

Des Moines cuts include 30% of music, art teachers

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Des Moines will lose nearly 30 percent of its art, music and physical education teachers and guidance counselors next school year as part of the district's efforts to trim \$11.1 million from its budget, district figures recently provided to The Des Moines Register show.

In addition, the Des Moines school district has eliminated nearly 20 percent of its family and consumer science teachers and scrapped other programs, such as career exploration and electronics.

"Teachers are already pulled in so many different directions," said Melissa Spencer, president of the Des Moines Education Association. "It will be difficult and will reduce the amount of time they have with students."

The information provided by the district is the first detailed look at the specific positions cut by the school board in April. Before the board vote, some parents and educators had expressed concern about deep cuts to the arts programs and physical education.

The loss of 173 of the district's 2,766 full-time teachers next school year means that students at two of Des Moines' 10 middle schools will lose some of their music programs, and physical education class sizes will increase from 30 students to as many as 70 students.

In addition, some teachers will teach more classes, significantly reducing the time they have to plan their classes, meet with parents and develop ways to help struggling students.

At the elementary level, students will spend less time in art, music and physical education classes and have different teachers leading the class during the week in some instances.

High school students will have fewer opportunities to take upper-level classes at their home schools and, instead, will have to travel to Central Campus, teachers said.

Student loads for teachers will dramatically increase in some instances, with some teachers working with 600 to 700 students in a week instead of the 300 to 400 they worked with last school year.

The larger loads make it harder for teachers to get to know students and their needs, educators say. It also increases the hours the teachers spend outside of the school day grading students' work and planning lessons, teachers said.

"It's hard to get to know all of your kids when you have 600," said Mary O'Connor, a physical education teacher who will move to Merrill Middle School next year after her position at Goodrell Middle School was eliminated.

"And, in the elementary schools, it's going to be boom, boom, boom," she said. "Those teachers are teaching 11 classes a day — when one class walks out, the other walks in. Unfortunately, it turns into less instruction with a real purpose."

Spencer said some art, music and physical education educators will teach as many as 11 classes a day. However, a majority will have eight classes, she said. A teacher's class load is determined by the number of schools in which the person teaches, as well as building enrollments. Those in one building teach more classes, while those who travel between buildings have fewer classes, Spencer said.

Shawn Reynolds, an art teacher at Willard Elementary School, said she will most likely teach 11 classes next school year. Less time with students makes it difficult to cover some areas such as clay molding or print-making because of the cleanup time involved, she said.

"It's tough," Reynolds said. "It's almost like they come in and get a pinch of time, and then it's time to clean up. There are things I can't do anymore because of the lack of time to do it."

School board members voted in favor of the elimination of the 173 jobs in April, when they approved the district's budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1. At the time, the district did not make public what jobs would be lost or the effect on students.

The Register submitted a request with the district in April for a list of the 173 positions eliminated. It took the district about a month to provide a list of total reductions by subject area.

When asked for a breakdown of the positions cut at each school, Beth Nigut, the district's lawyer, replied, "The only format it is in is the format that was provided to you."

District officials told the Register they could not provide the list of lost positions sooner because the list had not yet been compiled.

Theresa Weeks, who has a daughter at Roosevelt High School, said: "What the district's problem has been and what it continues to be is a lack of transparency. They get upset and kind of self-protective when parents speak out about their decisions, but we are the stakeholders in this, and we should be the ones included in the early portions of the decision-making. But we never are. If we are it's a token kind of involvement."

Nationally, districts are shrinking their teaching staffs in an effort to combat the effects of the recession, which left them with battered budgets and large funding shortfalls. Final numbers that reflect the extent of teacher losses and the subject areas being hit the hardest have yet to be tallied, national educational experts say.

But, anecdotally, it appears districts are cutting primarily in areas outside of the core subjects that students are tested in each year under No Child Left Behind, said Ron Skinner, assistant executive director of the Association of School Business Officials International in Reston, Va.

"If those are the subjects kids are tested on, then there are going to be cuts in areas outside of those subjects," Skinner said.

In Des Moines, district officials used staffing formulas that factor in a school's enrollment, special education numbers, mobility rates and the percent of low-income students, among other things, when allotting teachers to schools.

Regional directors then worked with principals to identify the positions they felt could be eliminated in their schools, said Twyla Woods, Des Moines' chief of staff.

Art, music and physical education teachers at elementary schools were the hardest hit, according to district figures. The loss of a combined 45.2 of the district's 200.1 full-time positions in those subjects means students in grades 3 to 5 will spend 60 minutes in those classes each week, instead of the 90 minutes of instruction they used to receive, teachers said.

While elementary students will spend less time in music classes, their middle school peers will totally lose some music programs, depending on where they are enrolled, said Joanne Tubbs, music curriculum coordinator for the district. Hoyt Middle School will not offer band, orchestra or handbells, while Hiatt Middle School is dropping its vocal music program, Tubbs said.

"(Equity) is a concern to us," said Spencer, the teachers' association president. "We want to make sure that buildings are offering similar opportunities for all of their students."