Quakertown looks to close two schools, furlough 50 staff to make ends meet

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After 30 years of nonstop property-tax increases, the superintendent of the Quakertown Community School District says only one way is left to balance the books: Immediately shut down an aging middle school, close an elementary school next year, end an expensive cyber-learning program, and furlough 50 teachers and other staff.

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William Harner calls his plan to save his Upper Bucks district “a paradigm shift.” Some parents are using much less kind words to describe it.

“We were blindsided completely,” said Emily George. She is sending her two children to different elementary schools because of Quakertown’s last redistricting and now may have to send one of them, a third grader who is on the autism spectrum, to yet another school. She called Harner’s proposed solution to the district’s $4.8 million budget gap “horrible.”

The fiscal strife in the district, encompassing a mostly blue-collar community between Philadelphia and Allentown where more than a quarter of the 5,240 public school students live in poverty, is a jarring example of what administrators regionwide are facing: large structural budget gaps that aren’t going away, even as the overall economy improves and headlines about a state education-funding crisis fade.

“Many districts have still not recovered from the Great Recession,” said Mark DiRocco, executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA).

He estimates that one-third of the state’s districts continue to slash programs and faculty positions or increase class sizes to make ends meet. The biggest culprits, DiRocco said, are skyrocketing teacher pension costs and the failure of state and federal school aid to keep pace.

Another Bucks district, Pennsbury, is laboring to close a $5 million budget gap, for instance. Delaware County’s Chichester district, one of several troubled systems profiled in a February report by PASA and the Pennsylvania Association of School Business Officials, has cut staff for
six straight years. The same report noted that 77 percent of Pennsylvania’s 500 districts raised property taxes this year.

Indeed, the ongoing school budget gaps are more starkly exposing the differences between affluent suburbs and older struggling towns. In Lower Merion Township, one of Pennsylvania's wealthiest communities, district administrators sought exemptions to raise property taxes above the state-legislated 3 percent cap more often than any other district over the last decade. Last year, Lower Merion lost a lawsuit over its high tax rate and a judge ordered a refund of some of its 2016-17 increase. The district has appealed.

Quakertown is the only district in Bucks County, and one of just a handful in the region, that has raised its real estate levy annually for the last 30 years. Even when adjusted for inflation, it has soared more than 40 percent over the last 15 years. School board members say they’re not willing to seek state permission to raise taxes higher than the maximum allowed under the 2006 property-tax relief legislation, Pennsylvania Act 1. That, they say, is not a viable option for a community with a 28 percent poverty rate.

“Taxpayers are going, ‘When are you not going to raise taxes for a change?’ ” said Paul Stepanoff, president of the school board, which has scheduled a hearing for Tuesday to discuss the closing of Milford Middle School.

Harnor said his impossible mission this winter was to devise a spending plan that didn’t massively raise taxes or eat up the district’s cash reserves, yet preserved popular programs such as athletics and the arts.

His proposed furloughs would affect four principals, 37 teachers, and as many as nine support staffers over two years, although next year's reductions are expected to be handled through attrition. The full-time staff would number 501 in the 2018-19 school year, down from 625 in 2007-08.

What requires more immediate action, he said, are time-worn school facilities such as Milford, where science labs are outdated and the heater is ready to give out.

“We’re in a Catch-22 because of how tight our funds are,” Harner said, noting the district will also likely need to close either Quakertown or Tohickon Elementary Schools in 2018 while maintaining the financial ability to begin building a new one. If a new elementary is opened, the other aging grade school would be shut.

The options he has presented to the school board include moving some of the students now at Milford to available space at the district’s Freshman Center and Strayer Middle School, with the installation of some modular classrooms -- still cheaper than the $10 million required to bring Milford up to code.

In addition, Harner said, a closer look at Quakertown’s cyber-learning program – viewed as a money-saver when it was launched a couple of years ago – showed it is actually costing the district $700,000 a year; some teachers get paid for online classes with only three or four
students. “It’s not efficient for us,” said the superintendent, who also seeks to eliminate a $600,000 eighth-grade “Team Time” program, a daily period during which teachers can work with students, parents, and one another.

Quakertown parents don’t necessarily blame Harner. The district’s cash crunch, they note, existed before he arrived in 2014. But many aren’t pleased with the plan, taking to Facebook to post complaints. The biggest concerns are over the chaos of closing schools and redistricting.

“Milford looks like a prison, but to the kids, it’s their school,” George said. She and other parents also questioned some of Quakertown’s recent spending decisions. “Why did they spend millions of dollars on the land for a new middle school” before construction was put on hold, she asked. “They also put Astroturf on the football field and renovated the high school.”

Ryan Wieand, president of the teachers’ union in Quakertown, said his worry about the looming cuts was their speed: “They’re doing it very fast, without considering the impact it’s going to have on kids.” Wieland said he’s especially concerned that the furloughs will eliminate reading and instruction specialists who work with the neediest kids, and that middle-school consolidation could mean larger classes and overcrowding in sports and other activities.

Others in the school community note that under Harner’s leadership, the high school has the top state School Performance Profile score in Bucks County – above more upscale neighbors – and a plethora of Advanced Placement courses.

“Sometimes these tough decisions are hard to swallow, but in the end, it will be better for the schools and the kids,” said Denise Moyer, a mother of two whose older child will be in ninth grade next fall and could be affected by crowding at the Freshman Center. “They’re not cutting sports, or lots of great things that they instituted.”