

Proposed state budget trims \$4.4 billion

Olympia: Plan retains services for poor and disabled, slashes \$482M from higher education

By **MANUEL VALDES**
Associated Press

OLYMPIA — House leaders on Monday released a proposed two-year state budget that includes \$4.4 billion in cuts and the privatization of state liquor distributions, while retaining services for the poor and disabled.

Lawmakers need to close an estimated \$5 billion gap in the cycle for 2011-2013. State officials said the state needs \$37 billion to keep the state's responsibilities and payments, but the expected revenue for that time frame

is \$32 billion.

The proposal from the Democrat-led House of Representatives slashes \$482 million from higher education and transfers \$214 million in funds. It also deals with the last of this fiscal year's deficit — about \$370 million — by delaying a \$240 million payment to schools by one day, into the 2011-2013 budget.

The shortfall for the current fiscal year, which ends in June, was left over

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Education: Local school officials relieved that subsidies for K-12 districts were spared

By **HOWARD BUCK**
Columbian staff writer

Across Clark County on Monday, public school leaders could exhale again.

The House version for a 2011-13 state budget plan doesn't touch levy equalization funds, which go to subsidize K-12 school districts with below-average total property assessments.

That alone was a huge relief, and the biggest positive, for educators closely tracking Olympia's deficit-

busting struggle this spring as they weigh difficult cost-savings decisions.

"That was a hard fight, but we won it," said Rep. Tim Probst, D-Vancouver, a member of both the Education and Education Appropriations committees.

"That's great, that's good for all of us," said Steve Olsen, chief fiscal officer for Vancouver Public Schools. "Knowing (levy equaliza-

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tion) is saved cuts our challenge in half.”

Olsen spoke literally.

For the Vancouver district, levy equalization would be worth about \$8.6 million next school year. Suddenly, a “worst-case” need to slash district funding by \$16 million or so drops by one-half.

For Evergreen Public Schools, equalization funds are worth \$13 million to \$14 million next school year. That’s out of about \$24 million in state cuts the district feared under its worst-case scenario.

In Battle Ground, levy equalization brings in about \$6 million per year.

For Clark County’s other school districts — save for property-rich Ridgefield, which doesn’t receive equalization funds — the dollar amounts are much smaller, but the proportional impact is no less great.

“To us, that was the most important

thing,” said Edri Geiger, Vancouver school board president. “It’s still a horrible deficit, but (without levy dollars) it would have been devastating.” Geiger also serves on the legislative committee of the statewide school board association and has monitored the legislature like a hawk.

She knows the House plan is only one swing at a final budget. Gregoire’s prior proposal to trim levy equalization on a sliding scale could resurface during Olympia’s endgame, with a Senate counter-proposal due next, she noted. “You never know what’s going to be happening.”

Crucial choices

Scanning through the House budget bill details, Geiger found crucial choices were made. Most were expected; some were welcome.

Pilot projects for new school principal and teacher evaluation models are saved; so is phase-in of all-day kindergarten across the state. Budget writers slotted \$6.6 million for Probst’s new PASS incentive program, which would award bonuses to schools and school

districts that successfully reduce drop-out rates and improve attendance.

“Our economy calls for more people to be educated to higher levels,” Probst said. “Our education system needs more emphasis on outcomes instead of process. So the PASS Act makes some headway there, in rewarding schools for actual outcomes for students.”

On the minus side, the last of state funding subsidies to keep class size low for grades K-4 is eliminated (although it was spared for grades K-3 in high-poverty districts).

Voter-approved Initiative 728 (to reduce teacher-student ratios) and I-732 (cost-of-living adjustments) are again suspended. Funding for highly capable (accelerated) programs is reduced.

Teachers face personal pocketbook pain, under the House plan.

The blueprint eliminates an annual salary step increase for teachers the next two years, either for additional years of service or more training (post-graduate credits).

The plan also lops 40 percent off the \$5,000 bonus awarded to teachers who complete a rigorous National Board Certification process, and the same

amount from an equivalent bonus to board-certified teachers who take jobs in low-achieving schools.

STEM, Running Start nicked

Other reductions carry local impact.

Clark College received unwelcome news: Zero money in the House capital spending plan for a planned \$36 million STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) building on its main campus.

Initial hopes were to open the building by 2013. Instead, completion might wait until 2017, said President Bob Knight, who expects the project could slide further.

“It’s official now, but it’s not a surprise,” Knight said on Monday. There was ample warning the downsized capital budget could foot only a handful of higher education projects, leaving out the Clark addition. “It’s still going to be funded, just not in the next two years,” he said.

There is a silver lining.

“I’d like to have that STEM building right now, but operational dollars are tough,” Knight said. The delay is

“not necessarily the worst thing in the world.”

Clark College is looking to partner with the Vancouver district on a proposed STEM magnet high school, he said. It also has available space in the newly built Engineering and Computer Sciences building at the Washington State University Vancouver campus in Salmon Creek, he said.

“We’ll work around it. We won’t stop working on STEM, we just won’t have it all in one place,” Knight said.

Also, the House plan would cut \$6 million for Running Start programs at community colleges, which allow high school students to earn early, tuition-free college credits.

Enrollment and funding caps would limit a student’s enrollment to 1.2 full-time equivalency, rather than the current 2.0 FTE (concurrent, full-time enrollment in both Running Start classes and high school). Legislators estimate reduction of 680 FTEs in Running Start per year, statewide.

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