

Will the bus stop here anymore?

Transportation taking toll on schools. Lunches will cost more.

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Hillsdale, Mich. — Local schools are seeing their budgets take a hit after seeing fuel prices double in the past year.

Consumers have been feeling the pressure as retail gas prices soared above \$4 a gallon in the past week. While drivers can curtail use of their vehicles, districts don't have the same options. The impact is telling.

"It's a huge effect," Robert Henthorne, Hillsdale County Intermediate School District superintendent, said, "because every (traditional) school district in Hillsdale County provides transportation which means maintaining a fleet of buses and, of course, fueling them every day. When the price of fuel basically doubles like it has in the past year it affects everything, because there was no way of predicting that a year ago."

Schools are already spending more money than planned on fuel and are budgeting the increased gas prices for the next school year. Camden-Frontier has already budgeted future fuel costs at \$6 per gallon.

Peggy LoPresto, Hillsdale Community Schools' business manager, said the fuel budget for the district will significantly increase by the end of this school year

"I started the budget year with \$75,000 and I'm going to have to increase it another \$40,000 by the end of the year," she said. "We will be spending about \$115,000 in diesel fuel this year (2007-08)."

Jonesville Community Schools is projecting a 20 percent increase in fuel costs for the 2008-09, while Pittsford Area School budgeted a 35 percent increase in fuel costs, in addition to the 35 percent increase it has already endured for this school year.

"The hopes are that we can keep it similar and watch what we're doing so we don't have to put more (money) in later on," Pittsford Superintendent Andy Shaw said.

But busing is only one part of district's budget that has been affected by rising fuel costs. Food, heating, and electricity costs have also gone up stretching finances even further.

"We're really seeing a direct impact in our food service area," Shaw said. "It's making our food go up in price...it's really having an impact on our schools all the way through."

Jonesville Community Schools Superintendent Michael Potts said the increased energy prices are impacting travel costs for staff conference training as well as heating and electricity bills which are affecting the price of school lunches.

"The impact on food services is one that is going to have to pass on to the consumer," he said. "It's one of the programs that has to stay solvent."

While districts are surviving the rest of the current school year, officials are thinking ahead about what can be done to reduce expenses next year. They hope to receive extra funds from the state to compensate for the increasing costs.

"We're having to absorb the extra costs by taking money from savings that we have, and if there's no savings left then things have to be cut in other areas," Henthorne said. "It usually starts with things like supplies and materials for the classrooms, then it goes into the delay or cancellation of textbook purchases."

"Some districts don't transport kids to away athletic events. They either have to have parent transportation or they just don't have the events anymore."

Hudson Area Schools Superintendent Kathy Malnar is looking to reduce costs by delaying building repair.

"The first thing that would be affected would be maintenance and repair," she said. "The absolute last area to be affected is the classroom. Superintendents and school boards do everything they can to protect classrooms and classroom programs at the expense of things like roofs, building maintenance, boilers, and general upkeep, (but) that can't go on forever."

Hillsdale Community Schools Board of Education President Bill Smith is looking into minimizing and/or collaborating bus routes to reduce costs.

"Maybe reduced athletic events or more home meets versus away (will minimize fuel costs)," he said, "but I'm sure the other school districts are going to use the same strategy...Maybe countywide we can look at routes that overlap and we could haul someone else's kids and they could haul our kids."

The surprise factor of the price jump and the unpredictability of future costs is one of the biggest challenges for the schools.

"It's a guessing job at how much we should budget for fuel," Shaw said. "That's the challenge. We have no idea really where it's going."

Malnar is worried about the future of schools in Michigan.

"Schools are really being pinched into a position and, frankly, I don't know where it's going to lead," she said. "I don't know how long the public schools in Michigan can continue to operate this way."

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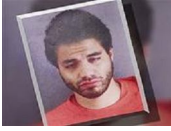
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