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Schools cautiously rebuilding amid uncertainty Sizable minority still cutting staff, institutionalizing pay-to-play

Restoration of deep state budget cuts has strengthened school finances in the current year, but adjusted for inflation, the level of state funding for K-12 instruction remains lower than it was in 2008-09, according to a study released today by Policy Matters Ohio. Schools are rebuilding cautiously, with uncertainty around state aid in the future, the study finds.

The report is based on a survey of school finance officials distributed by the Ohio Association of School Business Officials (OASBO). Nine percent (53) of Ohio's districts responded to the survey, including urban, suburban, rural, large and small.

More respondents have added teachers than reduced teaching staff in the current year, and more report budget surpluses than deficits. However, many are still cutting teachers; non-teaching positions remain unfilled in many districts and many continue to institute pay-to-play, which requires students to pay fees to participate in athletics. Ongoing uncertainty and risk shapes the budgeting process, including:

- Repeated change in the state funding formula, with four different formulas since 2009.
- Phase-out of tax reimbursements proposed in the executive budget for FY 2016-17.
- Uncertainty about the “guarantee” or aid that protects school finances from big losses in short periods of time, and
- Damaged local property tax base in many areas; with recovery on a statewide basis not expected until 2017.

“It’s great to see some restoration of funds in the state budget bill, which would help schools rehire some of the teachers they’ve lost,” said Wendy Patton, senior project director at Policy Matters Ohio and report author. “The problem is that many districts had to make deep cuts, and the restored funds still don’t get us back to the level of funding needed to provide Ohio kids with a great education.”

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*Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute
with offices in Cleveland and Columbus.*