

MV schools must decide how to apportion the pain

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**MOUNT VERNON** — It is coming down to a question of how to apportion the pain.

Despite hopes to save the Mountain School environmental program and keep from cutting school librarian positions, Mount Vernon School Board members indicated Tuesday that those sacrifices would probably have to be made in favor of kindergarten services.

In its quest to cut \$1 million from the 2008-09 budget, School Board members are struggling to find ways to cut the budget in ways that don't hurt students' education.

In a previous meeting, Superintendent Carl Bruner said that cutting bus service to students within a mile of the students' school is an option. Currently the district transports a child who lives at least a half mile from his or her school.

Tuesday, he said the district could encourage students to walk to school with the existing walking school bus program. But whether the program is safe during all times of the year or during all weather is up for debate, he said.

Perhaps the biggest controversy throughout budget talks is how to pay for more kindergarten classes. Early learning ranks No. 1 on the board's priority list.

"If we put money in kindergarten, we have to take it from somewhere else," said School Board President Charlie Guildner.

Initially the board had discussed combining a half-day kindergartner's education into full days, with classes for three days a week during one week and two days the next. But after outcry from parents and teachers, the suggestion seems to have been scrapped.

And despite earlier discussions about saving the Mountain School, board member Luanne Burkhart, with arms crossed and her brow furrowed with concern, said the environmental school for fifth-graders might have to be sacrificed to pay for more kindergarten services.

"Nobody has been more for Mountain School than I," Burkhart said. "(The cut) is very hard for me to accept."

The Mountain School costs the district \$54,000 per year, about \$55 per student. The North Cascades Institute subsidizes most of the remaining cost. Last year, the institute paid \$304,200 for Mount Vernon students to attend.

Another area of concern for many parents is the district's librarians. More than a third of the proposed cuts involve removing librarians from schools and hiring classified staff in their place.

Monica Hodges, Jefferson Elementary School's librarian, has attended every public budget meeting since the possibility of librarian cuts was announced.

She said she's disappointed that other areas, such as transportation, were not considered for cuts instead. District budget draft documents show a proposed cut of \$89,000 in transportation. Proposed maintenance and custodial cuts equal \$93,600.

"Cutting librarians and kindergarten is a Band-Aid for today," Hodges said. "Our whole goal is to educate children, not buildings and buses and lawnmowers."

State law provides for the funding of a basic education for every child. But the definition of a basic education has not been updated since 1977, said librarian advocate Lisa Layera Brunkan, cofounder of FundOurFuture-Washington.org, a Web site dedicated to increasing funding for school librarians.

"Mount Vernon is disa p p o i n t i n g b e c a u s e o f the migrant and free-and-reduced lunch population," Layera Brunkan said. "The library is literally the grand equalizer. Those are the kids who do not have a library at home. They don't have a library card or a ride to the library. ... It's quite a draconian prospect for these children, who might be cut out."

State Rep. Dave Quall, chairman of the house education committee, said the state's joint education task force will make recommendations this December to change the definition of basic education.

"This idea that libraries are extra is really a fallacy," Quall said. "I think the libraries are a fundamental foundation of a good education."

The Mount Vernon School Board will make a decision about the budget at a 7 p.m. meeting on July 23 in the high school library.