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After cutting more than 260 jobs, here's how MPS hopes to close the rest of its budget gap

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MILWAUKEE (CBS 58) -- The Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) board narrowly approved a plan this week to cut more than 260 jobs, but the district still has more to do in order to close a $46 million budget gap.

Superintendent Brenda Cassellius discussed the district's finances Tuesday at an appearance before the Rotary Club of Milwaukee. It came after a board meeting Monday in which supervisors approved her proposal to cut 263 jobs, including assistant principals, deans of students and interventionists.

Cassellius maintained job cuts are a necessary step for closing the budget gap. She pointed to an audit the district asked the Council of the Great City Schools to conduct.



Superintendent Brenda CasselliusCBS 58

The audit found MPS has one employee for every 138 students, while the average large urban district has one employee for every 166 students.

Cassellius said she chose the positions that will be cut with the goal of minimizing the direct impact on students.

"We wanted to make sure that we were not making cuts to psychologists, social workers, counselors, art, music," Cassellius said.

About 40 of the positions being cut are already vacant. Cassellius said about 140 of the affected workers have active state teacher licenses and added she was hopeful many of those employees will agree to transition into full-time classroom roles.

Alan Borsuk, a longtime education observer who is now a senior fellow in the Marquette University Law School, said given declining enrollment in MPS and across the state, something has to give.

"I mean, this is a district that used to have well over 100,000 students that now has under 60,000 students," Borsuk said. "Workforce attrition has been a fact of life because they've got fewer students, they've got fewer classes. They need fewer people."

The job cuts will save a projected $30 million. To close the rest of the gap, Cassellius said the district hoped to find savings in vacancies following retirements that MPS won't fill.

She said the district is still in talks with the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA), the union representing most educators in the district.

MPS is willing to provide 2.63% cost-of-living wage increases, on top of steps tied to seniority. However, the district is also asking the union to agree to delays in wage increases.

By pushing raises back to January instead of getting them in July, Cassellius said the district could save between $15 million and $17 million.

Teachers have so far pushed back on the administration, questioning why MPS is already in a substantial fiscal hole after voters passed a $252 million referendum in 2024.

Cassellius told the Rotary Club audience that even an hour before Monday's board meeting, she wasn't sure there was enough support for her plan. The public comment portion of the meeting featured one district employee after another slamming the plan.

"I'm upset. I know we have a lot of individuals upset, as well, and they have a right to be upset," Stanley Shelton, dean of students at Morse Middle School, said. "They have a right to understand why we are here again and again and again."

Beyond cuts and position shifts, the district is hopeful Governor Tony Evers and Republican lawmakers will reach an agreement on how to use Wisconsin's projected $2.5 billion surplus.

The hangup in Madison is a disagreement over how much money to provide schools and how to provide property tax relief, with that aspect also tied back to education funding.

Both sides have signaled an interest in giving districts more money for special education aid.

Evers and the GOP have agreed to increase special education reimbursements by $200 million in the current two-year budget. That would allow schools to have 42% and 45% of their special education costs covered in the 2025-26 and 2026-27 school years.

Cassellius said, if that happens, it would bring MPS about $10 million more.

"We need that funding," she told the audience. "That funding is essential to getting our students who have disabilities the services that they need."

Even after the 2026-27 budget is balanced, the district must find ways to find long-term fiscal footing. Money from the 2024 referendum will have been exhausted by the end of the 2027-28 school year.

Cassellius has now been superintendent for nearly one year. Those 12 months have covered financial challenges, an unexpected need for widespread lead abatement, a push to implement school resources officers under a new state law, all on top of the of the need to turn around some of the country's worst academic performance among urban districts.

After the event, a CBS 58 reporter asked Cassellius if the job has been harder than she expected.

"Yes," she responded. "Yes, just to be honest. It's a very hard job. It's a very hard job, but it's a worthy one."