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Legislators need to fight for our students, schools

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Prince George's legislators will face a stern test of their commitment to the county's children and continued progress in its schools when the General Assembly convenes in special session on Oct. 29.

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Gov. Martin O'Malley has called the session to deal with a looming deficit of \$1.7 billion in the state budget next year. This risky maneuver follows his failure to reach consensus with legislative leaders on a package of spending cuts, tax increases and revenues from slot machine gambling to fill the budget gap.

For Prince George's, the stakes couldn't be higher.

The governor's plan, rolled out over several weeks in September and early this month, would realize its greatest savings by freezing spending on direct state aid to the public schools for two years.

How is a freeze a cut, you ask?

The Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act, passed by the legislature in 2002 to implement the recommendations of the Thornton Commission, ratcheted up state spending on the public schools by \$1.3 billion over a six-year period, ending in the current fiscal year. Subsequently, the law requires that the amount of aid be adjusted annually to reflect increases in the cost of providing education, estimated at 5.2 percent in fiscal 2009 and 2010.

The projected deficit is based on a budget that includes the inflation adjustment, thus, freezing education spending nets substantial savings for the state — almost \$188 million next year alone, counting some other forms of direct aid the governor would cut.

As the biggest recipient of state aid, Prince George's County public schools would take the heaviest hit: almost \$37 million next year.

Gov. O'Malley has proposed to soften the blow — and fulfill a campaign promise — by phasing in the Geographic Cost-of-Education Index, a feature of the Thornton plan that his predecessor, Robert L. Ehrlich, and the General Assembly refused to fund over the past five years. The GCEI was designed to provide extra help to counties where the cost of goods and services is higher. In Prince George's case, that would amount to about \$12.5 million in the first year of a three-year phase-in of the GCEI.

Of course, there's no guarantee that the legislature, in search of additional savings and reluctant to raise taxes, will fund the GCEI. In addition, both the governor and legislative leaders have been whispering the threat that, if they can't find adequate revenues elsewhere, they might force local governments to pick up the contributions now made by the state to the teacher retirement fund.

Those contributions are expected to total almost \$318 million next year — about \$28 million in Prince George's alone.

That explains the plan by PGCPs Superintendent John E. Deasy to develop an alternative budget with cuts of \$65 million: \$37 million from the inflation factor plus \$28 million from retirement costs, with no provision for new funds from the GCEI.

Despite Dr. Deasy's assurance that, should such a scenario come to pass, he will cut "from the outside in," sparing as much as possible programs that serve students in the classroom, the impact of such cuts could be devastating.

Like King Canute commanding the tide not to rise, Gov. O'Malley cannot simply freeze the cost of education. Rising prices for energy, textbooks, supplies and health care will take a big bite out of school budgets, as will raises promised

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to employees under collective bargaining agreements.

The Thornton Commission anticipated such threats to the value of state education aid, which was why the inflation factor is mandated in the Bridge to Excellence Act.

Make no mistake about it: Eliminating the inflation adjustment, even for only two years, would inflict real and permanent cuts in state education aid — something that was not done even in difficult fiscal circumstances under the Ehrlich administration. That would constitute a breach of the promise made by state government in 2002 to adequately fund the public schools, as required by the Maryland Constitution, and an abandonment of the Thornton plan.

We are at a critical juncture for all Maryland students and schools, but especially those in Prince George's. To meet the ever-higher standards imposed by the No Child Left Behind Act and the pending requirement that students pass the Maryland High School Assessments to receive a diploma, we need more state education aid, not less.

The members of the Prince George's House and Senate delegations are key to passage of any deficit reduction package. They need to hear from county residents that we expect them to stand up for our students and preserve the hard-won progress our public schools have been making.

David Merkwowitz, executive director of the Prince George's Business-Education Alliance, Hyattsville.