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Cutting School Year in South Carolina Being Considered

The state House's top budget writer believes cutting 10 days out of South Carolina's school year could save \$210 million and help ease an \$800 million deficit. Whittling down the 180-day school calendar is just one of the ideas House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dan Cooper offered after his panel's first meeting, months before members begin writing a \$5 billion budget for the fiscal year that begins in July.

"We'll probably have to do something like that," Cooper said. The suggestion drew an immediate objection from a state education official, who said it also cuts learning for children and goes in wrong direction. A 180 day school year is the norm nationally and the Obama Administration has called for more class time, not less in the nation's schools, said Pete Pillow, a spokesman for the state Education Department.

He also noted that it takes away 10 days of teacher pay and adds 10 days more for parents to find care or activities for their children.

"You're talking about an economic hit. You're giving 50,000 teachers plus other folks in schools 10 days less pay when you're trying to revive the state's economy," he said.

Cooper also is considering eliminating popular and far-reaching Medicaid programs that aren't mandated by federal law and combining all the state's cultural agencies, such as libraries, museums and arts programs, into a single entity.

"You'll probably see some programs that won't be offered anymore," Cooper said. "I look for us to have to combine some agencies - the smaller ones," Coopers said.

The state's Medicaid program is short \$350 million to maintain current services.

Cooper said closing that gap could mean eliminating \$100 million in optional programs for elderly, disabled and poor people, including extra prescription drugs, hospice care and assistance to stay in their homes. It is likely to provoke a wide public backlash reminiscent of last year when deep cuts were threatened for programs serving the people with disabilities.

Cooper said his staff and the state Department of Health and Human Services are reviewing reduced payments to doctors. The agency says cutting doctor reimbursements by 10 percent could save \$100 million and notes the state is the only one in the nation where legislators have barred reductions to reimbursements.

"We've got to look at those where we've locked those in," Cooper said. Cooper isn't sure legislators are prepared for the public onslaught over health care budget cuts.

"I understand what it means - what's coming - when you do drop those optional programs," Cooper said. "I don't know there's a real choice."

Other choices involve tax law changes, but the GOP-dominated Legislature has no appetite for anything that would increase revenues.

Cooper said he doubts proposals to overhaul the state's tax system - discussed for more than a year and now being finished - will go anywhere in the Legislature. "I don't know that it will help this budget process," Cooper told the panel.

Those proposals would only be taken up after the budget clears the House.

"If anybody is willing to introduce them," Cooper said.

That's because they're a complex mix of increases and decreases that leave legislators open to charges they've raised taxes, Cooper said. "You've got to be willing to put your name on that and suffer the consequences in an election cycle," Cooper said after the meeting.

Source: by the Associated Press, published on News Channel 6's website.

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