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WGN news

Students protest Maine Township teacher cuts

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Students protested teacher cuts in Maine Township High School District 207 on Friday. They suggested ways to increase revenue, including dipping into the district's \$86 million reserve funds and attracting advertising money.

Dozens of students turned out on a day off Friday to fight for teachers slated to lose their jobs at a Park Ridge-based school district.

"It's our education at stake," said Anna Rangos, a junior at Maine South. "We've made very close connections with these teachers."

Rangos and about 60 other students from three high schools protested outside Maine Township High School District 207 offices, holding handwritten signs with the names of each student's favorite teacher.

"Save our teachers," they shouted in unison.

Facing its worst financial challenge in 80 years, the district plans \$15 million in cuts that could result in the layoffs of about 135 employees. The cuts include 75 full-time teachers.

The students came with suggestions to raise revenue and stop the cuts. These included dipping into the district's estimated \$86 million reserve funds, allowing a Nike swoosh to be painted on the school's roof for advertising revenue and allowing local businesses to advertise on in-school televisions that usually play CNN.

"We want them to try anything to save these jobs," said Maine South sophomore Patrick Wohl.

District spokesman Dave Beery said district leaders appreciate the students' passion and willingness to offer solutions, but said the proposals fall short.

The reserve funds, which may look flush, are not, he said.

"Our five-year projections show that those reserves will be depleted to unacceptably low levels within two to four years," he said.

As for advertising revenue, he said that the board recently changed its policy to allow more advertising on school grounds. But the additional money -- the district plans to bring in about \$2 million next year, partly from the ads -- doesn't come close to compensating for the expected \$5

million in savings the teacher cuts will bring, he said.

Class size in the district is smaller than average, he said, and increases will be manageable. For example, the average social science class will go from 21.7 students to 24.3 next school year, he said.

The high school district has about 6,800 students in three schools -- East, South and West.

The school board is expected to approve the plan or a similar one at its Feb. 1 meeting.

Parent Bogumil Bortnowski, whose son Michael is a sophomore at Maine West, said making the cuts during a difficult economic time is all wrong.

"Our economy won't improve if we don't take care of educating our kids," he said. "It's the wrong message."

--Dan Simmons