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Schools ready in case override fail

By **Katie Liesener**/ Staff Writer
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Seventy percent of the \$2.1 million override to appear before voters in April is devoted to the schools' "level-services" budget.

If voters do not approve the override, the School Committee has OKed \$1.47 million in cuts that will have to be made - including teacher layoffs, eliminated extracurricular activities, and elementary school consolidation.

"Collectively, the administrators don't like the thought of carrying out these recommendations, but stand ready to do so, if necessary," wrote Superintendent Gary Burton in a letter to the School Committee outlining the administrators' recommended cuts.

Those cuts include the elimination of a principal, four middle school teachers, five high school teachers, a custodian, all money for staff development, and \$100,000 in extracurricular activities for grades 6 to 12.

The School Committee has not yet decided which activities would be cut, but Burton speculated they would likely be activities with a high price tag or those that involve a relatively low number of students.

Burton said school administrators have been anticipating the possibility of an override - and the need for a back-up plan if it fails - since August.

In November, the School Committee identified \$2.5 million in cuts to satisfy the Finance Committee's request for a budget decreased by 8 percent. Those cuts included the entire elimination of grades 6 to 12 athletics and extracurricular activities, as well as all of the school district's librarians.

Since that time, the FinCom's estimated deficit has significantly decreased and the School Committee has adopted over \$600,000 in participation fees, allowing for less extreme cuts.

"With \$1.47 million to cut, we obviously had to cut a lot less," said School Committee Chairman Jeff Dieffenbach. "We got considerable savings by putting kindergarten in one elementary school."

The consolidation of elementary schools would likely result in all kindergartners attending Loker School, first and second grades at Happy Hollow School, and third through fifth grades at Claypit Hill School. As a result of the consolidation, one principal would oversee two of the buildings (kindergarten and first through second). This would allow roughly 14 teachers and teaching assistants to be let go.

Despite the savings, Dieffenbach said that consolidated schools would create greater inconvenience for parents with children of different ages, and mean fewer programs that pair older children with younger ones.

Dieffenbach said that if the override fails, the committee would consider allowing eliminated extracurricular activities to continue as fee-based programs.

"We always prefer something fee-based than to not have it at all," said Dieffenbach. "But we strongly realize unfortunately it reduces the number of people who can participate. It's essentially saying, 'Well, if you're wealthy enough, you can play.'"

Dieffenbach stressed that in identifying these cuts, the School Committee is not crying wolf to unduly pressure an override.

"We don't make such a list lightly. I would expect these are the cuts, plus or minus a few changes around the edges if the override fails," Dieffenbach said. "If we put forth these cuts and do something different, then it's difficult for residents to have trust in a cut list the next time around."

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