

East Bridgewater officials told funding might not be as dire as first thought

State lawmakers tell local school officials the town may get same level of state aid

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EAST BRIDGEWATER — Two of the town's state lawmakers had some good news for the School Committee Thursday night as it continued to wrestle with next year's proposed school budget.

State Sen. Thomas Kennedy and state Rep. Geoffrey Diehl told committee members that recent figures from Beacon Hill may mean at least level-funded state aid for the town.

"The numbers aren't set in stone," Diehl said. "I'm fairly confident they're going to keep local aid and Chapter 70 money intact."

Kennedy also said state revenues are increasing slightly on a monthly basis.

"If state revenues become a bit healthier, we will do everything in our power to direct that surplus down to local aid," Kennedy said.

That could mean some of the 30 positions slated for layoffs in the school system could be avoided. And fewer layoffs would mean drops in projected class sizes of 30 or more students in each grade.

Superintendent of Schools Susan Cote said she also has been working with town officials to try to mitigate some of the more than \$1 million in reductions needed to get to either a 1.5 percent or 3.5 percent budget cut that Town Administrator George Samia has asked of all departments.

She said since 2000, the percentage distribution of the total town budget to the schools has fallen from 56 percent to 46 percent, while the average in most other towns is 50 percent of the total budget going to schools.

"We really feel the schools have taken a hit over the last 10 years," Cote said. "I do believe the town will help mitigate some of the situations the schools (are) facing."

Should the town be able to help offset some of the increased costs, even fewer teachers would be laid off.

Cote again said that sports and music programs would not be trimmed or eliminated, noting parents already pay more than half the costs for those programs.

"Research shows elimination of those programs is just as devastating to a child," Cote said.

The School Committee expects to vote on and certify a final school budget at the committee's April 28 meeting.

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