

COPING WITH LESS

How do Puyallup and Sumner school districts adjust to ever-decreasing budgets? By making some creative but less-than-ideal choices without affecting area students

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Many students and parents within the Puyallup School District's boundaries have had to adjust to a new routine this year. Instead of letting their kids sleep a bit longer and having them catch a bus, parents who live within a mile of their child's school are being forced to take extra time by walking or driving students to school in the mornings and back home in the afternoons.

Those changes are the result of some significant cost-cutting measures the district implemented this fall for its transportation program.

Amy Fleming, the district's director of business services, said more than 900 bus stops were eliminated as 16 schools had their routes "significantly altered." Twenty-five bus drivers lost their jobs, though six were brought back after other positions were left vacant through attrition. The reductions, however, represent 22 percent of Puyallup's driver force.

As classes resumed in September, the changes affected families as most students who lived within a one-mile radius of their school were not allowed to use buses. The change was made, officials said, because the state doesn't reimburse costs for transporting students within the radius. Some exceptions were made for children who have to cross dangerous arterials.

While there were complaints the cuts weren't communicated well, Fleming said, school officials, drivers and families seem to be doing well with the new policies.

The school having the most problems adjusting, she added, is Brouillet Elementary in South Hill. Traffic backs up daily on Gem Heights Drive because there isn't space for the extra vehicles coming and going from the small cul-de-sac leading to the school's parking lot and drop zone.

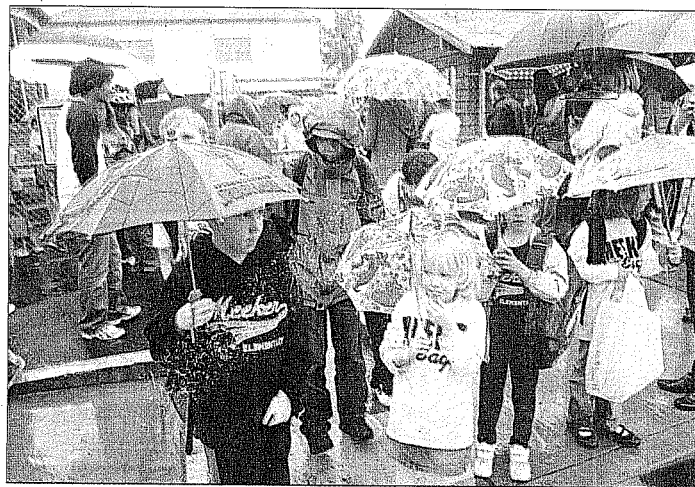
The schools that received the most changes to bus routes are largely located in South Hill neighborhoods, something that was done from a safety standpoint.

"They've built the neighborhoods there with adequate sidewalks and the requirements now by Pierce County (are) that you have to put sidewalks in," Fleming said. "Most areas of North Hill don't have appropriate walking



Isaac Looker leaps out of a car as he's dropped off for school on Friday morning at Meeker Elementary.

Herald photos/Colleen Carroll



From left, Meeker Elementary students Noah Adams, Chloe Adams, Rebecca Adams and Lillian Elliott, wait to be picked up by parents after school on a soggy Friday afternoon.

areas."

Fleming said district officials haven't discussed transportation options for next year but the likelihood of restoring jobs and routes isn't good.

"I haven't really thought that process through yet," she said. "And that's probably because I don't think the

money is coming back any time soon."

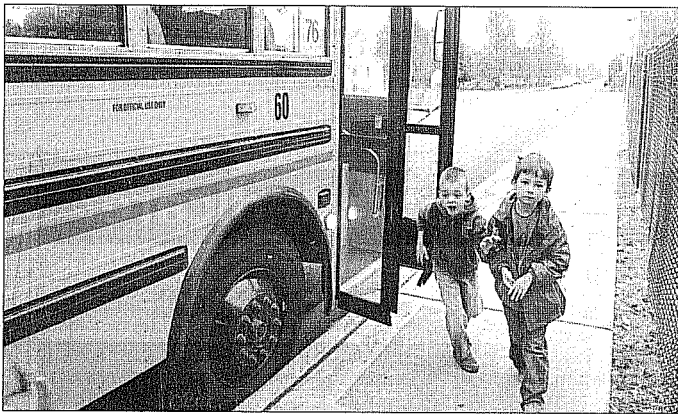
Libraries

Puyallup schools are saving \$670,000 compared to last year after trimming the equivalent of nearly 13 full-time certified librarian positions.

Vince Pecchia, the district's direc-

tor of student learning for literacy, said nine librarians were eventually laid off but others retained classroom teaching positions because of their seniority status. Pecchia co-chaired the district's library services committee, which made

Please see **SCHOOL CUTS**, page A9



Herald photo/Colleen Carroll

Ian Miller, left, and Orien Taute, race off the school bus to start their Friday morning at Meeker Elementary.

SCHOOL CUTS

continued from page A1

budget recommendations to Superintendent Tony Apostle.

When budget discussions began early this year, Pecchia said, district officials knew allocation projections from the state were "grim" and set out on a pair of cost-saving solutions for libraries.

The school board eventually accepted the worst-case scenario, trimming more than 20 percent of the budget for the district's 33 schools.

The district's three comprehensive high schools — Emerald Ridge, Rogers and Puyallup — no longer have their own certified librarian during the week; they share one. The seven junior highs lost nearly four full-time librarians. The three remaining positions are shared among multiple schools: One for Ballou and Stahl, one for Ferrucci and Glacier View and another for Ayles, Edgemont and Kalles.

At the elementary level, staffing has been cut to roughly one librarian for every two schools. Classified personnel staff the 22 elementary libraries for about four hours each day. Pecchia said the plan isn't ideal but it allows students access to books and provides someone to keep the libraries organized.

"Our libraries remain open," he said. "That was one of our main goals when we were studying the program."

The library services committee admitted in its budget recommendations that students would have less time with qualified librarians, meaning they're less able to find books to meet their specialized needs and interests. Classroom teachers now have little or no time to plan lessons with librarians, who are in turn forced to spend more time coordinating and supervising their assistants.

Pecchia said the district isn't ruling out improvements to library programs in the near future but the news coming out of Olympia doesn't sound much rosy.

"We don't know what's going to happen this year with the Legislature," he said. "The economy doesn't look great but it's hard to tell what that means for us right now."

Professional development

In the Summer School District, much more responsibility has fallen on the shoulders of both

elementary and secondary principals since the budget cuts.

For one, the elimination of the district's professional development specialists, which saved \$145,902, means principals no longer have a partner to create professional development programs for their building's staff.

"As a principal, it is a challenge because you want to be on the cutting edge of professional development and ... to know what's the latest and greatest," Crestwood Elementary Principal Kay Gallo said.

Now, along with their regular duties of managing staff and a building, principals have to mentor teachers, help them in areas they feel they may need more training, build curriculum and crunch student assessment numbers. It hasn't been easy, Gallo said, but she has had some help.

"We're picking up the pieces and trying to do the best we can," she said. "Where my staff has really helped me is that we've buddied new teachers with veteran teachers. They're probably doing more of the mentoring than I am and so far it's been working really well."

There have also been many more meetings. Gallo meets with the other district elementary schools' principals regularly and also holds meetings with her own staff members. In order to educate herself on professional development strategies, she has also attended many more conferences and workshops than she has in past years.

"What I'm learning this year is that you have to be very intentional and strategic about what you're going to focus on," Gallo said. "You do have to have that collaborative spirit. I could make lots of decisions on my own, but if I don't have the teachers' input, my work isn't going to be as powerful. (Most importantly), we'll go where the kids need us. We love our work and we're glad to be here. No matter what happens with the budget, we'll figure it out."

Extracurricular activities

At the middle school level, the Associated Student Body (ASB) adviser positions, generally held by staff members, were eliminated, saving about \$15,000. For Sumner Middle School Principal Steve Sjolund, that means even more added responsibility.

The student ASB officers, who run campaigns and are elected by their peers, organize assemblies, put together "spirit weeks," and hold dances. Now it is up to Sjolund to supervise and guide the officers through the planning process. Early on Sjolund, like Gallo, found that delegating tasks was crucial.

"What I quickly realized is that I

needed to go out and recruit some teachers that could take some pieces of the job," he explained.

One staff member agreed to help with dances, another took on spirit weeks. Sjolund himself leads the officers in weekly meetings and also through bi-weekly meetings with representatives from each classroom.

Sjolund said he can already see the positives to his additional duties. Just a couple of weeks ago, he watched the ASB officers look over a proposal for a cooking club and decide whether or not to fork over \$250 for it.

"I watched as the ASB leaders facilitated a discussion and they settled in on perhaps paying for half of it," he said. "At the end of the meeting one of them commented, 'I'm beginning to understand what I need to do.' It's been rewarding to watch these kids begin to realize the responsibilities they have as they're leading meetings, setting agendas."

Ann Cook, the district's communications director, said administrators, faculty and staff have been willing to pick up new tasks. It has helped district officials keep every single teacher in the district.

"We knew we had to make reductions," Cook said. "We didn't lay off any teachers. We eliminated the professional development positions, but placed those teachers back in classrooms. We really wanted to find every possible way to maintain programs and opportunities for the kids."

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