

Schools will work with reduced budget

50 staff members may lose positions after \$3.9 million cut in state aid

By John Zucal Managing Editor, Orange Transcript

When the city's Board of School Estimate met earlier this month, they faced a decision no member wants to make: approving a budget which may adversely affect the services the district provides.

Such was the case in Orange after Gov. Chris Christie presented his proposed budget for the 2011 fiscal year to the state Legislature in March. In it, he recommended a reduction of more than \$ 800 million in basic education aid. To accomplish this, all school districts throughout New Jersey had their basic aid reduced by 5 percent of their 2009- 10 general fund budgets. For some districts, it meant the elimination of all basic aid.

In most low- income districts, the reduction was approximately 5 percent. That amount, however, meant major adjustments to the budget in Orange within a three- week period before it was to be submitted to the Essex County superintendent's office.

Through Christie's proposed budget, Orange board members faced having to reduce the district's budget by \$ 3.9 million. Districts are required by state law to submit balanced budgets to the county superintendent's office.

" The circumstances didn't make the decision likable because of the reduction in state aid," Superintendent Ronald Lee said Tuesday of the board's unanimous vote.

According to Lee, Christie's plan will cause the district to potentially eliminate 50 positions for the 2010- 11 school year. The number of staff members who may lose their positions, however, may be offset through attrition. Such attrition could occur if staff members retire.

As for fears that student activities may be reduced, Lee stressed that student services and athletics would not be affected.

Asked if Christie could have proposed less of a reduction in state aid to districts, Lee said district officials and the Board of Education still would have had to trim expenses within the district's budget.

" Obviously, I would have preferred less of a cut," said Lee. " Unfortunately, we've been put in a position to tighten our belt while we still address the needs of the community."

While officials in some districts have expressed hope that legislators may be able to work out a compromise with the governor's office to lessen the aid reduction, Lee said he was working with the belief none would be forthcoming. " Realistically, I'm not holding out on it," said Lee. " It would be a windfall if we get more."