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Sun Exclusive

Alonso to cut central school staff

300 jobs would be trimmed at city schools main office

By Sara Neufeld

Sun Reporter

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The proposed budget that Baltimore schools chief Andres Alonso will present to the Board of Education tonight would cut \$110 million from the central office, redistributing \$70 million to schools and using \$40 million to help close a budget shortfall.

More than 300 central office jobs would be eliminated under the proposal, cutting the number of full-time positions at system headquarters from 1,531 to 1,222, according to a draft copy of Alonso's board presentation. Alonso has said that administrators with a background in instruction would have the opportunity to be transferred back to schools as teachers or principals, likely taking a pay cut. While that would avoid the need for large-scale layoffs, it appears that some layoffs of noninstructional personnel would be necessary.

The presentation draft was inadvertently posted on the school board's Web site yesterday, and Alonso declined to comment until it goes to the board tonight. Board Chairman Brian D. Morris also said that he would defer comment until tonight.

Since the day Alonso arrived in Baltimore last June, he has vowed to make the central office leaner, redistributing money to individual schools and giving principals more autonomy in exchange for accountability. If it is approved by the school board and the City Council, his first budget would go a long way toward making that vision a reality.

"There is no time to waste," one slide in the presentation says.

With a total budget of \$1.1 billion, the city school system currently spends the equivalent of \$13,000 for each of its 81,000 students. But principals have discretion over how only about \$90 per student is used, with the central office making all other decisions. Alonso has been trying to figure out how much money could possibly be freed up for the principals to use to meet the needs of their schools.

The PowerPoint presentation left blank the slides that will include the new amount that Alonso proposes should be at principals' discretion. But it did say that the principal of a typical school with 300 students who this year had just \$27,000 in discretionary funds could next year have as much as \$1.9 million - indicating that the amount of discretionary funding would climb from \$90 per pupil to somewhere around \$6,000.

Principals would be in charge of using the discretionary money to implement whatever reforms their students, staff and parents feel are necessary, be it reducing class size, hiring an art or music teacher, or starting an after-school program. This spring, they must submit to Alonso what they plan to do with their money. Every school will be required to hold at least one public meeting to gather input on its budget proposal.

According to the presentation, Alonso is recommending that the central office continue to fund a handful of "flagship" programs, such as International Baccalaureate at schools including City College and the Ingenuity Project at Polytechnic Institute and three middle schools. The Baltimore School for the Arts would continue getting extra central office money to maintain its program.

But most other contracts for programs would be controlled at the school level, so principals could opt in or out of them. The goal is to "move toward sustainability and fairness across the system over time," trying to eliminate disparities in school funding, the presentation says. But for schools that currently receive a disproportionately high level of funding, Alonso is recommending at least a partial hold-harmless provision.

The reorganization of the city schools comes in the face of \$76.9 million in cuts. The presentation says the system is expecting a revenue increase of \$11.1 million next academic year, but it will have \$61.5 million in increased costs, largely as a result of negotiated salary increases. The system was expecting a bigger revenue increase when it negotiated employee contracts, before state budget cuts.

In addition to the \$50.4 million shortfall, the presentation says the system will need to spend an extra \$20 million next fiscal year on a citywide initiative to close some school buildings and refurbish others that will receive the displaced students. And Alonso wants to spend an extra \$2.5 million to expand preschool, \$3.5 million for secondary school reform and \$500,000 for parental engagement.

That means that the CEO had to find a total of \$76.9 million to cut elsewhere in the budget, and he vowed to do it without hurting the schools.

Central office cuts would be the biggest source of money to close the budget gap: \$40 million, according to the presentation. The system also identified \$13 million in cost savings from this year's budget, \$18 million in reserves and \$6 million in city bonds.

At the same time, money going directly to schools would increase by \$70 million, from \$584 million to \$654 million. And the pot of discretionary money available to principals would increase from \$20 million to \$436 million, with \$218 million in school-level spending still dictated by the central office.

Special education money will continue to be controlled centrally because the city's special education program is under a federal consent decree and monitored by the parties in a long-running lawsuit. Principals participating in a focus group also recommended keeping central management of food services and transportation, saying they didn't want the increased authority in those areas.

In an interview last week, Alonso said that decentralized school management didn't work when Baltimore tried it in the 1980s and the 1990s because there wasn't clear accountability. He has not yet proposed the framework on which principals will be evaluated under the new structure, but it will be subject to a school board vote this spring.

The presentation says the evaluation framework will be clear, and principals will have ample support to help them meet their goals. The system is tapping budget analysts, retired principals with experience in

school-based budgeting, university professors and others to work with principals individually and in small groups.

"Autonomy will be bound," the presentation says. "It will not be 'do as I wish' but 'do within a framework set by policy, outcomes and student needs.' "

Tonight's school board meeting begins at 6 p.m. at system headquarters, 200 E. North Ave. Alonso is also scheduled to appear at a parent information session about the budget at 9 a.m. Saturday at [Frederick Douglass](#) High. A public hearing on the budget is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. March 19 at system headquarters.

sara.neufeld@baltsun.com

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