

FAYETTE SCHOOLS BUDGET SHORTFALL

Time for change in Ky.'s school funding

By Andrew Brennen

Ever since Fayette County Superintendent Tom Shelton announced that the district would need to cut \$20 million from its budget this May, this newspaper, social media and community conversations have been aflame with frustration, fear and even some outright hostility.

Budget shaving has never been an uncommon practice among school districts. But in Fayette County the problem is exacerbated by the fact that up until this point, we have been shielded from much of the impact of the recession by a relatively robust rainy-day fund.

These cuts will almost certainly come from some combination of staff and programming reductions, both difficult processes that have a significant impact on students throughout the district. Many of us



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wonder openly: Just what is going on? And what does it mean for us in our everyday lives at school?

Jamie Smith, a sophomore at Henry Clay High School, reflected concerns her teachers have that if elementary school band is cut, the high school program will be greatly affected. "Many students become interested in band through middle and elementary school programs," she stressed.

Other students at Tates Creek High School say they are hearing from teachers that every high school is going down to one librarian and some stand to lose up to 10 teachers.

"Our fear is that with the combination of budget cuts and tenured teacher relocation, Tates Creek stands to lose many of our best and most passionate young teachers, something that spells disaster for our school," said Ben Childress. "Even though I'm a senior, I still want those who come after me to be able to benefit from these effective, amazing teachers, just as I have."

As students, we need to do our own due diligence and not simply depend on administrative talking

points or community gossip. There is a bigger narrative here, and students, along with everyone else interested in making our schools the best they can be, can do a lot to help frame it. We need to put the current crisis into the larger context of inadequate school funding. Consider that Kentucky has:

- Joined 14 other states in decreasing state support of per-student spending in the last year.
- Slashed funds to support tutoring by nearly two-thirds since 2008.
- Decreased professional development funds for teachers from \$13 million in 2008 to just \$3 million in 2013.
- Committed zero state dollars toward textbooks and other learning materials since 2011.

Fayette County's problem is real and painful, but it won't be solved by pitting one great program against another. The broader issue regards how we finance our public schools in Kentucky in the first place.

And if the issue really is about doing what's best for kids, then it's time to make a more systemic change involving a deeper investment in our public schools.