

Teachers battle budget crunch with their own money

Hannah Martin is in her second year as a pre-kindergarten teacher at Salem Elementary School in Apex, N.C. The 23-year-old makes about \$34,000 a year and in her spare time takes as many babysitting jobs as she can get.

Martin, who rents a room in a house she shares with four other women, said the work outside her classroom is necessary if her students are to have the school supplies they need.

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"I only have \$100 from the school for the whole year to buy supplies, and it's not enough," Martin said.

"I do the babysitting to help get money to buy toys and books," said the North Carolina native. "I even had to buy shelves and a stool for the kids to stand on to wash their hands at the sink. I spent about \$500 on supplies last year, and It definitely hurts my own pocketbook."

With school budgets across the country slashed, Martin is part of a growing number of teachers spending more of their own money for school supplies, according to a recent survey from insurance firm Horace Mann, which focuses on products for educators.

The problem has reached near-crisis levels, especially in states like North Carolina.

"We're letting our teachers know how rough the situation is," said Eric Moore, a fiscal accountant at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. "We've only got about 35% of our past budgets for supplies this year."

"After the Great Recession, decisions were made to cut supply funding instead of teaching positions, and we're still facing that lack of funding," he said.

'Some of these kids don't even get breakfast'

According to the Horace Mann survey, 53% of respondents said their budgets for classroom supplies have been cut. General items, including paper and pens, top the list of materials not covered sufficiently by current budgets, followed by math and science tools, then reading material.

The survey said that 26% of the 814 teachers participating spent \$400 of their own money on supplies last year—that's a 3 percentage point increase from 2011 in the number of teachers spending that much.

"It has gotten worse for us ... especially since we haven't received a raise in seven years," said Mallori Lucas, a reading and language arts teacher at Union Township Middle School in Valparaiso, Ind.

"Of course we're not forced to spend our money. But some of these kids don't even get breakfast before they come to school, so we buy them snacks and treats," said the single mother of two teenagers.

'Forced to pick up the slack'

Increasing numbers of teachers also are going online to seek financial donations for items including pens, paper or computers. Others seek supplies for specific projects, such as field trips or science fairs.

"We've had a 30% year growth from last year in the number of requests from teachers," said Charles Best, CEO of DonorsChoose.org, an online nonprofit charity group that matches donors and teachers for supplies and projects.

Horace Mann is among the contributors to teacher projects on DonorsChoose.org.

"It's clear that the reason for the increase is that so many teachers have to use their own money these days," Best said. "That's especially true in the lower-income school districts."

Pooling resources

With only 9% of total K-12 education funds coming from the federal government, most

money for schools comes from state and local funding.

But continued cuts — and low spending even at prior levels — are forcing officials to be creative, said Moore at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

"What we're trying to do now is to pool supply resources among school districts as best we can," Moore said. "It's a top issue for us to try and make sure the kids get the supplies they need."

California students may be a bit luckier. In an email to CNBC.com, the state's superintendent of public instruction, Tom Torlakson, said, "I appreciate the great sacrifices teachers make by taking money out of their own pockets for supplies for their students, especially after years of budget cuts that will soon be alleviated by the governor's budget and passage of Prop 30."

Proposition 30 was the state tax increase passed by California voters last November. In June, the Democratic-controlled Legislature passed Gov. Jerry Brown's budget calling for a \$38 billion increase in education spending for grades K through 12.

'Want the best for the kids'

While expressing hope that the situation may improve, some envision only darker days ahead.

"I don't see how this gets any better," said Lucas at Union Township Middle School. "Cuts keep happening. It's too bad, because this is such a great school."

"I see how this affects my kids," said Hall at Donald E. Suburu Elementary. "They don't always have the tools to learn. It's always been a problem, but it's much worse now. California's budget should help us, but other states won't benefit from that."

Martin at Salem Elementary said she isn't digging as deeply into her own pocket this year.

"I bought a lot last year, but items like Velcro and magnets that will last longer," she said. "I keep receipts, but I'm afraid to look at what I've spent."

"We're all doing the best we can, and we're not complaining. We just want the best for

our kids," Martin said. "There are other things I could do with my life, but I love teaching. It's in my blood, so I'll continue to do what I can for the kids."

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