

Brown: Governor had other choices than budgets cuts

Rep. Cecil Brown • Clarion-Ledger guest columnist • September 6, 2009

The Governor's cuts to the education budgets may be necessary, but despite what he says, these cuts will have severe consequences and will be devastating to many school districts.

It is true that districts will receive more money from the state than they did in Fiscal Year 2009, but their 2009 funds were also cut so that schools are taking cuts on top of cuts.

As a result, in many cases school district reserves are exhausted.

School districts are funded with a combination of federal, state and local funds. Federal funds are restricted to specific programs and cannot be used for general operations. If state funds are cut, the only remaining source is local property taxes.

Already as a result of last year's cuts many districts have raised their millage rates. For those who have not, it is too late in the year to do so.

Teachers have already been hired. They are under contract with the districts. Their salaries are set by statute.

Local school district budgets have been set, and most of their funds are obligated. For local school administrators, the situation is dire.

Some school districts will absorb the cuts through spending down whatever reserve funds they have left. Others will be forced to shut down discretionary spending on programs such as extracurricular activities.

Our institutions of higher learning and community colleges will have similar problems. Already we see some universities shutting down facilities and cutting academic programs.

In the case of the universities, their only source of additional funds may be tuition increases, very bad news for students and their families.

The governor did not cause the recession, and he is not to blame for the shortfall in tax collections. **He did, however, have choices other than cutting education budgets by 5 percent.**

The governor could have used a portion of the remaining \$250 million in the rainy day fund. He could have used a portion of his remaining discretionary stimulus money.

Or he could have put together a combination of cuts, stimulus money and rainy day funds. Had he taken that option, we the cuts to the schools would not have been as severe.

But that's the governor's decision. He clearly has the authority to do what he did, and I am sure he used his best judgment.



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According to the experts, the economy is improving. That being the case, tax collections will also improve and the shortfall will not be as bad as the governor predicts.

The Legislature is now beginning the busy Joint Legislative Budget Committee hearings as part of the budget preparation process for the next fiscal year that begins July 1, 2010. As will the governor, state legislators will closely watch each month's revenue collections as we seek to craft the most responsible and effective budget possible.

In the meantime, we can simply hope that our schools will find some way to deal with these cuts that will not negatively affect their mission of providing a quality education to every boy and girl in Mississippi.

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