

Anchorage School District's proposed budget cuts encounter wave of opposition

By [Tim Rockey](#)

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Anchorage School District parents, students, employees and other members of the public packed a meeting of the Anchorage School Board on Tuesday, Feb. 17. (Tim Rockey / ADN)

With less than a week to decide which of the proposed budget cuts they'll implement, Anchorage School Board members are encountering strong resistance from affected parents, students and employees.

Facing a \$90 million shortfall, the district's current budget proposal calls for larger class sizes, fewer school nurses, and cuts to popular educational programs and most sports. Around 300 people attended a school board meeting Tuesday evening to oppose the district's planned budget cuts. Nearly every testifier opposed cuts to a program they or their child values.

More than 140 people had signed up to speak prior to the start of the meeting, and board members sat through nearly five straight hours of testimony before the meeting ended at 11:59 p.m. The school board chambers reached their capacity of about 220

people, and additional sections of folding chairs in the lobby were mostly full as testimony continued late into the evening.

During the meeting, a group of school nurses sat together in hooded sweatshirts that said “one nurse, one school.”

The budget calls for school nursing to move to a regional model, where the Anchorage Bowl would be divided up into five regions — north, south, east, west and central — and Eagle River would be its own region. About 10 nurses would staff each region, which would include about a dozen schools.

Under the plan, front office clerical staff would tend to sick children if substitute nurses are unavailable. Parents on Tuesday told the board about their students’ complex health needs, and said they would not be confident in their child’s safety with the new nursing model. Eagle River High School nurse Megan Charles said students need access to a medical professional, and recalled a time when she saw a student with an upset stomach.

“A non-medical eye could easily have dismissed it and administered Tums. My clinical assessment identified that it was in fact a life-threatening allergic anaphylactic reaction. We saved that student’s life because a nurse was there,” Charles said. “A regional model compromises student safety and well-being and will likely drive families with medically complex children out of the district, further impacting enrollment. There are safer ways to address these cuts without removing the frontline medical protection for our children.”

The budget also calls for cuts to elementary specialists, lumping art and music together in one class. Homestead Elementary School music teacher Hannah Johnston said it would be unfair for the district to expect art and music teachers to teach each other’s classes, and that it would harm students’ opportunities to learn.

“For many students, the arts are the very reason they get excited to come to school each day. I cannot tell you how many times I’ve been warned about a student who struggles, only to find that they absolutely thrive in music. That student who doesn’t speak sings, the student who is bored and doesn’t feel challenged is suddenly highly engaged,” Johnston said.

The plan to reduce the number of classes taken by middle schoolers was opposed by students and families who feel their opportunities to take electives would be limited. Turnagain Elementary School fifth grader Cora Moe said she takes Russian language immersion classes, writes for the student newspaper and plays basketball, but worried she wouldn’t have enough room in her schedule next year if the board approves the change to middle schools.

“For the last two years I have worked hard advocating for school funding. I have flown to Juneau to meet with legislators and kids in my class and I wrote letters that were delivered to legislators and the governor,” Moe said. “I was very happy funding was passed last year, but I am super sad that we are dealing with these budget cuts again, cuts that will impact my education and others even more.”

The district’s plan to close three elementary schools was another unpopular proposal among testifiers. ASD Deputy Superintendent Sven Gustafson said plans on where to relocate students from schools slated for closure had changed in response to [criticism](#) of the district’s previous school closure proposal in November. But despite the subtle changes, students and parents pleaded with the board to keep their schools open.

Fire Lake Elementary School student Hazelynn Higgins said she was nonverbal in the Structured Learning Classroom for special needs students when she started school, and applauded the work of Fire Lake teachers for helping her progress to a general education classroom.

“School was hard for me. I felt overwhelmed a lot at the time, but the staff at Fire Lake didn’t give up on me. With their help I found my voice,” Higgins said. “I’m now using my voice today to advocate for other children with autism, and they deserve the same support and understanding I received.”

Brittane Harris’ three sons now attend Campbell STEM, where she went to school decades ago. Harris struggled with dyslexia as a child, and said teachers there have helped her son overcome the same learning disability.

“This is the heart of our neighborhood, we’re a community. People move into our neighborhood to go to Campbell STEM, it is the only STEM school in Anchorage,” Harris said. “My son couldn’t read two years ago, and he’s thriving. My kids need Campbell STEM.”

Much of the testimony Tuesday focused on the district’s proposal to cut middle school and most high school sports, although the district said it is proposing an alternate plan that could spare those programs.

Kris Armstrong, the mother of Chugiak High School cross-country skier Solveig Alcaraz, said Anchorage’s vast network of ski trails is one reason she and her husband decided to move to Alaska. “That’s how our daughter became an Alaskan, in the winter on skis,” Armstrong said. “That’s how she defines herself, a high school skier from Alaska. Tonight she and the entire ski community are sending you an S.O.S. Save our skiing.” Alcaraz and dozens of other athletes asked the school board not to cut sports programs, arguing for the benefits to their social development and mental health as well as with their physical health.

“For many students, sports are the reason they come to school. They are a safe space,” Alcaraz said.

However, district administrators on Tuesday reversed course and announced a recommendation that would allow most sports to continue next year.

Kersten Johnson-Struempler, deputy chief of schools for the district, showed that by increasing sports fees and reducing buses for travel within Anchorage, they could cobble together enough savings to reinstate all sports programs except esports and gymnastics.

“We likely can bring back most sports but it will look differently than it does this year because of some of the changes that we would need to make,” Johnson-Struempler said.

The sports recommendation from administrators has not been adopted by the school board yet.

The board will vote on the budget Feb. 24.