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School groups say budget must happen, regardless of roads plan: 'Stop putting concrete over kids'

Education leaders had a simple message for lawmakers during a Tuesday round table: come back to Lansing and pass a budget – now.

District administrators and statewide education advocates stressed the impact of the Legislature not reaching a budget deal by the July 1 deadline on local schools and students, saying lawmakers have forced educators to make impossible financial decisions without the necessary information.

Almost a month after the deadline, the lack of a budget is still a thorn in the side of the education community – but adding insult to injury, advocates said, is the renewed conversation among lawmakers and the governor's office about tying any budget to a road funding deal.

"We need a budget that is sustainable, significant, and one that invests in programs that serve Michigan's most vulnerable students. To be clear, we do not have a budget because of this manufactured crisis," Michigan Alliance for Student Opportunity Executive Director Peter Spadafore said. "The fact that the legislature broke the law and missed the deadline is not because of a lack of resources or outside factors. Holding up the budget to pave the way for a road deal is unacceptable, and every day that ticks by only makes the situation worse, and real consequences are already being felt across the state."

Some of those consequences, Spadafore said, include districts having to release or not renew agreements with contracted employees like literacy coaches or school resource officers, or being unable to fill vacancies in staff positions until a budget is passed.

"We are putting concrete over kids. It's been stated that we will not see a school budget until we see a roads budget," Van Dyke Schools Superintendent Piper Bognar said. "We are building roads on the backs of our children. Think about that. Think about your children being second place to roads. This is not potholes versus preschoolers here, we're talking about our most valuable resource in the state."

Spadafore said previous iterations of road funding plans have included methods to backfill losses to the School Aid Fund under sales tax changes, but as more and more legislative priorities depend on pulling money from schools, lawmakers have shuffled Michigan students to the back burner.

"Now it has become a situation where, as more and more dollars come out of the School Aid Fund to pay for higher education, to remove the sales tax on fuel, to pay for roads, to talk about paying for other non K-12 related functions, the policymakers here in Lansing have set up that false choice between roads and students, and that's why we're here to say, 'don't do that,'" he said. "Get the job done, get our budget done right, and then figure out what's left to cover up the other resources that are necessary. We've long since advocated that there aren't enough resources in the state to do everything, and I think that's becoming painfully clear as lawmakers continue to add to the list of their number one priorities and don't have the resources to cover them."

Currently, to meet the deadline of their own fiscal calendar, school districts around the state formed their budgets for the upcoming school year around last year's per-pupil foundation allowance. However, administrators said, even if there was movement on a budget in recent weeks, the distance between House and Senate versions of what the School Aid Fund should look like only enhances the uncertainty.

"We're not just talking about the fact that we don't have a budget, but we're also talking about the fact that the proposals of the way that the budget would be allocated are significantly different, and we have not had a situation in Michigan where we have no categoricals," Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals Director Wendy Zdeb said of the budget House Republicans passed earlier this summer.

"That's a whole different mindset and a way of approaching it, and it's going to create winners and losers, because essentially, you're going to have districts that have a higher proportion of high-need students, that are English language learners, that are special education that have significant at-risk factors," Zdeb continued. "And if those factors aren't being accommodated by the budget, those districts probably aren't going to see the kind of funding that they have in the past to be able to support those students."

With the uncertainty and delay in the budgetary process, coupled with near-constant back-and-forth in the courts regarding President Donald Trump's sweeping changes to education at the federal level, Zdeb said members of her organization have reported that they're planning for larger class sizes and fewer individual course offerings this school year.

"We know parents don't want large class sizes," Zdeb said. "We know that parents want their kids to be able to have those individual course offerings that really meet their needs, and we can't provide that if we don't know what to anticipate in terms of funding. So, it's both a staffing and a programming perspective that's concerning to us."

Michigan Association of Superintendents and Administrators Executive Director Tina Kerr said funding questions at both the state and federal levels have the potential to create a perfect storm of devastation for public schools.

"In addition to the uncertainty in Lansing, we're dealing with uncertainty in the threat of funding cuts from Washington, D.C.," Kerr said. "The administration has proposed a budget cut for next year that would cut funding by 15% and there's no certain certainty that (the state Legislature) will avoid a government shutdown in September, (so) we're looking at a true nightmare scenario in September, the first full month of the school year, where Michigan public schools are looking and having no idea if they will receive state and federal programs or funding."

Many of the programs supported by state and federal funds, Spadafore said, help service the state's highest need students or ensure school districts can comply with statute and implement programs passed by the Legislature.

"I've talked to several of my members that they're waiting to sign contracts for things like safety, school resource officers, paraprofessionals, literacy coaches, things like that that have been specialized funding categories because there is such a large amount of daylight between what the Governor proposed, what the House proposed, and what the Senate proposed," he said. "We have no idea how to budget for that, so money you may have typically earmarked for school safety and mental health, you now have to hold off to even know if that's going to be there in the budget."

As lawmakers continue to hold session with no attendance and no voting, or decline to come to Lansing entirely, the educators said making students a bargaining chip in the negotiations for a road funding plan stand to only prolong the process and put schools in the lurch come September.

"Public education was created to be the great equalizer, not a pawn," Bognar said. "We need to make sure that we are serving our students and again, not throwing aside our babies for roads. We need to put our resources into schools and keep that school aid money in our schools."

– By Lily Guiney

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