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School jobs saved in state budget

BY LYNN BONNER - Staff writer

Teacher assistants got a reprieve Tuesday as Republican leaders presented a new budget proposal designed to withstand a possible veto from Democratic Gov. Bev Perdue.

The new $19.7 billion budget deletes the deep cuts to teacher assistants that were in the earlier Senate and House proposals. The budget keeps money to hire more than 1,100 teachers to reduce class sizes in first through third grades. But local school districts must find more savings, $124 million, on their own.

The budget has the backing of at least five House Democrats, but Perdue and state education leaders were quick to call the rewrite little more than a shell game that drains public schools and universities.

Republican leaders, however, touted their plan as a protecting classrooms while cutting spending and letting the 1-cent temporary sales tax increase expire.

"I think this is a responsible, reasonable budget to move North Carolina forward," said Senate leader Phil Berger, an Eden Republican. The full Senate is expected to take a preliminary vote today.

Democrats said the budget moves money around to try to camouflage holes. Perdue stepped up her opposition in a conference call with reporters.

"What you've got in the Senate budget is just a shuffling around of money," she said. "It's a charade of sorts - trying to paper over the devastation to education and other important programs by using one-time money."

The new proposal includes significant rewrites of the $19.4 billion plan key Senate committees approved last week.

To keep more money, the Senate budget gets rid of the proposed individual income tax cut proposed last week.

The budget also takes back $72 million the Senate proposed last week to send to local school districts for construction.

Ann McColl, the State Board of Education lobbyist, said the $124 million in cuts comes on top of more than $300 million already built into the budget
that local districts will lose. That amounts to $429 million local school districts will have to return to the state, she said.

"Some of the really tough decisions about positions and job losses are just being passed down to the local level," she said.

**Shifts to local level**

According to the state Department of Public Instruction, Wake schools would have to cut $42.3 million, Durham County schools, $9.4 million, and Johnston County schools, $9.5 million.

Perdue's budget also shifted some state education expenses to local school districts, making school bus replacement, payment of workers' compensation claims and lawsuits local responsibilities. GOP budget writers did not go along with those suggestions.

House Speaker Thom Tillis, a Mecklenburg County Republican, said Perdue's rhetoric does not match the budget numbers. The difference between the Perdue proposal and the legislative plan for total education spending on K-12 public schools, community colleges and state universities is a few percentage points, he said.

The GOP budget does cut assistant principals, school clerks, janitors, guidance counselors and other school workers, reductions Democrats say would not be needed if Republicans agreed to keep at least part of the temporary sales tax increase.

Perdue said the budget needs more money in it, but would not say whether she would veto it.

"There are a lot of moving parts to this whole thing," she said.

Rep. Jim Crawford, an Oxford Democrat who worked on the budget deal, said he hopes Perdue doesn't veto the budget. He has not decided what he'll do if she does.

"That's a little ways down the road," he said.

Staff writer Craig Jarvis contributed to this report.

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Study: Public universities leaner now than in 2001

By Daniel de Vise

A new report from a higher education association finds that public universities are leaner now than at the start of the last decade, with fewer staff members and fewer faculty per 100 students after multiple years of state funding cuts.

Public universities overall had 21.1 staff per 100 students in the 2009-10 academic year, compared with 22.9 staff in 2001-02, according to the report from State Higher Education Executive Officers.

Staffing declines seemed to be steepest among the roughly 100 schools in the Carnegie classification “research, high activity,” a group of schools smaller in research scale (if not in size) than the top research institutions. Schools in that group went from 45 staff per 100 students in 2001-02 to 40 staff in 2009-10. Staffing changes in other categories of schools, including the top research schools and non-research institutions, were comparatively smaller.

Staffing declined in the early years of the last decade, then rebounded from 2003 to 2008 before declining again in 2009 and 2010, after the downturn.

Part-time instructional staff held steady in the time period studied, but full-time instructional staff declined by 9 percent, from 4.6 to 4.2 per 100 students. Employees less-directly involved with students, including clerical and administrative workers, saw comparatively larger declines.

The report is more about identifying trends than reaching conclusions. But its authors politely note that public universities face conflicting forces: pressure from state governments to operate with less money on the one hand, and pressures from the Obama administration to increase completion rates on the other.
Norm Shafer/ FOR THE WASHINGTON POST - James Madison sophomore Anna Wilson works on a Wikipedia-related assignment for a class called "Professional and Technical Editing.”

Wikipedia goes to class

By Jenna Johnson

A Virginia Tech graduate student hit save on her overview of the state workers’ compensation commission one spring day, but before her professor could take a look at it, someone else began deleting entire sections, calling them trivial and promotional.

It wasn’t a teaching assistant on a power trip — it was a Wikipedia editor known only as “Mean as custard.”

“I had worked on it for almost an entire day,” said Amy Pearson, a public administration master’s student. “It was kind of shocking.”

This school year, dozens of professors from across the country gave students an unexpected assignment: Write Wikipedia entries about public policy issues.

The Wikimedia Foundation, which supports the Web site, organized the project in an effort to bulk up the decade-old online encyclopedia’s coverage of topics ranging from the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976 to Sudanese refugees in Egypt. Such issues have been treated on the site in
much less depth than TV shows, celebrity biographies and other elements of pop culture.

Many students involved in the project have received humbling lessons about open-source writing as their work was revised, attacked or deleted by anonymous critics with unknown credentials.

In the fall, Rochelle A. Davis, an assistant professor at Georgetown University, told undergraduates in her culture and politics course to create a Wikipedia page about a community they belonged to, then use that research to develop a thesis for an academic paper.

“Collectively, they were the best papers I’ve ever read at Georgetown,” Davis said. She said students benefited from vetting their ideas with a wider community — a practice that could help academics at all levels. “This is where we are going,” she said. “I think that’s a good thing.”

In the fall semester, nine professors were involved. There are about three dozen now. By next semester, the foundation hopes to expand to schools in India, Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom. The goal is to train at least 10,000 professors and students by 2013.

The total number of participants in the volunteer project is about 600. But in April alone, that group contributed 2.9 million characters worth of information, which would fill nearly 2,000 traditional printed pages.

“The outcome is just amazing,” said Frank Schulenburg, the foundation’s head of public outreach. “We have a much larger number of professors who are interested than we ever expected.”

Still, Wikipedia and academia make an odd pair. The “free encyclopedia that anyone can edit” has long had an uneasy relationship with professors who dedicate their lives to filling scholarly journals and libraries. In their eyes, Wikipedia is an unreliable cheat sheet.

“I start every semester with the typical speech: ‘If you are turning in a paper and cite Wikipedia, then we have a problem. We need to talk,’ ” said Matt Dull, who is Pearson’s professor at Virginia Tech. But this time, he gave that speech and followed it with the Wiki assignment.

As the Wikipedia catalogue has grown to 18 million entries in more than 270 languages, the site has become one of the leading ways much of the world learns about new topics, double-checks memories of past events and settles bar bets.
Professors such as Dull are starting to see Wikipedia as an opportunity to educate a massive audience on the specialized topics their students research. Most college papers are read by a handful of people, at most, while a Wiki entry can be read by thousands (or millions) around the world.

“It’s the ability for students to feel that their works matters, that it doesn’t get trapped in the classroom,” said Adel Iskander, a Georgetown instructor who assigned Wiki entries in his graduate-level Arab media course. “We’re kind of challenging the academic establishment, in a way.”

To the uninitiated, writing for Wikipedia can be intimidating. There are complicated rules for what can be an entry and what counts as a reliable source. The language must hew to a neutral point of view. Writers also must learn how to add technical code to display their work properly on the Web.

To help students and professors, the foundation recruited a network of experts to organize campus workshops and answer questions via e-mail or online chats.

As students create the content, instructors must find a way to grade it. By the end of the term, the typical student has already received help — or headaches — from a host of Wiki editors. Automated Web tools known as bots have scoured their work for grammatical and coding errors.

“We had so many people, from God knows where, scold them for things that they have done and praise them,” said Cindy Allen, a technical writing and editing instructor at James Madison University who assigned two classes to write Wiki entries. “It’s really a different thing.”

Some professors have sifted through the editing histories of their students’ pages to pinpoint what they wrote. Some have simply given participation grades. Others have asked students to convert their entries into traditional term papers.

Some students walked away with an understanding of how to evaluate the quality of a Wikipedia page. Others found themselves contributing more to Wikipedia — just for fun.

“I got really sort of addicted to it,” said Jeff Reger, a Georgetown graduate student. “At this point, when I hear of something new, I find myself wondering, ‘Oh, I wonder what that Wikipedia page says.’”
Gillian Spolarich's college search played out like a romantic triangle. She was set on American University. But the College of Charleston was set on her. The Southern suitor sweetened its admission offer with a pledge of more than $10,000 in merit aid.

In the end, the high school senior from Silver Spring took the better offer from the second-choice school in South Carolina, placing price before prestige.

It is becoming a common scenario post-recession: Affluent applicants, shocked by college sticker prices and leery of debt, are choosing a school not because it is the first choice but because it is the best deal. Students are using their academic credentials to leverage generous merit awards from second- or third-choice schools looking to boost their own academic profiles. Colleges are responding with record sums of merit aid, transforming the admissions process into a polite bidding war.
The average student at a private college last year reaped a 42 percent discount on the published tuition, according to an industry survey, a historic high. Admission experts say more colleges use merit awards to lure strong students who might not otherwise attend, including those who could afford to pay full price.

Private institutions spent $2,060 per student in 2010 on aid to families without financial need. That category of aid has increased by half in 10 years in constant dollars, according to the College Board. Public colleges, too, trade in merit aid: They spent $410 per student on aid “beyond need” in 2010, a 37 percent increase in 10 years.

In addition, experts say, a significant amount of merit aid is given to other students. But the total is hard to quantify.

Price has always been a concern in choosing a college. But experts say there is a tradition among many upper-middle-class families — those with six-figure incomes and little hope for need-based aid — of finding the money to attend the most selective school that offers admission, whatever the price.

That is changing, admissions counselors say. Today, even privileged families are questioning the wisdom of paying $50,000 a year for college, especially on an institution that lacks the pedigree of a Harvard or Yale.

“Even if you have money, $200,000 is still a lot of money,” said Lisa Sohmer, director of college counseling at the private, college preparatory Garden School in Queens, N.Y. “The thing to remember is, there are extraordinary educations to be had at colleges that cost all different kinds of money.”

Spolarich, 18, seemed a natural fit at American. Its Northwest Washington campus is close to her Montgomery County home. Its strong communications program beckoned to the senior, an editor at the Blake High School Beat student newspaper. She was one of many AU applicants representing the top 5 percent of their high school class.

The College of Charleston was a more impulsive choice. Spolarich visited the campus while driving to Florida with her mother, drawn to the colonial charm of Charleston and its 18th-century public college, one of the nation’s oldest.

Spolarich soon learned that, with her 3.85 unweighted grade-point average and 30-plus ACT scores, she was just the sort of student the College of Charleston aspired to attract. Her numbers, unremarkable in the AU
applicant pool, stood out at Charleston. AU wanted her. Charleston seemed to want her more.

“They were straightforward at the beginning that if she applied, and if her numbers were what she had written on the [information] card, they would be able to make her a very good offer,” said Audrey Spolarich, Gillian’s mother.

The wooing intensified when Spolarich returned to Charleston in March for Accepted Students Weekend. In the honors college, Gillian would enjoy smaller classes, interdisciplinary study, preferential housing and first dibs on registration. She met the college president.

“It was really crazy how friendly everyone was,” she said.

The college offered her enough aid to lower the total annual bill from about $34,000 to about $21,000, effectively erasing the financial penalty for Gillian as an out-of-state student, Audrey Spolarich said.

AU had offered no aid. Tuition, fees and living expenses total about $50,000 a year, typical for a first-rank private university. The Spolarich family did the math. Even with two solid incomes (Gillian’s father is chief financial officer for a federal agency, and her mother is a strategic development consultant), someone would have to postpone retirement to cover the cost.

“And then, I don’t know, my mom and dad were just like, ‘I can’t pay for this,’ ” Gillian Spolarich said. “And I was like, ‘I know, this is stupid.’ ”

Merit aid, uncommon 30 years ago, has grown into a dominant admissions tool at hundreds of private and public colleges seeking top students.

“They’re looking to improve the profile of the class to give themselves bragging rights,” said Douglas Bennett, president of Earlham College in Indiana.

Of course, colleges also have long steered scholarships to athletes and others with special talents.

Most aid is still need-based. But admission experts say colleges increasingly use grant dollars as a tool to attract good students, needy or not. The full extent of merit aid is hard to gauge because schools define it in different ways, said Haley Chitty, spokesman for the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.

A few dozen of the most selective colleges offer financial assistance only for need, an arrangement they deem more equitable. But then, those schools can
attract top students without merit aid, said Amanda Griffith, an economist at Wake Forest University.

Hundreds of other colleges favor merit aid, offering packages that can cover most or all of the cost of an education. Schools manage the expense by passing it along to the students who pay full price. Merit aid is thus partly responsible for the steep tuition increases of the past 20 years.

Spiraling aid has caused financial trouble for some private colleges. For college applicants, on the other hand, it has spawned a buyer’s market. High-achieving students can reap steep discounts at colleges with strong reputations for undergraduate education.

“We’re getting calls back from families saying, ‘We’re getting this much from another college. Can you match it?’ ” said Joseph Urgo, president of St. Mary’s College of Maryland, a public liberal arts college that competes with private institutions.

St. Mary’s charges $25,000 a year in in-state tuition and living expenses, half the price of some competitors. But some of them are willing to bridge the gap by offering tuition discounts of 60 or 70 percent.

“We’re wasting billions of dollars nationally competing for kids,” Urgo said. “But we can’t stop it.”

Some schools package merit awards with admission to elite programs and other perks. This is “another level of merit aid, where you’re not just getting the money, you’re getting the special attention,” said Sally Rubenstone, a senior adviser at the college admissions Web site College Confidential.

Samantha Shevach of Queens chose the public University of Delaware over Penn State, her first choice, because of merit aid.

Shevach was a strong applicant, with an A average at Mary Louis Academy, a Catholic college preparatory, and high SAT scores. She had always wanted to go to Penn State and applied to Delaware as an afterthought.

Penn State offered admission, but not aid. “It was $43,000 a year,” she said. “So expensive, even for a state school.”

Delaware deemed Shevach a top prospect. The school offered $20,000 in merit aid and a spot in the honors program. At an event for admitted students, she met other honors recruits who had turned down Ivy League schools.

Shevach said she chose the Delaware school for the sake of her parents.
“They said that they would have paid for Penn State,” she said. “But I didn’t want them to be $160,000 in debt. You need to think about the investment you’re making: Are you going to get that $160,000 back?”

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College grads' gowns going green
By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY
May 31, 2011

America's colleges, where recycling is hip, are turning another green leaf: sending off their graduates in caps and gowns made from eco-friendly materials.

Some students are picking up diplomas in gowns made from recycled plastic bottles (they're actually quite soft), and others are using ones made from wood pulp.

More than 250 institutions have ordered the attire this year from Virginia-based Oak Hall Cap & Gown, up from 60 in 2010, says vice president Donna Hodges. She says it takes an average of 23 plastic bottles to make each GreenWeaver gown set.

A handful of U.S.-based companies, seeing bottom-line green in the eco-conscious world of higher education, have entered this booming market within the past three years. Some donate a small fraction of the proceeds to participating colleges.

• Minneapolis-based Jostens makes graduation gowns out of wood fiber from sustainably-harvested North American forests. "We're seeing a significant increase in demand," spokesman Rich Stoebe says, though he declined to detail the sales numbers.

• Omaha-based Willsie Cap and Gown sells a GreenGown made of the same resin used in plastic bottles and reuses the fabric if it's returned. Sales are up 300% from a year ago, says the company's Steve Killen.

Some say being green costs more green.

Richard Spear, owner of American Cap and Gown, a New Jersey-based distributor, says the new gowns often cost much more than the polyester ones he sells for about $30, and most colleges still have students buy rather than rent them. "College bookstores are there to make money," Spear says.

Last week in Fairfax, Va., George Mason University graduated 7,392 students in the GreenWeaver gowns, which Hodges says typically cost $4 to $5 more than traditional ones.

"Some students suggested a (gown) swap" but since it was the first year GMU used the green gowns, it wasn't able to start one, says Karen Eiserman, merchandise manager at GMU's Bookstore. She says the undergraduate gown set costs $49.98, same as last year's
polyester ones, and a 25-cent donation included in the price goes to the campus's Greening Initiative.

Andrew Reid says he hasn't worn his gown since his 2009 GMU graduation and probably never will again. His take on the situation, posted on Facebook:

"They would be even more 'green' if we could sell them back!"
Do Today’s Grads Have a ‘Sense of Entitlement’?
By Krishnan Anantharaman
May 26, 2011, 10:18 AM ET

In a Wall Street Journal commentary piece titled “Don’t Wear Flip-Flops to the Interview,” career counselor Adam Friedman writes that parents ought to do a better job of prepping their children for the job search, including such basics as how to dress and behave:

What is surprising is that most parents spend thousands of dollars on SAT preparation for their college-bound children, but little or nothing for job preparation. Most graduates with liberal arts degrees have no clue as to what jobs they are suited for and have little idea of what skills they need to land the job they want. More perplexing is the all-too-common scenario of the grad who is bewildered by the many options and doesn’t know where to begin the job search.

Lack of focus is another issue. One applicant for a public relations firm was asked by the human resources manager at the firm why he wanted to enter the field and his response was, “It beats flipping burgers.”

Mr. Friedman follows his anecdotes with a standard-issue, bulleted list of tips for graduates and the parents helping them. Find your passion, develop a network, perfect your resume (Typos are bad, kids!), etc., etc.

But he winds up with a broadside on an entire generation of job seekers. Quoting a recruiter for a Fortune 500 company, he writes:

“Today’s crop of graduates is as bright and easily as accomplished as their predecessors. What’s different is their attitude about finding a job. They have a sense of entitlement that suggests that we need to impress them, not the other way around.”
It’s easy enough to dig up a second-hand flip-flop anecdote to make a point, but we wonder about how much this generation’s job prospects are being shaped simply by perceptions and stereotypes.

Job seekers, do you get the sense that you’re being judged before you walk in the door? Recruiters and hiring managers: What evidence are you seeing of this “sense of entitlement”? Is it any worse than in previous generations, when the goof-off son of an executive would be a shoo-in for an internship? Shouldn’t employers be trying to impress their job candidates, too?