

# Educators brace for cuts to budget

Impact likely to be  
felt at local schools  
by early 2011

By **HOWARD BUCK**  
*Columbian staff writer*

Southwest Washington educators face an early mid-term exam: They're bracing for across-the-board budget cuts ordered by Gov. Chris Gregoire.

Spending reductions will impact the school year just begun. It's not yet clear exactly how, in grades K-12 public schools, at Clark College and at Washington State University Vancouver.

One bright spot: The recent "Edu-jobs" bill passed by Congress that should keep K-12 classroom teaching ranks intact through next June.

Under Gregoire's directive, officials are looking at 6.3 percent reductions in many school funds by early 2011—though not for constitutionally mandated, per-pupil K-12 basic education state dollars.

Actually, the target is 10 percent in many cases, anticipating a further drop in state tax revenues when the next forecast comes in November.

Cuts will target many grant programs, both those managed directly by districts and through Educational Service District 112, said Tim Merlino, budget director for the regional school agency. The state's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction will trim its own spending by the amount required.

But a \$26 billion stimulus package voted by Congress comes in time to help K-12 districts navigate thin ice this school year.

About \$205 million from the federal bill is earmarked for Washington schools. Each should receive \$210 per student, Merlino said.

"We're going to collect all the

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federal money up front," he said. The aid should protect classroom employee ranks "all the way through 2010-11," he said.

That's good, because Olympia must dial down its spending spigot by next spring, once lawmakers adopt a supplemental budget to cover all state programs through June 30.

Given the task of patching a roughly \$520 million deficit for that period, legislators are likely to enact cuts swiftly in January, Merlino predicts.

That's before they begin to

bite off an immense \$4.5 billion deficit estimated for the following 2011-13 budget cycle.

The Vancouver district school board will absorb the latest news when it meets Tuesday.

Other school districts also are gearing up for changes that hinge on lawmakers' choices, "until they put this stuff in action," said Mary Beth Lynn, budget director for Battle Ground Public Schools.

What local districts do know is the dollar loss if legislators strip the most likely, non-constitutionally mandated state funding streams for 2011-13.

Those include levy equalization funds, intended to help districts with below-average to-

tal property tax values; supplemental funds that pay for extra teachers in grades K-3; and highly capable learning programs.

Legislators might even order partial repayment of Initiative 728 school enhancement funds disbursed this summer, the final shred of that voter-approved state learning assistance.

Evergreen and Vancouver districts each would lose \$15 million to \$20 million per year, should all those funds dry up.

## Higher ed impact

WSUV has launched a campus budget review after last week's directive from Pullman leaders to identify 6.3 percent in spend-

ing reductions.

Layoffs are unlikely, but the Salmon Creek campus will keep many vacant positions open, said Lynn Valenter, vice chancellor for finance and operations.

As a result, students will notice fewer class sections and other staffing shortfalls, she said.

"Our hope is to shield students as much as we can, but we've been doing that all along," Valenter said. "Tough stuff. We continue to try to do more, with less."

At Clark College, the current mood is less dire.

President Bob Knight has issued campus notice the two-year school will maintain current cost-containment efforts.

But there's no sign any student programs or jobs are threatened, much less any solid plan.

All job vacancies and academic support and other costs remain under close scrutiny, said Bob Williamson, vice president for administrative services.

Clark, too, is in "wait-and-see" mode until the state supplemental budget takes shape, he said.

## Role in recovery?

Given previous support for community colleges, labeled as "job engines" by some, Clark has reason for hope any new cuts in January will be smaller than those ordered elsewhere, Williamson said.

The school already has plenty

of campus feedback on cost cutting options "that is still useful and relevant," he said.

But frustration abounds at both Clark and WSUV, where employees and students alike recognize that higher education is critical to sustained economic revival. Until the state claws out of its budget hole, additional spending cuts only undermine that relevancy, however.

"It's bleak," Valenter said, looking at the 2011-13 budget gap. "It's just challenging when the state doesn't have sufficient funds to meet demand."

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