

'Fiscal cliff' issues could rock local schools

Guest column by Nannette Johnston, HCS superintendent

Sunday, December 16, 2012 at 12:30 am (Updated: December 16, 12:30 am)

Much has been made about the fiscal cliff that is threatening our nation's financial security. We all should be alarmed about the possible outcomes should we "fall" off the cliff. Our pocket books, our homes and our businesses will be drastically affected.

I would like to share with you the devastating problems it would be bring to Hardin County Schools and the future of the children and youth in our community. These critically important decisions lie solely in the hands of our elected leaders in Congress and the White House, but make no mistake – they have the potential to dramatically impact your local schools.

Sequestration, the fiscal policy procedure adopted by Congress to deal with the federal budget deficit, ensures automatic cuts for each of nine years, fiscal years 2013-2021, totaling \$1.2 trillion. The first round of cuts would take place Jan. 2 without Congressional action to prevent it. The 2013 cuts apply across-the-board to "discretionary" spending and are divided between reductions to defense and non-defense spending, including education.

The impact of sequestration on education programs is an estimated cut of \$3.5 billion to \$4.1 billion including a \$1.2 billion cut to Title I grants and an estimated \$900 million cut to IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) money for the 2013-14 school year.

The cuts in federal funding would be devastating to Hardin County Schools. Here's what an 8 percent cut would do to our students:

- A loss in Title I money would cost our students \$272,000.
- A loss in Title II money would cost our students \$44,000.
- A loss in IDEA money (special education and preschool) would cost our students \$224,000.
- A loss in free and reduced lunch reimbursement would cost our students nearly \$360,000.
- An 8 percent cut to Title I, Title II, IDEA and free/reduced lunch reimbursement would cost our students approximately \$900,000.

Kentucky's per-pupil allotment has continued to dissipate over the last several years and there have been slashes to funding budgeted for student instruction, technology, assessment and curriculum programs. School districts in Kentucky have not received state funding to purchase textbooks since 2009. Education funding continues to drop while expectations from the state and federal departments of education continue to increase.

We are thrilled that the bar of accountability continues to rise. That means that our students are challenged and are ready to meet the global opportunities that await them after graduation. However, when the funding that is promised for mandates is much less than expected, students are the ones who suffer the most.

Now is the time for action and leadership by our congressional delegation and by our president.

Sequestration can be avoided only if Congress passes legislation that undoes the legal requirement in the Budget Control Act before Jan. 2, 2013. There is no room for error or thoughtless, across-the-board, blunt cuts.

Please join the Hardin County Board of Education in urging Kentucky's entire Congressional delegation to work with colleagues from both sides of the aisle to intervene and avoid the fiscal cliff. It is a necessity to ask Congress and the White House to set aside differences and find common ground in a responsible approach that doesn't impact students by ripping our national investment in education.

I ask the U.S. Senate, the House of Representatives and the president to set the "right" example. Put partisan politics aside and put our country's children first. The future of our country depends on strong and selfless leadership.

Nannette Johnston is superintendent of Hardin County Schools.