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EDUCATION

Akron Public Schools employees, parents oppose recommended budget cuts



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Key Points

Akron school employees and parents say the proposed staffing cuts will negatively impact students.

The school board then decided to delay its vote on whether to eliminate 17 employee positions.

They may not be classroom teachers, but the paraprofessionals and deans at [Akron Public Schools](#) also significantly impact students and their positions [should not be eliminated](#), according to district employees and parents.

“We need to look at everything outside of the school building before we touch (any positions) inside the school building,” said Clarissa Kornell, president of the [King Community Learning Center's](#) Parent Teacher Association who has two sons enrolled in Akron Public Schools. “Schools are already stretched thin.”

The Akron school board is considering eliminating roughly 25 positions as part of its plan to reduce its \$386 million main operating budget by at least \$11 million before next school year. The board had been poised to vote on eliminating roughly 17 positions during its March 23 board meeting but took no action following a nearly four-hour closed-door session that included discussions about other personnel items and union contract negotiations.

Superintendent Mary Outley has said the district of nearly 19,000 students faces a financial shortfall if it doesn't reduce its expenses. The shortfall is largely due to

reduced state funding and increased costs.

On March 9, Outley presented a [revised list of reductions](#) that seek to eliminate nearly \$3.4 million through personnel changes, \$4.3 million through operational changes and \$3.3 million through program changes.

The recommended positions to be eliminated on June 30 include:

Six deans of students, who serve as assistant principals at the elementary and high school levels. Schools that will be affected include Pfeiffer Elementary and East, Forest Hill, King, Crouse and Resnik community learning centers. Some of the district's remaining 19 deans will be redistributed to cover the affected schools, Outley previously said.

Six intervention specialist paraprofessionals, which are educational assistants who support students with special education needs under the guidance of a classroom teacher. The proposed cuts include two positions each at Ellet and Garfield community learning centers and one each at East and Firestone.

Four learning resource center technicians, who work within the library or media center to support library operations and student learning. Affected schools include Buchtel, East, Ellet and Firestone community learning centers.

An art therapist at Crouse Community Learning Center. Outley previously said the art therapist was hired when the school didn't have an art teacher, but the therapist's position wasn't reduced when an art teacher was hired.

Outley has said affected employees will have the opportunity to apply for other open positions within the district. She's noted that the district has 50 open paraprofessional positions available.

The superintendent's recommendation to cut an online mentor, a position currently held by a substitute teacher, was not on the board's agenda for March 23.

Besides eliminating positions, Outley's personnel recommendations also call for not filling two special education coordinator positions and four technology support

specialist positions, reducing spending on administrative specialists and restructuring three administrative positions to reduce their salaries and benefits.

The recommendations also seek to transfer to federal funding sources – instead of cutting – the \$161,336 cost of a career and technical education specialist, the \$49,780 cost to pay for mentors to help students during their senior year and the \$105,000 cost for seats in the SOAR program, which provides special education instruction and related services for students.

APS employee: ‘We are the engine’

Jessica Higginbotham, who is one of the learning resource center paraprofessionals whose job would be eliminated under the recommended reduction plan, told the school board on March 23 that she helps to create a safe space at East Community Learning Center for some of the district’s most vulnerable students by overseeing one of the libraries when a librarian must leave the learning resource center. She said that without her and other technicians, high school libraries will be forced to close whenever the librarian must leave.

"Our LRCs (learning resource centers) are more than just rooms for books," said Higginbotham, who was hired by the district in 2021. "They are safe havens for students who need a quiet, supervised environment during the day. Closing the doors because of staffing cuts leaves our most vulnerable students without a place to go. Just last week, a student told me I'm her safe space."

She said learning resource center technicians also are essential to the education process by providing appropriate books for students, offering technical guidance for the school’s technology, such as 3D printers, sewing and embroidery machines and heat presses, and creating posters for the school.

“We are the engine that keeps these learning hubs running safely and efficiently,” she said.

Carylon Lee, an intervention specialist paraprofessional at East Community Learning Center, said teachers do not have enough time in the day to help the students with special needs as a paraprofessional does. She said the needs vary greatly, such as needing to be pulled aside to learn in a small group setting, needing to hear motivational words or the directions repeated, or needing help to read and understand an assignment.

“Without the extra help, I’m afraid our graduation rates will decrease,” said Lee, who was hired by the district in 2019.

Shaun Cecil, high school finance teacher at East Community Learning Center, said paraprofessionals are essential to the operations of the district’s college and career academies because they help instructors focus on developing the curriculum of their programs.

The school board’s next regular board meeting is scheduled for 5:30 p.m. on April 13.

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