

# The Journal

June 12, 2009

The Journal is a videotaped message from Superintendent Del Burns to parents and the community regarding the issues that affect the Wake County Public School System. In what are expected to be regular webcasts, the Journal will allow parents and other key stakeholders the opportunity to hear directly from the superintendent about plans for the new school year, ways to become involved and how we are improving to meet the needs of all of our students.

In his first Journal entry, Dr. Burns discusses the impact the recession has on the system as we have developed our funding request for the 2009-10 school year and are planning for the opening of school in a few weeks.

---

I'm Del Burns, Wake County Public School System Superintendent.

As we wrap up the current school year, and prepare for a new one, I am proud -- very proud -- that our principals, teachers and students have done a such great job of keeping the focus on learning and teaching in the most challenging economic environment in our school system's history. And I know this time has been difficult for families and businesses throughout Wake County as well. Everyone is trying to understand and maintain a sense of control over circumstances that oftentimes, are beyond our control.

That is why this is the first of what I hope is a regular series of video journal entries that I'll be sharing with you as we prepare to meet the challenges of these uncertain times.

I'll do what I can to explain what's happening-- how we began preparing for a tough budget year--and how our children and educators may be affected. There is much we don't know and we certainly don't have all the answers yet, but as things become clearer with local and state funding, I will share that information with you and most importantly, I want to use this opportunity to talk to you about how we will work together to meet these challenges.

To start, I want to take just a moment to explain how our school system is funded. In our proposed budget, almost two thirds of our day-to-day funding comes from the State of North Carolina. This is different from many other states, where the majority of school funds come from the county. In Wake County, as is the case throughout our state, county and other local funding make up about a third of our operating budget. A small percentage comes from federal sources targeted to specific areas.

So you can see how dependent our schools are on a strong state economy.

Of our entire operating budget, 88 cents from every dollar goes to schools; the remainder goes to support services for our schools including Central Services. The other important thing to remember about our budget is that education is a people-powered business, with 82 percent of our operating budget paying for people, not things. What this means is that in a severe economic downturn, it's inevitable that schools and people will be affected.

We began to see the impact of this downturn early last fall. There were fewer housing starts; a slowing of retail sales and in conversations with our elected officials we knew that we needed to watch our expenditures in light of the changes that were occurring. In December of last year, we returned 11 million dollars to the state and county. We decided very early that we must protect our schools from cuts as much as possible, and that continues to be our strategy. As a result, the cuts from central services were higher proportionally than the

cut from schools.

Since then we have also frozen the hiring for all vacant positions -- with the exception of classroom teachers and mission-critical positions. Right now, seven percent of our Central Services positions are vacant and will not be filled for the foreseeable future, if ever. We must adjust how we work in order to support our schools in the coming years.

We also made a difficult decision when we heard that significant state funding cuts might be coming. We prepared for the possibility of a five percent budget cut. At the time the decision was made, the Governor requested plans to reduce state agencies, including school systems by 3%, 5%, and 7%. We chose a middle ground and asked principals to fill only 95 percent of their allotted positions in their schools. This meant that many of our 1500 certified employees on year-to-year contracts might not be rehired. In addition each of our salaries were reduced by half a percent following the governor's executive order in April, and finally, we have recently returned another 3.9 million dollars to the state following a second request for reductions.

That brings us to today. As I record this, we are expecting the Wake County Board of Commissioners to wrap up their work on the local budget very soon, and I will be able to share some of the impact of their decision with you when we know more. However, I can't say the same for the state budget. We have heard the possibility that we may face cuts even steeper than the ones we prepared for, but we don't know when the legislature will adopt a budget, much less what the budget will be.

In the meantime, our principals face the issue of how to plan for a new school year and greeting 140,000 students, when they don't know how much money and how many positions they'll have.

In order to help principals fill essential vacant teaching positions, we're now allowing them to hire teachers using a month-to-month temporary employment contract, with the understanding that the state's final budget may or may not include the funding to maintain those positions. Beyond that, we have asked principals to deal with the uncertainty by being as flexible as possible. As our economic picture becomes clearer we all will have to make adjustments and changes. Some of these changes may be difficult, and some of them will likely happen after the school year has already begun. I will be able to share more about this potential impact next time.

This is not the kind of report that I want to make to our community, but it's important that you know the seriousness of the impact this economic slowdown is having on our schools. Our children will likely begin the school year in schools with constrained resources, and with some familiar and important faces no longer there. In spite of that, their schools are staffed with resilient and dedicated teachers, principals and support staff who place our children first, and my team is committed to supporting them. Our schools will be focusing even more on being sure that everyone is working together to meet our children's individual needs.

We all must work together in this tough economy as we prepare our children to compete as adults in a challenging global economy. I know our team is up to that challenge, and our schools will continue to improve. Our children -- your children -- are too important for us to do otherwise.

Thank you, and I will talk to you again soon.