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Buses to roll to rally in Hub

School backers say no to cuts

By **Jacqueline Reis TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF**

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Massachusetts Stand for Children, the local branch of a national children's advocacy group, will hold its first statewide rally for education funding Wednesday on Boston Common, and Central Massachusetts residents will have a prominent role.

Fresh off a School Committee vote to close four elementary schools because of dropping enrollments and scarce funds, Worcester's contingent is expected to include about 200 parents and community members on several buses. Holden is sending its own bus, and representatives from Oxford and Leominster are also expected to attend.

Glenn R. Gaudette of Holden, who founded the community interest group Holden for Children, and 17-year-old Margaret D. Dawidczyk of Oxford, who is student council president and the student representative on the Oxford School Committee, will be among the speakers at the rally.

"A lot of kids really want to get the most out of their education, and they feel they're just not getting it," Margaret said. For instance, the 623-student Oxford High School, she said, has only one Advanced Placement class.

The rally's organizers hope to persuade legislators to restore state education aid to 2002 levels, adjusted for inflation and enrollment. That would mean adding approximately \$400 million to the budget proposals for fiscal 2007, said Meg Ansara, Massachusetts state director for Stand for Children. The state ranks 34th in education spending as a percentage of personal income, according to Stand for Children.

Worcester Mayor Timothy P. Murray, who is sponsoring one of the buses to the rally, said Worcester sorely needs additional state aid.

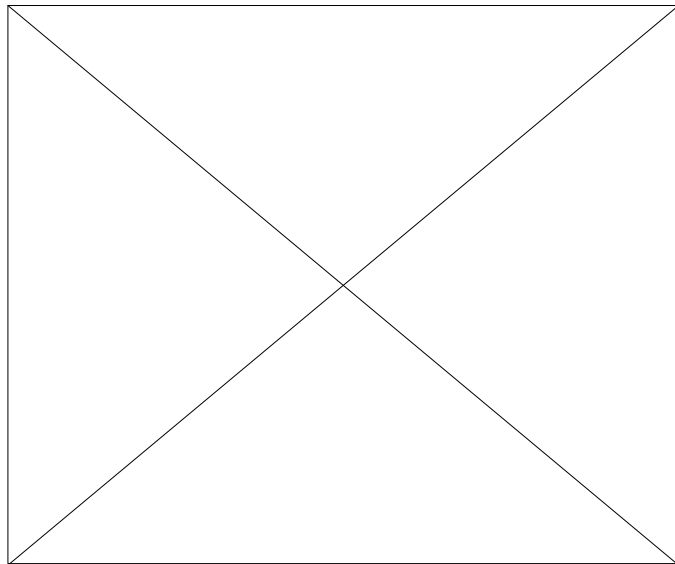
"We're going to do our part on the city side to increase our contribution, but it's not going to be enough," Mr. Murray said.

"The governor and legislators and people talk about surplus," he continued. "The surplus has not yet materialized for our schools."

Worcester's proposed cuts for the coming school year include 62 teaching positions, middle school and freshman sports, and arts consultants.

Dawn Johnson, co-chairwoman of Worcester's Citywide Parent Planning Advisory Council, said she plans to bring a sign to the rally saying "Shame on you."

"No sports in the middle school? Thirty kids in the elementary school classes? There's something wrong," Ms. Johnson



said.

Worcester School Committee member Joseph C. O'Brien agreed.

"We're closing schools and ending programs," he said. "Parents and people who care about public education need to make a really strong public statement about why we need more funding for our schools."

Besides generating more money for school districts, Worcester School Committee member John F. Monfredo said he hopes the rally will encourage legislators to reconfigure the Chapter 70 funding formula and make funding more predictable for districts. Fellow committee member Brian A. O'Connell said he hoped the rally will bring attention to other funding-related items, such as how to pay for charter schools and School Choice.

The rally is drawing a variety of community members, said local activist Kevin Ksen. Neighborhood groups in conjunction with Worcester Interfaith were already organizing around the School Department's proposed cut of \$263,000 in local funding for after-school programs, and the rally fit in naturally with their goals, he said.

Participants will meet with their elected representatives before the rally, which coincides with the Massachusetts Association of School Committees' annual Day on the Hill. Worcester rallygoers will meet with the Worcester delegation in Room A2 of the Statehouse at 11 a.m. before the one-hour rally, which starts at 12:30 p.m.

Stand for Children is based in Oregon. The Massachusetts affiliate has advocated for Proposition 2-1/2 override votes in individual towns, helped Lexington adopt an indoor air quality policy, and worked on school nutrition issues. The national organization's executive director is Jonah Edelman, son of Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund.

There is still room on two of the Worcester buses for residents interested in going to the rally. For more information, contact Dawn Johnson of the Citywide Parent Planning Advisory Council by e-mail at worcesterparent@aol.com.

For more information about the rally, go to www.standforchildren.org.

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