Arizona school districts will avoid steep budget cuts that threatened to cripple the rest of the school year after the state Senate on Monday approved a resolution that raises the education spending cap.

The 23-6 vote caps more than two months of public angst over the issue, and comes with just a week left before the required March 1 deadline.

Combined with last week’s approval in the House, Monday’s action means the schools can spend the $6.1 billion in their collective budgets that lawmakers approved last June. If lawmakers had rejected the increase, each school district would have to cut their budgets by 16%, or a combined $1.2 billion.

The vote was hard-won, as it took Senate President Karen Fann, R-Prescott, a week to marshal the minimum 20 Senate votes needed to raise the constitutional spending cap.

Six Republicans voted against the move, complaining the public schools continuously demand more money even as the GOP-controlled Legislature has added billions in spending since recovering from the Great Recession.

"All we get is, 'We need more,'" said Sen. Vince Leach, R-Saddlebrook, portraying the public schools and their advocates as ungrateful recipients of Republican-driven spending. He voted no.

Sen. Michelle Ugenti-Rita, R-Scottsdale, echoed Leach’s frustrations.
"More money, more money," she said.

Funding is not the major issue facing school districts, she said. Instead, it's waning trust in a system that she said has traumatized students and parents with ever-changing rules on COVID-19 restrictions that have closed schools, forced remote learning and isolated children from their classmates.

All 14 Democrats, joined by nine Republicans, voted in favor of the measure, Senate Concurrent Resolution 1050.

"This is one of the most important votes we'll make this year," said Sen. Sean Bowie, D-Phoenix. He dedicated his vote to the five school districts he represents, saying they faced a collective $154 million loss unless lawmakers acted.

**Does spending limit need an update?**

Senate Minority Leader Rebecca Rios, D-Phoenix, welcomed the affirmative vote, but criticized Republicans for dragging it out until the final week for action.

The aggregate education limit, she said, is "antiquated, arbitrary and outdated" and does not reflect the reality of school needs in the 21st century. It's unfair to argue that lawmakers have been overly generous with school spending when that spending is measured against a 40-year standard.

Voters added the spending limit to the Arizona Constitution in 1980, with annual adjustments for inflation and student enrollment growth.

Fann, who voted with the majority, urged lawmakers to now turn to a longer-term fix for the spending limit, which schools are already projected to exceed in the next school year.

“Let’s not do this year after year after year," she said, as the sometimes acrimonious debate ended. "Let’s come up with a bipartisan solution."
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When the limit was created 40 years ago, she said, there was little technology, no Chrome books or other costly education innovations.

Democratic lawmakers have proposed legislation to either update the aggregate limit or scrap it altogether, noting that each school district already has its own spending ceiling.

Sen. Kelly Townsend, R-Mesa, was the only senator to not vote. She had an excused absence. Sen. Juan Mendez, D-Tempe, who has stayed away from the Senate out of fear of exposing his newborn child with the coronavirus, came to his Senate office to vote in favor of lifting the spending cap.

With the measure having passed both the House and Senate with the needed two-thirds vote, the measure becomes law. The governor's signature is not needed. The House approved the measure last week on a bipartisan 45-14 vote.

Reach the reporter at maryjo.pitzl@arizonarepublic.com and follow her on Twitter @maryjpitzl.

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