

# **‘Basically Armageddon’: Talawanda Schools faces budget cuts after levy fails**

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By L. Franks

“Okay, we’re going to do something a bit different,” said Superintendent Ed Theroux to an audience gathered in Talawanda High School’s performing arts center.

The December 15 school board meeting had begun with a presentation by TMS students on student involvement at the middle school and a safety video prepared by the high school’s broadcast journalism class. But the series of speeches brought to the public participation portion of the meeting quickly addressed the elephant in the room: tonight, the board would approve an extensive list of budget cuts in an attempt to resolve ongoing fiscal distress.

In the November election the month before, Oxford voters failed to pass an operating levy proposed by the district as a remedy to fiscal distress. Now, the district must make substantial reductions to its current spendings to compensate for the lack of property tax revenue.

As the superintendent opened the window to an agenda item marked 7D, he reminded the audience of these circumstances.

“This is not a blame game at any point in time”, Theroux said. “We understand that these are difficult discussions, difficult decisions that will go forward. We understand that we need to increase revenue, and/or decrease our expenditures, so that we can continue to operate with any fear of state takeover”.

What exactly is “state takeover”?

“State takeover” in the context of fiscal distress takes effect when a district reaches a state of fiscal emergency, which the Ohio Auditor of State website describes as “the last and most severe stage of a school district’s financial solvency problems”.

School districts struggling with debt and other budgetary issues are at risk of falling into one of three levels of fiscal distress: fiscal caution, fiscal watch, and fiscal emergency. When a state of fiscal emergency is declared by the Auditor of State, a Financial Planning and Supervision Commission is created “that may assume all or parts of the powers of the board of education” and which “develops a financial plan to alleviate the school district’s financial crisis.”

Where does Talawanda fall?

In 2021, the Oxford Observer said TSD met the criteria for fiscal watch. The next step, fiscal emergency, is declared under dire circumstances, when operating deficits for the current fiscal year exceed 15%. Talawanda's operating deficit for the fiscal year of 2022, according to Treasurer Shaunna Tafelski, is 0%. "Based on the most recent forecast," Tafelski said, TSD can expect deficits of 10.9% in FY23, 5.5% in FY24, 7.9% FY25, 10.7% in FY26, and 13.1% in FY27.

What can we expect in the coming years?

The week prior to the board meeting, the school board met for a work session on December 8 in which board members provided recommendations for the upcoming years. Following recommendations from an audit released in March, the workshop produced options A1, A2, A3, and B1 to offer time frames for how and when budget reductions would take place.

"We were making the recommendations of 75,000 next year, 1.2 million dollars the next year, 2.4 the next following year with a total of a little over \$5.3 million," Theroux said.

The district emphasized in public Q & As leading up to the November election that Talawanda is not comparable to neighboring districts due to unique demographics, and that it provides a number of services and programs not required by the state of Ohio. Now, as the board reviewed its recommendations for the next three years, Dr. Theroux warned the audience: "We are moving toward state minimum."

Reductions in the 2023 spring semester

At Theroux's recommendation, the board voted on Option A1, which called for spring extracurricular pay to play fees of \$500 at THS and \$250 at TMS and the elimination of extracurricular busing. The motion to approve Option A1 failed, bringing forth Option A2.

Option A2's contents differed slightly from the first: at the suggestion of board member Kathleen Knight-Abowitz, the plan would utilize funds from student activity funds of graduating classes 2006-2022 — those considered "dormant." The motion to approve A2, seconded by board member Patrick Meade, passed with three votes.

Dr. Knight-Abowitz's dormant student funds plan would reduce spring pay to play fees to \$170 for THS and \$85 for TMS.

"I did that largely because I really have a problem with instituting pay to participate for athletes and musicians whose families have already made plans," Knight-Abowitz said.

In total, the district would save \$81,709 over the spring semester.

With plans now in place for the remainder of the 2022/23 school year, the board moved to pass Option B1. The plan listed over 70 targets for budget reductions in the next three school years, categorized by the year each would take effect.

Inside the three year plan:

After approving a three year plan at the December 15 board meeting, the district's website

posted a reformatted version of the B1 Budget Reductions. The new pdf made several disclaimers about the current decision, stating that the list is subject to change and will be “reviewed regularly”, and that “collective bargaining agreements, negotiations, Ohio State law, and federal laws must be followed as we make revenue and expense decisions.”

School board president Patrick Meade reiterated similar points near the meeting’s end.

“Year one is going to be pretty set,” Meade said. “But we will have time to come back after we see what happens on the ground — if we’re saving more or less — and look at year two and say, can we move some things back?”

He added that it’s possible savings could be more effective than what’s currently being forecasted, hopefully allowing the district to further delay reductions set for year three — “which is basically Armageddon,”

Year 1 (the 2023-24 school year) would include increasing pay-to-participate fees to \$900 per student at THS and \$350 at TMS, reducing building/department budgets by 20%, \$150,000 of curriculum reductions, and eliminating a number of positions. Projected savings for transportation and busing have not yet been announced.

#### Reductions in Force

The list called for the elimination of several positions in Year 1 — but the majority would come in Years 2 and 3. Matt Lykins, a co-president of the Talawanda Educators Association (TEA), said the union surveyed staff members in preparation for the reduction in force process.

“We surveyed the staff to try to get as much information as we possibly can,” Lykins said. “When they were hired, when they applied, when they interviewed, when the board voted on them, all that kind of stuff, but also what licensures they have”. He explained that seniority would determine which teachers were cut first within departments, and that those positions could be filled by other teachers with the right certifications.

The current three year plan anticipates the following changes in TSD staffing:

#### Year 1: 2023-24

Eliminate 2 Media Specialists \$67,579

Any NEW hires- replacing veteran staff \$100,000

Transfer 1 THS Business (staff) to TMS \$75,000

Eliminate 1 PDC Assistant \$50,091

Eliminate THS Teacher- hired through BCESC\* \$83,161

20% Reduction to 2 BOE Assistants \$27,138

\*Butler County Educational Service Center

Year 2: 2024-25

Eliminate Teaching & Learning Coordinator positions (T&L) \$125,852  
Eliminate 1 teacher elective-TMS \$57,730  
Eliminate 1 teacher elective-THS \$57,730  
Any NEW hires- replacing veteran staff \$100,000  
Eliminate Van Driver (if grant is not found) \$19,297  
Outsource Custodial Services \$262,700 Eliminate 1 Secondary SRO \$39,000  
Eliminate GIFTED teachers (coordinator stays for identification) \$201,200  
Eliminate Lunch/Recess Monitors \$50,333  
Eliminate 3 social workers \$307,097  
Eliminate 1 Foreign Language Staff Member \$62,926

Year 3: 2025-26

Eliminate Preschool Admin \$88,495  
Any NEW hires- replacing veteran staff \$100,000  
Eliminate additional teacher-elective-TMS \$57,730  
Eliminate additional teacher-elective-THS \$57,730  
Do not fill grade level chairs/departments chairs \$130,627  
Eliminate SAP positions (THS-1/TMS-1/2 ) \$167,793  
Eliminate 2 psychologists \$185,584  
Eliminate 3 elementary counselors \$290,457  
Eliminate 1 Assistant Principal \$132,574  
Eliminate 1 classified office staff per building \$122,161  
Eliminate Facilities Director- reassign duties \$105,216  
Replace 4 nurses with health aids (BCESC) \$44,000  
Eliminate 1.5 A.D. positions/secretary \$181,906

Matt Lykins also spoke on the impending reductions during the public comment portion of the December board meeting.

“While the TEA doesn’t necessarily agree with every detail of the proposal — and in fact, believes it will destroy our district — we recognize the reality that the budget must be cut,” Lykins said. “And there’s no way to do that without hurting students and staff.”

Lykins added that those things cannot be prevented, “without increased support from the community.”

Busing

Grades 9-12 will no longer receive busing beginning in Year 1. Though projected savings have not been announced, the three year plan available on the district’s website said TSD would continue to provide busing for K-8 and for special education students regardless of age, as well as a bus shuttle for Butler Tech Students.

Additionally, Theroux said the district would extend an existing one mile no transportation zone to two miles.

### Classes/Extracurriculars

The three year plan said the district would reduce curriculum adoptions by \$150,000 each year.

In Year 2, the district would eliminate STEM and Gifted teachers (except for a coordinator to test and identify students) at the elementary schools for \$63,020 and \$210,000 accordingly. It would also cut one high school foreign language class and halt all student activity extracurriculars.

By Year 3, TSD would enact the largest eliminations of classes and programs at elementary, middle and high school levels: art, music and physical education at elementary schools (along with a shortened school day), “1 more” elective at TMS and THS for \$57,730 each, Butler Tech programs including FCCLA, FFA, and career based intervention, and all remaining extracurricular activities.

In addition, the plan listed several items at the high school level with price tags and dates yet to be determined. Among these were College Career Readiness and an unnamed “core THS class”, along with a policy change to state minimum graduation requirements.

During the meeting’s public comment portion, junior Eliza Sullivan spoke about her experience at Talawanda’s schools and expressed concerns about how those might change in coming years.

“I moved here from Chicago, and I’m still friends with a lot of people from Chicago, and I’ve seen the high school experience that I might’ve had”, Sullivan said. “I understand that this levy will not be voted on again before my senior year, but it’s not too late for a lot of the community members. It’s not too late for my brother in seventh grade, and I hope we can get some more funding for this school so that other kids can have the same opportunities that I have”.

### DeRolph vs. State

In 1997, the Ohio Supreme Court asked the question of whether or not the state was successfully providing “adequate” public education and declared the state’s school funding system unconstitutional, citing excessive reliance on property tax and disparities between high and low income school districts. The state enacted legislature following the decision in an attempt to fix the issue, but the court held the new system unconstitutional on similar grounds. Between 1997 and 2002, the court issued four decisions holding that the system remained unconstitutional despite some legislative reforms.

At the meeting’s end, Theroux urged the community to push for changes at the state level.

“I will reiterate”, Theroux said, “There is a state funding problem. It is still unconstitutional. It’s a problem that we need to not turn in on ourselves, but join forces and ask our representatives and legislators for changes.”