

Journal 11
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Hello, I'm Del Burns, superintendent of the Wake County Public School System.

About 40,000 students are already in their second month of classes as I record this message and we have almost another 100,000 students ready to begin their classes on the traditional calendar. Our teachers, principals, and staff have been working very hard to ensure a strong start to the school year, and I'm very grateful to them for everything they have done. They've prepared for this year under some of the most uncertain conditions our schools have ever seen due to our economy. I have attempted to share some of these challenges with you over the past several weeks.

Last week, the state finalized their budget for the fiscal year that actually began July 1. Based on that information, this Tuesday our school board took steps to reconcile our local budget with the state funding.

This has been a long and difficult process, and I wish I could say that it is over. But while our school-based staff continue to get on with the important business of learning and teaching, our business operations staff continue to follow the economy closely. All of our funding sources-- the state included -- are based on assumptions about the economy, and there have been conflicting signs about how quickly the recession is lifting. If there are future revenue shortfalls, I would not be surprised if we were asked to cut our budget again.

This is why we are being very careful in our use of the federal stimulus funding that's been made available to schools. It's not a magical solution that will make everything like it was. The funding we have received is directed toward specific purposes such as students with disabilities and title 1 schools. That stimulus funding, AND the federal stimulus money that the state has incorporated into their funding of school systems, are set to expire in two years.

It's fiscally irresponsible to use short-term funds to pay for recurring expenses, all the while hoping that replacement funds will arrive. To me, that is not an acceptable strategy. That's digging a hole for our future that we cannot see our way out of. We continue to strive to strike a balance with the use of these funds to preserve positions, add positions while bracing for the inevitable loss of these funds in the future.

These are tough times. As far as state funding is concerned, our per pupil funding is less than many other districts in North Carolina. For example we do not receive as much funding from the Disadvantaged Student Supplemental Fun. We receive no funding from the supplemental small school funds, or low-wealth county funding. The flexibility you may have heard of in how school systems can use state funding has less of an impact on us. That's because we have more than 90 percent of state funds paying for people.

In Wake County, we have made a practice of using our economies of scale to do more with less. The reality of the situation is that we are working to provide services to children with fewer people and less funding.

This is one of the reasons that, as the fiscal crisis became apparent, we took many proactive steps and made some tough decisions early on -- in order to open school in July and welcome another 100,000 children this month while avoiding significant changes to classrooms after the school year began. On our website we have posted the chronology of these decisions for you.

Our community has understandable concerns about what lies ahead for us this year, but as I've visited the classrooms and talked to our staff, I have seen such excitement to have the school year finally underway. We will work through our challenges, and we will keep the focus on learning and teaching. This is going to be a good year for our students, and that's the most important thing.

Thanks, and I will talk to you again soon.