■ EDITORIAL ■

School Board Has Big Job Ahead

Tomorrow is drop-dead day for the Santa Fe school board: Board members must finally decide what to eliminate from the school district budget in order to meet a nearly $7 million-plus shortfall in next year's budget.

A month ago, we suggested the board should start with cuts that didn't affect in-the-classroom education. Some of those possibilities are still on the table — a couple of administrative positions may get the ax; there has been talk of slight reductions in salaries, with the biggest cuts aimed at administrative or non-teaching pay; talk too of eliminating educational "frills" like art and music or eliminating middle-school sports.

More drastically, and unfortunately more effectively from a strictly cost-saving point of view, the board has been talking about increasing class sizes across the board, closing some small schools and consolidating others and trying to rent out the consequently vacant schools to increase district income.

These changes make little sense as educational policy. Critics note that the small schools slated for closing or consolidation are some of the district's best. Proponents point to the inescapable fact that these same schools serve mainly the city's more affluent areas, while young students in the less-well-off reaches of the city's south side are crammed into overcrowded elementaries with student bodies of three or four times the size of those smaller and better schools.

The result is nothing short of a Solomonic dilemma: It surely makes no sense for the board to consolidate or close the district's most effective schools. It just as certainly makes no sense to keep them open at the expense of the district's less advantaged students, who could benefit significantly both from relief from overcrowding and from access to the better schools, which are not in their neighborhoods.

Think New Mexico, a home-grown think tank that has been studying education, among other issues, for at least a decade, may have presented the 11th-hour solution: Redistribute the district's entire student body to relieve pressure on the most crowded schools while bringing the smaller schools up to capacity enrollment.

That sounds a lot like redistricting, something school administrators and the board have been talking about for several years without much in the way of serious action. It would also increase access for all city students — including the less privileged — to what are acknowledged to be the district's top-performing elementary schools.

That's socially responsible, sensible from an education policy point of view and doesn't involve massive dislocation of students that the consolidation and closure plan currently before the board would entail.

Think New Mexico also has a couple of other good ideas: furloughs for central-office administrative personnel and cuts to overtime and contractual services, where Santa Fe spends significantly more than other school districts.

In our view, these belt-tightening measures are no-brainers. Net savings to the district would be significant: $3.2 million — almost half the total the board has to save to balance the budget.

Another good idea from Think New Mexico: laying off "double dippers" — retired school employees who earn a pension, then are rehired and paid a salary, too. One caveat on this one: The Albuquerque schools have run into legal questions on the same issue, as well as questions about whether or not the savings would really be as great as originally estimated. Santa Fe board members should keep a close watch on this issue and follow through with layoffs if the legal issues are resolved and savings estimates remain significant.

We don't envy board members the task before them. But if it's any consolation, they're not alone in having to find solutions to difficult problems — school boards all over the state, not to mention city and county governments, state agencies and the Legislature, are engaged in the same agonizing process in response to the economic downturn.