School money may be cut, new Ariz. Senate leader says

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The next president of the Arizona Senate says spending for the state's elementary, junior and senior high schools will have to be on the chopping block when lawmakers act to keep the state budget in the black.

"Obviously K-12. That is the biggest component of the budget," Bob Burns said when asked during a Tuesday panel discussion what would be targeted for spending cuts.
Democratic Gov. Janet Napolitano and her allies in the Legislature largely fended off reductions in school funding when the current budget was enacted, but circumstances are changing.

The state now faces a projected $1.2 billion shortfall in the budget year that ends on June 30. A bigger shortfall is anticipated in the next budget.

Also, Republicans picked up additional legislative seats in the Nov. 4 election and Napolitano could be gone from the scene soon if, as expected, President-elect Barack Obama appoints her as secretary of the Department of Homeland Security.

Spending on K-12 schools accounts for $4.1 billion of the $9.9 billion budget, according to the Joint Legislative Budget Committee staff.

Most of that spending is protected from cuts because of a 2000 school funding law approved by voters.

However, that protection does not extend to all school spending. Exceptions include supplemental funding for special categories of students and per-student dollars provided for technology and equipment.

Burns did not specify what education programs could be targeted for elimination or reduction. But he said lawmakers and the public need to understand that state funding for education has increased by double-digits in recent years.

"There is no way that even in a strong economy in Arizona we can continue to spend at that level," Burns said. "We have overspent, obviously significantly overspent."

Rep. Steve Yarbrough, a Chandler Republican who spoke at the Valley Citizens League event on behalf of House Speaker-designate Kirk Adams, agreed that "at least some K-12 education (spending) is going to have to be there because of the magnitude" of the budget problem.

"We're not going to like the medicine," Yarbrough added.
House Minority Leader-elect David Lujan, D-Phoenix, said some temporary spending cuts will be necessary but he declined to identify any in particular.
However, he said it would be shortsighted to cut education.

"Let's protect education as much as we possibly can," Lujan said. "When we do come out of this downturn, that's the one thing that's going to keep us strong and safe