

Stimulus funds are schools' stopgap

Michael Alison Chandler

Prince George's County public school officials are hiring autism specialists. Fairfax County schools will fund a summer reading program for struggling readers. And the District is creating an online database for its special education plans.

The largest-ever infusion of federal cash is flowing into public school classrooms this year in the form of new programs and thousands of restored jobs. The stimulus package -- \$100 billion over two years -- comes with similarly sized expectations. The Obama administration is hoping the historic investment will spur reform, boost student achievement, help close achievement gaps and turn around struggling schools.

But school administrators across the country offered a reality check in a survey released Tuesday by the American Association of School Administrators.

Even with the extra cash, the survey found, many schools are focused on survival. Two-thirds of those surveyed reported that stimulus dollars filled budget gaps or only slightly increased funding levels. Many school systems reported that they lost teachers and librarians, counselors or support staff this year because of declining state or local revenue.

"The administration may be building up too much expectation for reform when schools need money just to keep the doors open," said Jack Jennings, president of the District-based Center on Education Policy.

The survey represented responses from 160 school administrators from 37 states. A majority of respondents were from rural districts.

In Fairfax County, stimulus funding saved about 274 positions, but class size ratios still increased by half a student. Prince William County averted more than 300 layoffs, although class size went up there, too.

"There are lots of things that the Obama administration would like us to do with these funds. Here . . . we saved jobs. That is the thrust of what we did," said John Wallingford, director of financial services in Prince William.

Most of the education stimulus funding flows through three major avenues. The largest share -- \$54 billion -- comes through the states and is meant to offset cuts to local school budgets. The other two major conduits are federal programs that support education for children with disabilities or for students living in poverty.

All states will have a shot at the separate "Race to the Top" funding, which will provide \$4.35 billion in competitive grants for promising innovations.

But the boost to the existing federal programs is already leading to creative or reform-oriented changes for special education or poor students.

Montgomery County plans to increase the number of full-day Head Start classes and to invest in instructional technology to help students with disabilities. Prince George's is adding staff to after-school programs for at-risk students. Fairfax is hiring mentors for its special education teachers.

Urban districts, which serve greater numbers of poor and special education students, likely have more money to use for reform, said Michael Casserly, executive director of the District-based Council of the Great City Schools.

The council is surveying urban districts on how they are using stimulus dollars. Some innovations include curriculum reforms, new accountability systems, training for teachers of immigrant students or pilot math programs tailored to African American boys.

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