

# Education to feel pinch with no grant increase

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As far as education is concerned, Tuesday's budget was a case of the good, the bad and the unknown.

The good? The kindergarten to Grade 12 education budget wasn't cut as much as first expected.

The bad? Grants to school boards won't increase so school districts will feel the squeeze as they pay more to teachers as part of the arbitrated ruling and the collective agreement and still provide a quality education.

The unknown? Lethbridge College and the University of Lethbridge don't know yet how their individual grants will be affected by the 2.7 per cent decrease in operating support from Advanced Education and Technology because each post-secondary institution will be treated differently.

"With zero per cent next year I don't know how our division, and many school divisions throughout the province, are going to be able to absorb those salary increases and maintain programs and services to students," said Chris Smeaton, superintendent of the Holy Spirit Roman Catholic school division. "We're going to look at every cost-cutting measure that we can."

As it is, school districts have already dipped into their reserve funds to make up for clawbacks from Alberta Education at the beginning of the school year. They've also had to come up with more money to reflect the salary increase due to teachers with the recent arbitration ruling. In addition, the collective agreement means teachers will receive another increase based on the next Alberta Weekly Earnings Index, likely somewhere between three and four per cent.

Education Minister Dave Hancock has also encouraged school boards to maintain staffing levels, said Barry Litun, superintendent of the Lethbridge public school district. But to do that, something has to give.

"Until now we haven't been allowed to run a deficit," Litun said. "We can't generate revenue. Even if the board is allowed to run a deficit they would have to have significant discussion about whether that would be acting as prudently as a board must act."

Another factor that will affect the public district's operation is a change in the way the class size initiative grant is calculated.

"Very preliminary calculations are that it will have a significant negative impact upon our grant," he said, adding it could amount to \$1 million to \$1.5 million less funding for the district.

No decisions will be made until the public school board has more information but the goal will be to go forward with the least impact on students, programs and staffing.

Smeaton didn't rule out cuts to staffing, although it would be a last resort.

"When 77 per cent of your budget is staff I think it would be difficult not to impact our staff," he said. "We're going to work very, very hard to look at all cost savings and that will be our first chore."

More details on how the 2.7 per cent reduction in the Advanced Education and Technology budget will filter down is expected in the next few days.

"It is very odd. We've never had this sort of waiting game. Usually when the budget comes out we know what numbers we're looking at, but this time we're unsure," said Nancy Walker, vice-president of finance and administration at the University of Lethbridge.

She expects Advanced Education and Technology will be looking at programs and enrolment at each institution to determine the appropriate allocation of funds.

"Since the dollars have been allocated through a formula, we don't yet know the impact on the college," said Lethbridge College president Tracy Edwards. "We are cautiously optimistic that we will get the same funding as last year or perhaps a little more."

Post-secondary institutions had been preparing themselves for no increase to their operating grants. The U of L has been discussing salary freezes with its employee groups as a way to help it weather tough economic times but the wage freeze option was rejected by Alberta Union of Provincial Employees in January.

Walker confirmed 10 AUPE administrative support staff positions have been abolished.

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