

TRAILBLAZER

DISTRICT FACING POTENTIAL \$1.2 MILLION AID REDUCTION IN STATE BUDGET PROPOSAL

The Board of Education is now conducting budget talks in a climate where the state's own budgetary woes threaten district revenues, and local community members struggle to recover from the blows of a bad economy.

For a number of years, the district has followed a conservative, long-range financial planning approach that has resulted in a healthy credit rating, glowing audit reports and a strong undesignated fund balance — all while fulfilling the district's mission to educate students.

Although Business Official Kevin Callagy says the district has been on that same good track this school year, this budget season's grim economic

backdrop will present a number of challenges.

In January, the district learned it could face a budget gap of \$1.2 million if reductions in state education aid proposed by Gov. David Paterson are enacted by the New York State Legislature. In addition, some of the district's major fixed costs such as health insurance are set to increase significantly. The district's current estimates for these cost increases, coupled with the proposed state aid reduction, add up to a potentially significant budget gap for the 2010-11 school year.

The following is a detailed outline of all identified fiscal challenges, as well as list of possible solutions for closing the budget gap.

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REACHING THEIR OWN PINNACLES: 'PEAKS' PROGRAM USES STUDENT-CUSTOMIZED LEARNING APPROACH

This year, sophomore Samantha Keyer is describing school in a way that actually kind of surprises her.

"It's really fun," she says.

Last year, Keyer, 15, was struggling to keep up academically. It was clear she needed something beyond the regular classroom to help her improve at school, but her teachers at the Secondary School felt the alternative

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Students in the PEAKS program organize items for a community clothing drive they sponsored.

NEWS AND Notes

What is the Shared Decision Making Committee up to?

The Shared Decision Making Committee is a group of parents, faculty, staff, community members and administrators helping to guide decisions that help improve the educational performance of students in our schools. Now, you can read committee discussions and learn more about its initiatives by logging on to www.bkwschools.org/SharedDecision-Making.htm.

Students form environmental club

The Animal Welfare and Environment Club is now a reality! The club kicked off its efforts with a "Save The Rainforest" bottle drive that wrapped up on Feb. 6. More events and fund-raisers for environmental causes will soon be announced at www.bkwschools.org.

When you're child is absent...

If your child is going to be absent from school due to illness or another reason, please remember to call Mrs. Cortese in the attendance office at 872-0939.

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education program wasn't reaching students like Keyer in the most effective way possible.

So, teachers worked through the summer to revamp alternative education at BKW, and the PEAKS Program was born.

PEAKS, or "Path to Education through Achievement, Knowledge and Success," was named by the students it now serves. The program is designed to help students who are in jeopardy of not graduating due to poor academic performance. Then, the program delves deeper, pinpointing not just where students need extra academic help, but why.

"This program is designed to let struggling students reach goals we knew they were capable of, but in a different type of learning environment," says PEAKS Program Teacher Erin Snyder.

PEAKS immerses students in a full-day program where they receive all academic instruction, instead of pulling students from regular classes for extra help in specific subjects, explains Secondary School Principal Tom McGurl.

"There are no changes to the curriculum," McGurl says. "It's the same Regents exams, the same

diploma; but they're going to get the instruction at a different pace and in a different format. It's almost like a school within a school."

Teachers in the program assess each student not just as academic scholars, but as individuals, taking social, emotional and behavioral aspects into account. Then, the teachers develop for each PEAKS student an individual plan that addresses these life aspects within the context of school, aiming to help them improve not just as students, but also as individuals.

A team of PEAKS teachers and social workers meet at least once every other school day to discuss how the class is going, to communicate the progress of each

student and to improve the program based on the students' needs, McGurl says.

According to Keyer, PEAKS is definitely working. As an example, Keyer's grades in English and Math have risen into the 80s – a marked improvement over last year.

"I know I wouldn't be doing that well if I were in regular classes," she says. "It's been helping me a lot. I feel like I'm learning much more because everything is broken down into material I understand much better. I really like getting the individual help, and how the classes focus on all different sorts of activities."

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— SAMANTHA KEYER, 15
PEAKS PROGRAM STUDENT

HOLIDAY SPIRIT BRINGS STUDENTS TOGETHER

This past December, Mrs. Miller's second grade class and Ms. Canale's middle school class came together for a day filled with holiday traditions and ornament making. Middle school students each led a group of second graders in making cinnamon ornaments, as shown at right. Students read recipes, measured ingredients and made ornaments, and afterward, they read holiday books together.



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BUDGET CHALLENGES

■ RETIREMENT COSTS

Teacher and New York State employee retirement costs are set to increase much more than originally anticipated. Teachers' Retirement System (TRS) costs will increase an estimated 8.5 to 9 percent (originally 6.19 percent), while Employee Retirement System (ERS) costs will increase 11 to 15 percent (originally 7 to 9 percent). The district will need an estimated \$325,000 to cover these cost increases alone.

■ HEALTH INSURANCE

Health insurance premiums for the district are set to rise between 10 and 12 percent for 2010-11, which could cost the district an estimated \$400,000 more to cover the costs.

■ CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS

The BKW teachers' contract and the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA) contract both expired on June 30, 2009. The contract for BKW support staff will expire on June 30, 2010.

Negotiations for these contracts continue.

"We must work tirelessly together to strike the balance between securing our district's financial future and giving our students the highest-quality education possible by providing them with talented, highly qualified teachers and staff," says Interim Superintendent Kimberly LaBelle.

TOUGH DECISIONS AHEAD

In the face of these budgetary challenges, district officials will have to consider some difficult choices:

ATTRITION

During the 2009-10 budget season, the district was able to save about \$400,000 by not replacing staff who retired at the end of last school year. The move ended up working out well: Not only did this help the district balance the budget while avoiding layoffs, it also did not significantly affect class sizes. Although the district expects more staff members to retire this year, LaBelle says the district cannot count

on the same cost savings as last year.

LAYOFFS AND PROGRAM CUTS

BKW would have no choice but to consider reducing staff and cutting some school programs if faced with a \$1.2 million budget gap. When this newsletter went to print, it was not clear which staff or programs might be cut.

"I don't see how we could avoid layoffs and program cuts when faced with such a financial scenario," said LaBelle at a recent Board meeting. "We will be reviewing any and all possible ways to trim the budget."

USING UNDESIGNATED FUND BALANCE

The district has set aside an undesignated fund balance of 4 percent of its total budget, which is \$821,137 in the district's case. This fund is used to address emergencies that, if not attended to, would prevent the district from operating day-to-day.

School officials caution against using the undesignated fund balance for anything other than emergencies. Nevertheless, the Board of Education may be forced to consider using part of this fund to offset the budget gap, and possibly help minimize any potential reductions to the instructional portion of the school budget, which includes staffing and academic programs.

TAX LEVY INCREASE

While the Board of Education achieved its goal of a zero percent tax levy increase for this school year, the current fiscal climate will make this goal much more difficult to reach for 2010-11. The Board of Education, in partnership with the Budget Advisory Committee, aims to maintain the current tax levy for 2010-11. However, more information about state aid revenues is needed before school officials can more accurately estimate the tax levy.

For the latest budget news and announcements and other important budget information, log on to http://www.bkwschools.org/Budget/Budget_Info_Main.htm, or just click on the "Budget" icon on the district home page.

NEWS AND Notes

Adult Continuing Ed classes to return

Adult/Continuing Education program will be back this spring with class offerings such as:

- Pre-Licensing Class
- Gardening in the 21st Century
- Getting Paid To Talk
- Digital Photography
- Core Conditioning & Total Body Fitness
- Women & Investing: Turning Obstacles into Opportunities
- Defensive Driving

For the full list of courses, times and fees, log on to: <http://www.bkwschools.org/Academics/continuingeducation.htm>.

District outlines banking safeguards

When BKW learned on Jan. 5 that approximately \$3.8 million in taxpayer money was stolen through unauthorized bank transfers from the Duaneburg Central School District, the business office immediately contacted representatives from Key Bank, the district's banking institution, to review safeguards in place for protecting our district funds from a similar situation. For examples of the different ways our district and Key Bank work together to ensure district funds are protected, log on to www.bkwschools.org.



KIMBERLY A. LABELLE
Interim Superintendent

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GETTING A HEAD START ON CAREER EXPLORATION

Tough economic times make it especially important for students to begin creating their own career blueprints for an increasingly competitive marketplace.

That's why BKW offers a number of different opportunities for students to develop their budding interests and academic aptitudes into promising careers. Each month, Secondary School students have the opportunity to take field trips that introduce students to various career choices through the Liberty Partnership Program at SUNY Cobleskill. You can read about the trips online in the Career Corner at www.bkwschools.org.

This past December, the Secondary School hosted a Career Day event that brought professionals from various backgrounds and expertise into classrooms to discuss their careers with different groups of students.

Throughout the school year, the Secondary School offers numerous opportunities for students to explore career interests through various classes. Registration for next year's courses has begun. If you would like more information, please contact the Guidance Office 872-1482, or log on to the High School page at www.bkwschools.org and click on "Guidance Office."



It's more important than ever for students to begin exploring career opportunities now. At BKW, a number of options are available. At left, students attending a career field trip to Mildred Elley Business School take time to evaluate their experience. Below, an artist visits an art class at the Secondary School to discuss his profession and to offer insights on how the work students do now can help develop arts-based careers in the future.

