the audit could take six months to a year to complete.

Bowers' five-year forecast shows:

## **District expenses expected to grow faster than revenue**

If no changes are made to the budget, Bowers warned that the school district will continue pulling from its reserves and ultimately run out of money by June 2028, with a \$13.3 million cash deficit. The school district would either need a 17.5% revenue increase or a \$81.7 million cut in expenses to balance the budget in 2030.

## **Revenue growth expected to slow**

Over the past five years, the district's collections increased by 4.87%, which is roughly \$15.5 million annually. The forecast projects collections to rise by only 0.12% through June 2030.

Bowers blamed lagging collections mostly on state funding cuts. He said state funding, which makes up 55% of the district's revenue, is expected to be nearly \$11.7 million less per year compared with the amount of state funding the district has historically collected.

## **District spending on slower pace**

District spending is expected to increase at a slower pace than the historical trend. District expenses increased by about 6.5% during the past three years. The forecast estimates spending to increase by only 3.3% through June 2030.

He expects employee salary costs not to increase as much as they historically have, but employee benefits, which include medical insurance, retirement and workers' compensation expenses, are projected to rise faster compared with the historical average.

Through the first two months of this school year, Bowers said spending on supplies and materials has significantly decreased compared with a year ago. Bowers said it's too early to know whether the current decreased spending will continue over the next 10 months of the school year.

## **Akron Public Schools appeals federal funding cut**

Superintendent Mary Outley warned that more funding cuts could be on the way. She said the district was notified on Sept. 12 that the federal government has canceled funding for the GEAR Up grant, which provides mentoring and college and career readiness support for roughly 1,500 sophomores and juniors. The grant was supposed to provide support for seven years, but the district is entering only its fifth year.

"They began this program when they were in sixth grade," Outley said. "Now, at a crucial point when they are ready to access things for which they are preparing for, the support will no longer be there for them."

Yvonne Culver, director of school counselors and student wellness, said the federal government is now canceling the GEAR Up grant due to the diversity, equity and inclusion components of the district's program. She said federal officials requested those components when the district applied for the grant five years ago.

The district has appealed the decision to end the grant prematurely. If the appeal is unsuccessful, the grant would end on Oct. 1, seven staff positions would be cut and the district would lose \$1.2 million this year and \$3.6 million total, district officials said.

Outley said the U.S. House bill that proposes to cut the U.S. Department of Education's budget by 15% would mean a loss of roughly \$7 million for Akron Public Schools. She said the reductions would impact programs that support teacher training, academic programs, programs for English learners, student well-being and enrichment opportunities.

"Losing these funds would be hurtful to our classrooms, to our after-school programs, and the work that we have been doing where we are closing achievement gaps," said Outley, who noted that parochial and private schools also would be affected.

She encouraged residents to call their federal representatives to oppose the funding cuts.

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