

THE 2009 GENERAL ASSEMBLY SESSION

BUDGET, BUDGET, BUDGET! Crunching numbers and deciding where to cut will consume this year's General Assembly. The state is experiencing a record deficit period – with increased “lows” in sight. As bad as it is now, February's figures are expected to be worse, and adjustments to the already dismal budget will likely follow.

The Governor laid out his budget plan on December 17, which included cuts to public education. With such disappointing numbers, there appears to be no way to insulate K-12 from the slashes all departments and state services will experience. Don't expect state pay raises and expect to do more with less. Governor Kaine's proposed budget targets 13,000 of the 36,000 non-teaching school support staff funded by the state. Principals and assistant principals are considered instructional personnel so are not directly affected by the Governor's proposals. It is estimated that the proposed cuts will save the Commonwealth approximately \$340 million. All local school divisions currently meet or exceed the staffing requirements in the SOQ; however, localities far exceed the requirements in the SOQ for staffing of assistant principals. The Governor's proposed policy change would shift major responsibility to cut jobs to the localities. While the Governor insists that he does not want to affect what goes on in the classroom, most educators believe that these cuts will certainly impact staffing and therefore all aspects of education, including the classroom. The House and Senate are expected to offer their own plans, and the fear is that, like the Governor's plan, many of the proposals will become permanent solutions in response to a financial crisis. Educators have asked Governor Kaine and members of the legislature to consider one-time cuts during this downturn rather than instituting policies that will permanently change the funding methodology.

In order to lessen the blow to public education and other vital services, the Governor is proposing a higher tax on cigarettes. Although this would certainly ease the burden, many believe that such a major increase in taxes on cigarettes will be “DOA” in this General Assembly. If so, that hole in the Governor's budget will need to be filled with more cuts.

Pre-filed bills have been slow in surfacing, but the usual high number of education bills is expected. When elected representatives have no money to give, they often “give the gift” of Code change. With an election year looming, many will offer their solutions for fixing K-12 public education. Legislation “by anecdote” will continue to be the rule rather than the exception with local issues becoming the subjects of state bills. Pre-filed education bills that have surfaced so far are related to bullying, grading policies, attendance policies, school choice and family life education. The General Assembly's Youth

Commission is particularly concerned with attendance policies and will propose legislation to limit suspension for those students who are tardy or absent. VASSP maintains a presence on the Commission's permanent subcommittees and will continue to oppose restrictions on administrators regarding discipline issues. The General Assembly convenes this year on January 14, and the flurry of bill activity is expected to increase as soon as legislators arrive in Richmond.

All bills aside, the big issues this year will be related to the state's record deficit and how to keep the state's head above water. More than ever, educators' voices need to be heard and their stories told. Your local senators and delegates must hear from you about just how the classroom will be affected if proposed cuts to K-12 education are made permanent.