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EDITOR'S PICK

Layoff notices sent out to 42 staff members

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METHUEN — Dozens of teachers, medical assistants and other school staff members — 42 in all — received notice last week that they would not have a job next school year.

With rising contractual costs, such as transportation, and other budgetary pressures, the School Committee authorized the layoffs to stay within the budget given to them by Mayor D.J. Beauregard.

More staff members are also being shuffled between different positions, according to School Committee member Mary Beth Donovan-Grassi.

“These layoffs mean people with professional status will be reassigned to fill gaps as needed,” said Donovan-Grassi.

“In other words, veteran teachers could be transferred to different grade levels, different schools depending on their licensure and years of service.”

The notices were given out Thursday.

On Monday night, Beauregard announced he would be able to funnel an additional \$320,000 into the school’s budget through meals tax and billboard revenues. It was not



Donovan-Grassi added city schools have to follow the process as dictated by staff union contracts and that professional staff also could not be assigned to new positions until the school knows what budget to follow. The City Council has yet to approve Beauregard's budget as of Monday afternoon.

"It could be a very long and chaotic few weeks," she said.

Out of the 42 employees to receive layoff notices, 34 are newer teachers who had yet to gain professional status in the school, explained Donovan-Grassi. A humanities and an English language learner supervisor are also losing their jobs.

The remaining six employees are nonunionized and include medical assistants and a bullying investigator.

Methuen Education Association Copresident Sue Pierce said the impact on the district is more than the layoffs.

"It's a loss of over 80 positions that directly affect our students' education, on top of already having lost more than 40 positions last year," said Pierce. "These aren't just numbers; they are beloved teachers, counselors, and support staff who know our students, guide them, and help them thrive."

The school will be open an additional two weeks after the last day of school in order to allow teachers who are being transferred to other positions access, said Donovan-Grassi.

She said Superintendent Brandi Kwong mentioned last week that there have also been six resignations in recent weeks.

It is still possible that the school's overall budget may be increased in line or closer to what the committee has requested for funding to prevent some of the layoffs. However, Beauregard has told the council that the only way to increase the school's budget would



be to cut \$3 million from the city's budget, raise taxes or dip deeper into city reserves which are already being relied on this year.

Beauregard and Chief Administrative and Financial Officer Maggie Duprey have warned that spending any more free cash than is already planned to prop up the school's budget could have disastrous fiscal consequences.

He has also been critical of some of the school's cuts, arguing in favor of measures including freezing raises to save jobs.

During a finance subcommittee meeting last week City Councilor Jana Zanni Pesce asked Donovan-Grassi why the majority of the cuts were coming for teaching positions, not administrators, who are represented by Unit B in union negotiations.

"I cannot support taking classroom positions," she said.

"Unit B, we don't have that many people left," said Donovan-Grassi, referring to previous cuts to administration.

She has also emphasized how fluid the staffing situation remains.

On Monday, the council held the first read of the city's budget, which when or if approved, will further solidify the layoffs.

Donovan-Grassi expressed dismay over the cuts and said the school's literacy initiatives in particular are going to be "gutted" "by larger class size, less oversight and removal of some reading specialists who work with lots of struggling readers."

"I can't believe we are here," she said.

"Every student will feel this through larger class sizes, fewer adults in the building, and less support for those who need it most," continued Pierce. "Our students deserve better. The city has more than enough money stockpiled to prevent this. We need the mayor and

the city council to put our students first. What's missing isn't the funding, it's the commitment to invest in education. Bottom line (is) the city has the resources to stop these cuts and fully fund (and) staff our schools."

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