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MPS: Richardson orders four schools closed, sale of Georgia Washington

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## EDUCATION

# MPS: Richardson orders four schools closed, sale of Georgia Washington

**Andrew J. Yawn**

Montgomery Advertiser

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To create needed funding for a Montgomery County school system bleeding students and dollars, interim State Superintendent Ed Richardson has ordered the termination of 17 central office positions, the sale of unused property or previously closed schools and the closure of four MPS schools.

That's the financial side of a three-pronged, five-year financial and academic intervention plan Richardson revealed Friday morning, one year after the state's intervention into the school system began.

Besides the financial plan, Richardson released desired academic benchmarks and an action plan for improving academic achievement culture.

"No ambitious goal is achieved without a degree of anxiety, discomfort and pain," Richardson said. "I'm confident the steps we take today will move us in the right direction."

The closings of Floyd Elementary, Chisholm Elementary, Dozier Elementary and Georgia Washington Middle School next school year are estimated to save MPS \$1.4 million annually in salaries, utilities, insurance and maintenance.

Of particular importance is the closure of Georgia Washington Middle School. Richardson announced MPS would sell the school to Pike Road, a reincarnation of the \$11.25 million deal that was in place in the fall before the MCBOE voted it down amidst outcry from Georgia Washington parents and alumni in November. That \$11.25 million includes the \$1.499 million intended for MPS but inadvertently sent from the state to Pike Road two years ago.

"It's going to come in one lump sum," Richardson said. "This is one-time money that will carry us through the next year, and I believe the reason for that is clear as the accrediting

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team prepares to come to Montgomery."

**Previously:** MPS calls off Georgia Washington deal

Reps. Thad McClammy and John Knight, both D-Montgomery, called for the state to restore those funds to MPS on Thursday, the day before Richardson's news conference. Both were in attendance Friday. Richardson said he had previously told the two the money would be recouped.

Georgia Washington, the school's namesake, began the school out of a rented 12-by-13-foot cabin in 1893, according to the school's website, and is hailed for her role in educating African-Americans in the Jim Crow era. Richardson said both Georgia Washington's name and her grave site, which is on the school's campus, will be preserved. Pike Road issued a statement Friday saying, "The transition of the Georgia Washington campus to Pike Road ensures that it will remain a vital educational facility for years to come that respects its historic role in public education."

"This is a great lady," Richardson said. "If I have just a few heroes in education, Georgia Washington is one of them. The school will take at least \$2 (million) or \$3 million more to bring it up to acceptable levels. It's been neglected. But I'd say Georgia Washington is coming to the rescue of MPS, because without that sale, we'd be cutting at least 200 teachers and support personnel on top of that."

**Read here: School closure FAQs**

Public hearings for the closures of the four schools will be scheduled, the dates of which will be announced next week, Richardson said.

The elimination of the 17 central office jobs will result in \$1.1 million in savings. Richardson is also cutting all travel expenses for the Montgomery County Board of Education, an amount budgeted at just more than \$51,000.

Several central office buildings will also be closed to cut costs. Currently nine buildings are being used by MPS central office staff.

State Board of Education Vice President Stephanie Bell, whose district includes Montgomery, said she was "100 percent" behind Richardson's proposal.

"He is correct in focusing on the central office," she said. "The fact there are nine offices that are considered the central office because they're satellites is just inexcusable, when the

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money needs to be directed to children in the classroom.”

In addition, Floyd Middle Magnet School students will be moved into the currently closed Houston Hill Junior High School building, a move based on infrastructure needs rather than cost-cutting.

Those moves are expected to aid a school system that would be operating with a \$4.5 million deficit this year if no changes were made.

The budget for MPS has not yet been approved and is now more than four months past due.

MPS is required by state law to maintain one month’s operating budget. For MPS’ \$287 million budget, that minimum is \$18.8 million. MPS hasn’t met that minimum standard in the past five years and has met it only once in the past 10 years, Richardson said in December.

Richardson’s goal is for MPS to have \$22.6 million on hand with the extra \$3.8 million being put toward academic improvement strategies within the schools.

The MCBOE approved a budget in December to reach those goals, but that budget cut 114 teacher jobs, and Richardson did not approve it.

“We want to stay out of the classrooms until the very last. If we’re going to make progress in student achievement, we need good principals and teachers out there,” Richardson said.

MPS has averaged a loss of 500 students a year for the past five years and is projected to lose between \$3 million and \$4 million next year due to declining enrollment.

The school system also lost \$2.8 million because the Montgomery County Commission withheld education funds to service the debt of MPS construction projects, another loss that MPS will likely have to cover next year.

Although there will likely be backlash related to school closures and the sale of Georgia Washington, Richardson has said fixing a school system’s finances is easy compared to improving academic achievement.

MPS has 11 “failing” schools, 15 percent of all failing schools in Alabama. All five traditional public high schools made the failing schools list. All of those except Park Crossing face chronic absentee problems with more than 28 percent of each school’s students missing 15 or more days a year.

**More:** MPS: All non-magnet high schools make 'failing schools' list

To that end, Richardson said he doesn't have specific ideas to increase test scores, but moves will be made to create a better learning environment.

A new alternative school will be started in McIntyre School to take "students who are disrupting the schools" out of the general school population. Expectations for standardized tests will be raised and students and parents will be notified when expectations aren't met. The four to five charter schools that have applied will all be approved as long as they meet requirements, and all principals are currently being evaluated by Chief Administrative Officer Reginald Eggleston.

"Those not performing at a high level will be removed. Period," Richardson said.

All principals were given a 10 percent raise last year by former State Superintendent Michael Sentance. Richardson said some of the extra \$3.8 million could be used to buy out those principals if they are underperforming.

By the 2021-2022 school year, Richardson hopes MPS will be equal to current state averages in academic achievement standards.

Of primary importance to Richardson is the gap between the graduation rate and the college/career readiness rate.

In the 2015-2016 school year, MPS had a 78 percent graduation rate, but only 43 percent of those students were college and career ready.

"We're sending people out with a diploma that has not prepared them for the basics of life. It's deceptive and dishonest," Richardson said, adding that one MPS educator called the school system a "diploma mill."

Richardson's goal is for the county (and each school individually) to have a college and career readiness rate equal to its current graduation rate by the 2021-2022 school year. Robert E. Lee High School, for example, would be expected to have its college and career readiness rate (currently 27 percent) equal to the current graduation rate (66 percent) in five years.

Richardson also pointed to ACT Aspire scores as an illustration of MPS student achievement woes. The state average for the test — which is administered to students in grades 3-8 and 10th graders — is 41 percent. The MPS average is 27 percent, a score that includes scores from high-performing magnet school students.

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All five public high schools had less than 5 percent of its 10th-grade students proficient in math, according to 2016-2017 ACT Aspire data: Park Crossing (4.22 percent), Robert E. Lee (1.12), Sidney Lanier (2.33), Jeff Davis (2.00) and G.W. Carver (2.78).

“Two percent. Which is to say 98 percent are not proficient,” Richardson said. “Lee High school, a place where I did my internship in chemistry: 1 percent.”

The average for MPS 10th-graders in math that year was 9.84, well below the still-concerning state average of 19.07 percent.

The State Board of Education has done away with the ACT Aspire test over a belief that it doesn't align with Alabama educational standards. MCBOE President Robert Porterfield addressed Richardson Friday, saying the ACT Aspire is a “flawed tool” that shouldn't be used to measure performance.

“Alabama has 137 school systems. There is only one under state intervention,” Richardson said. “The other 136 took the same test and many actually have less revenue than Montgomery so I think the time for platitudes and excuses are over.”

An analysis of ACT scores shows similar shortcomings. Park Crossing is the only public high school with an 11th-grade ACT average above 14 (15.9). The average for all five public high schools is 14.9, a score that places them in the bottom 20 percent of all students nationally.

“These are the lowest student achievement scores I've seen in my 50-plus years of education,” Richardson said. “We are adversely impacting the lives and futures of thousands of students by allowing this to go on.”

LAMP by comparison has a 28.2 average ACT score.

The average ACT score for incoming freshmen at Auburn University is 27, Richardson said.

In five years, Richardson hopes to have those five high schools' ACT averages at the current state average of 18.4.

“Alabama's state scores are embarrassingly low. We're among the bottom in the United States and I hope you can't stand that either. But if you're at the low end in one of the bottom states, we can't tolerate that any longer,” Richardson said.

Richardson will only be interim state superintendent until May and said he hopes the plan offers stability and leaves MPS prepared for its accreditation review next school year. A

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special accreditation review will also be conducted in March.

All MCBOE members except Durden Dean were in attendance. MCBOE Vice President Lesa Keith said she was thankful for the state “finally doing something.” Mary Briers seemed taken aback by the “eye-opening” scores and said she is in “wait-and-see” mode.

“We just need to stay singularly focused on our students,” Briers said.

Arica Watkins-Smith and Porterfield were the most frustrated, citing issues with the enrollment data and taking umbrage with Richardson’s repeated claims that the board has done nothing to address the issues.

“The Montgomery County Board of Education has on many occasions endured scathing remarks. ... Let it be known the (MCBOE) went to the state department seeking assistance. The (MCBOE) was trying to find solutions to the magnitude of problems in the district,” Porterfield said. “The sad thing about it is all of this has been done in an effort of supporting Pike Road and bringing in charter schools.”