

## South Kitsap teachers blast district's plan to cut 47 positions

Chris Henry, Kitsap Sun

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Rebecca Chandler, a nurse in South Kitsap School District, warns the school board that plans to cut positions, including a school nurse, could put students with severe health challenges and life-threatening conditions at risk. Chandler spoke at a school board meeting May 1, 2019, at South Kitsap High School. (Photo: Chris Henry, Kitsap Sun)

**SOUTH KITSAP** — Teachers panned a plan unveiled Wednesday by South Kitsap schools Superintendent Karst Brandsma to balance the budget in the upcoming school year by cutting 47 teaching positions.

At least 28 positions will be gone through attrition, leaving potentially 19 full-time equivalent positions targeted for non-renewal of contracts.

South Kitsap Education Association President John Richardson blasted Brandsma for late notice on specifics of the budget reduction plan, which has been in the works since January and broad details of which Brandsma shared with staff in a video April 23.

Richardson said he and other union leaders were notified of the proposed RIF shortly before the school board meeting at South Kitsap High School.

"I'm incredibly, incredibly disappointed right now," Richardson said. "I walked in and right before the meeting, I was handed what we saw today."

The reduction in force, which also includes administrators and classified staff, is needed to close a budget gap caused in part by declining enrollment, Brandsma told the crowd of more than 200 school employees and others at the meeting.

The Legislature's recent passage of a local school levy lid lift will help but not enough, Brandsma said.

Richardson implored the board, which will vote on the Brandsma's recommendation May 8, to walk back the cuts.

"Please, please don't hurt our students; don't hurt our teachers; don't hurt our community, because this will destroy our community."

## Superintendent explains cuts

South Kitsap, like some districts around the state, has reported a shortfall from the "levy swap" enacted over the past two years in Olympia to address a court mandate that the state fully fund basic education.

An increase in state school taxes generated an increase in revenue for K-12 schools, most of which went to substantial salary hikes for teachers and other staff. In 2019, the state capped local levies at \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed value, an attempt to fix a system in which wealthy districts were seen to have an unfair advantage.

In South Kitsap, the levy swap translates to a net deficit of \$9.7 million in the upcoming school year, Brandsma reported.

Despite predictions in 2018 of enrollment growth, South Kitsap is experiencing a downward trend, primarily at the high school. The district is expected to finish this year with 118 fewer students than it had budgeted for, and the projection for next year is the loss of another 92 full-time equivalent students.

**North Kitsap:** [School board authorizes cutting up to 20 teaching positions \(/story/news/local/2019/04/26/north-kitsap-school-board-budget-cutting-teaching-positions/3590485002/\)](/story/news/local/2019/04/26/north-kitsap-school-board-budget-cutting-teaching-positions/3590485002/)

The state apportionment per FTE student is about \$10,000 in South Kitsap, meaning a projected loss of revenue over the current school year and next of \$2.1 million.

## 'The math doesn't work'

Also impacting South Kitsap's budget is a new school employee benefits system, projected to result in \$750,000 in increased costs in 2019-20.

The elimination by retirement, resignation or RIF of 47.5 full-time teaching positions is projected to save the district \$2.92 million.

Teachers' union leaders questioned the district's calculations, especially regarding increased costs from the salary hike. Lora-Jean Piper, a member of SKEA's representative council from Discovery Alternative High School, said the union agreed to forgo a COLA in the upcoming school year in anticipation of the levy lid's impact.

"I sat on that bargaining table," Piper said. "The math doesn't work."

The budget reduction also includes "reducing, reorganizing or reclassifying" 9.5 administrative positions, for a savings of \$1.2 million. Cuts to classified staff — positions like school secretaries and custodians — is projected to save just more than \$1 million.

With additional cuts to supplies and operating expenses, proposed budget reductions total \$6.1 million in a budget of nearly \$150 million for a district of around 9,500 students.

Under Brandsma's plan, the district would tap \$2 million of its reserve fund (currently totaled at just more than \$20 million) to help close the gap.

## District welcomes levy lid lift

The school board on March 30 projected a budget gap of at least \$9.4 million due to the levy cap and other factors. The board directed Brandsma to do a deeper analysis, including enrollment projections, and return with a recommendation for cuts by May 1.

Brandsma prefaced his report Wednesday by saying some of the specifics on cuts had depended on the outcome of the Legislative session, which ended on time April 28.

The most significant legislation was an easing of the levy lid. "It went down too hard, too fast," said Sen. Lisa Wellman, D-Mercer Island, the bill's sponsor.

**Related:** [Legislature passes "lid lift" local tax rules for schools \(/story/news/2019/04/29/legislature-passes-lid-lift-local-tax-rules-schools/3616313002/\)](/story/news/2019/04/29/legislature-passes-lid-lift-local-tax-rules-schools/3616313002/)

The lid lift, beginning in 2020, allows districts to increase local school tax collections by the lesser of \$2.50 per \$1,000 of assessed value or \$2,500 per full-time student.

South Kitsap in 2020 can increase its local levy collections up to the new lid without returning to voters for approval because voters in 2017 passed a

levy for an even higher amount. The district, in essence, retains its taxing authority from the 2017 levy, Brandsma said and Wellman confirmed. The district must return to voters in 2021, the last year of the 2017 levy, for approval of a new local tax.

South Kitsap was among districts that lobbied for the levy increase, but not all districts were pushing for the change, according to Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island, who chaired the Senate Ways & Means Committee in charge of the budget.

## District could see tax hike blowback

Teachers warned that the local tax increase on top of the increased state school tax is likely to erode voter support in South Kitsap, where an anti-tax sentiment has resulted in three bond failures since 2016.

"I have concerns about the distrust this could create with our community to pass a bond due to past mistrust," said Alicia Bennett-Veitch, a union representative. "I'm very concerned that if we follow down this path, it will result in bond failure after bond failure after bond failure."

**More:** [South Kitsap bond supporters dismayed by another loss \(/story/news/local/2018/11/07/election-results-2018-south-kitsap-schools-bond-supporters-shocked-loss/1923084002/\)](https://www.kitsapsun.com/story/news/local/2018/11/07/election-results-2018-south-kitsap-schools-bond-supporters-shocked-loss/1923084002/)

Theresa Mae Johnson, a librarian at Hidden Creek, reminded district officials that in 2018, they told voters the proposed bond and capital levy measure would result in no net tax increase because of the levy lid. The bond didn't pass, but the capital levy did. Johnson, who worked on the bond and capital levy campaign, said the RIF would make it hard for her to defend the district to voters in future campaigns.

"The number one reason community members vote no is because they don't trust the district," Johnson said.

The tax impact of the levy lid lift on property owners is yet to be calculated and depends on a number of factors, said Greg Lynch, Superintendent of Olympic Educational Service District 114, which has reviewed South Kitsap proposed budget cuts. A preliminary estimate, published on social media by Rep. Michelle Caldier, R-Port Orchard, is that South Kitsap's local levy rate would increase from \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed value to \$2.46 per \$1,000.

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