

NC schools agency: hundreds of teachers laid off

By Emery P. Dalesio, Associated Press

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RALEIGH -- North Carolina public schools laid off hundreds of teachers and other workers again this year in a pattern that has persisted for years, the state education department said Wednesday, but the agency admitted its count of how many lost their jobs fell victim to faulty math.

School districts reported that they laid off nearly 6,100 people and eliminated 16,678 positions, many of which were vacant, between 2008 and the academic year that started last week, the state Department of Public Instruction said.

The jobs lost and vacant positions eliminated over the four-year period came while enrollment was essentially steady, rising by about 4,425 students to 1.48 million.

The survey of 113 out of the state's 115 school districts found 534 teachers lost their jobs statewide, and 2,418 education workers were cut ahead of the current school year. After questions were raised by The Associated Press, DPI retracted its earlier count after realizing the state agency failed to update data from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

The survey originally listed the district as cutting 313 teachers for the new school year. Charlotte schools revised its earlier estimate to say it's not cutting any teachers, but that updated information wasn't incorporated into the agency's initial totals, DPI Chief Financial Officer Philip Price said. He said he did not know the reason for the mistake.

Instead, Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools have added 376 teachers this year and were still looking to hire more than 70 this week, spokeswoman Lauren Bell said. The school board received \$26 million in additional cash from county commissioners after warning layoffs were looming.

The revised layoff figures show that almost as bad as this year for job cuts was recession-wracked 2009-2010, when 2,367 education workers were laid off. That year, kindergarten through 12th grade classrooms lost 975 teachers.

The totals don't include Guilford County Schools, one of the state's largest districts with more than 71,000 students, which did not respond to the survey, DPI reported. Duplin County Schools also did not respond to the survey, the agency said.

The survey of people laid off and unfilled positions eliminated is a political hot potato in Raleigh. Democrats contend state budget-cutting will hurt education.

"When you look at these numbers, it is striking to think of the impact for students. There are fewer adults in schools, more students in each class in all grades and fewer staff to help students who may struggle or need help with learning," said state schools superintendent June Atkinson, a Democrat.

Republicans, who took over control of the General Assembly for the first time in more than a

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century, have said teachers were protected from the layoffs spread across state government and any cuts were up to local districts.

GOP lawmakers have pointed to the fact that state budget cuts this year could be offset by about \$250 million in federal education jobs funds expiring next year that school districts could use this year. that money will be used during the 2011-12 school year to save about 5,000 jobs, DPI said.

State House Speaker Thom Tillis, R-Mecklenburg, said legislative oversight committees will compare predictions to results to see how much school districts and state agencies have had to trim staff in reaction to cuts in the state's \$19.7 billion budget.

"We're going to spend a lot of time evaluating whether those assessments were accurate," he said in an interview Wednesday. "We have a sincere goal of finding out if any school system was impacted disproportionately."

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