

A 'goal' — not a promise

Will Malloy boost ECS grants after stimulus stops?

By Dan Brechlin
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School budget cuts are already being discussed, but if an additional 7 percent of state money for local districts is cut in each of the next two years, area schools risk more teacher and extracurricular activity cuts, ending some classes and even closing schools.

The Education Cost Sharing grant was put in place 22 years ago to help close achievement

At a glance

Total ECS dollars at risk over two years (in millions)		
District	Possible cut	2010-11 entitlement
Meriden	7.7	53.8
Wallingford	3.1	21.4
Southington	2.8	19.8
Cheshire	1.3	9.3

Source: Connecticut
Department of Education

gaps between municipalities. For the last two years, 14 percent of that money has been taken away by the state to fund other items, but the 14 percent was reinstated through federal stimulus money both years.

The stimulus money will run out July 1, and with a two-year, \$540 million shortfall looming as part of a projected \$3.67 billion state deficit, restoring the 7 percent for each of the next two years is not guaranteed. At a press conference Thursday, newly elected Gov. Dannel P. Malloy called it "a goal" to maintain the state funding, but did not guarantee it.

Making sure that money comes through is a top priority at the Capitol and for the new administration, said House Speaker Christopher G. Donovan, D-Meriden, who noted things should become clearer when Malloy, a Democrat, presents his two-year budget in mid-February.

"It would be a big hit to the districts," Donovan said, should the money not come through. "We don't want to get to that point."

If that does happen, however, local districts would suffer.

Meriden figures to lose the most, almost \$7.7 million for each of the next two years. Wallingford would lose about \$3.1 million per year, Southington \$2.8 million and Cheshire about \$1.3 million.

Meriden School Superintendent Mark D. Benigni said he and the Board of Education are preparing as if they will get the ECS money, but if it does not come through, "drastic changes" would follow.

"You would have to look at the viability of Edison (Thomas Edison Middle School, a magnet school), you would have to reconsider how many schools we can continue operating, a reduction of course offerings on the high school level," Benigni said, adding that the cuts would come in addition to numerous staff cuts, including teachers.

The state funds — nearly \$54 million in 2010-11 — make up more than half of the district's budget, so even if the school board receives the 3 percent increase it has requested from the city, that would not come close to covering the lost state money.

Joseph J. Cirsuolo, a former Wallingford school superintendent who now serves as executive director of the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, said Meriden and other areas are going about their planning stages in the correct way.

"Most are taking (Malloy) on his word," Cirsuolo said about the governor, who, throughout his campaign, said the 14 percent would not be cut. "They are probably planning that way and then making contingency plans."

The problem, Cirsuolo said, is that most districts have already suffered the consequences of tight budgets.

"Wallingford has cut teachers in the double digits and they reorganized the district's elementary schools, he said. "The only thing now is to look at cutting more teaching positions; that would increase class size and get rid of extracurricular activities and the arts and world languages."

The 2010-11 budget claimed 21 teaching jobs and twice as many non-certified positions.

The superintendents' association, the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education and the Connecticut Association of School Business Officials have teamed up to launch a campaign called "What Will Our Children Lose?" to inform the public of what is at stake.

The website for the campaign, www.whatwillourchildrenlose.com, also lists all districts and how much they could lose should the 14 percent be cut.

For the districts it is a lot of money, but many do not realize all that could be lost, which is why Cirsuolo said the cam-

campaign was launched. If the campaign does not get what it hopes accomplished and the money does not come through, Cirsuolo said, there will be changes aplenty.

The idea of changing the ECS grant formula is possible, but Cheshire Superintendent Greg Florio said Thursday that a change would be devastating and his district needs the full \$9.3 million from the state.

"Let's hope (Malloy) can deliver on that," Florio said.

Nonetheless, Florio submitted a request for a 5 percent budget increase to the Board of Education.

Benigni echoed Florio's statements and upped the stakes: Provide the money or else the fallout could have long-lasting effects on his district and even the state because the achievement gap, already the highest in the nation, could worsen. Connecticut's cities, whose poverty rates entitle them to the highest yearly aid, would lose the most money if the ECS gap is not filled by July 1.

"The ECS grant was established to give all kids a level playing field," Benigni said. "They have a moral obligation to keep it in place."

Information from The Associated Press is included in this report.

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