

State Budget Cuts to Education



What's at Stake for Lamorinda's Schools?

By Andrea A. Firth

(Contributing: Lee Borrowman)

Members of the Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) Governing Board were not celebrating a “happy” new year as they convened last Wednesday for the first time in 2008 and listened to a sobering budget presentation by Chris Learned, Assistant Superintendent, Business Services. Learned reviewed Governor Schwarzenegger’s proposed budget cuts to education and outlined preliminary estimates of the decrease in state funding that the District could expect. “The proposed budget is the most devastating budget proposal that I have seen since Proposition 13,” reported Jim Negri, Superintendent of AUHSD, in his newsletter to the community. “Draconian,” “Bleak,” “Bad, really bad,” were all words used by school administrators across Lamorinda over the past week to describe the state’s proposed budget as they worked ardently to determine the repercussions of the cuts on their budgets and to their stakeholders.

The Governor’s budget proposes to eliminate over \$4 billion in funding to schools in the next year, which translates to a loss of over \$2.7 million in revenue for the Acalanes Union High School District in 2008-2009 according to Learned. This projected budget reduction equates to a loss of \$489 per student in AUHSD. In addition, AUHSD projects categorical programs such as class size reduction, counseling, and special education will be reduced by another \$60 per student.

The situation in the Moraga School District looks no better. Pre-

liminary estimates reveal that the district faces a funding reduction of \$582,000 less than what was projected for 2008-2009—a loss of \$342 per student below projected revenue and \$162 per student below the current year’s funding level. These amounts do not yet reflect the impact of the anticipated federal funding reduction to categorical programs and special education.

In Orinda, Superintendent Joe Jaconette says, “Our preliminary review of the Governor’s budget cuts would leave the District short around one million dollars next year.”

Lafayette Superintendent Frank Tom has preliminary estimates as well, but says the Governor’s budget proposal has “a lot of different pieces,” so it’s hard to confirm at this point what the actual numbers will look like. He meets with his Budget Director and Cabinet this week to further assess the situation, and stated unequivocally, “It’s definitely going to impact all school district programs.”

“This is not business as usual this year,” said Superintendent Negri at the recent AUHSD Governing Board meeting.

Even the current school year budgets may be jeopardized by the proposed cuts. Although the Governor’s budget proposal indicated that a \$360 million reduction in current school year funding was expected to come from a redirection of savings from categorical programs, this may not be the case.

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“School Services of California [an organization that advises schools districts on fiscal issues] has suggested that the state may not be able to recapture the full amount that they need,” explained Moraga School District Superintendent Rick Schafer. “...there may be a .5% midyear cut to our revenue limit funds. Again, we do not know if this will happen. We guesstimate this amount to be in the neighborhood of \$50,000 if it was to occur,” he added.

Learned of AUHSD was working on similar assumptions for the current school year budget, “Not good news there. That’s about a \$190,000 this year to this District’s revenue limit.”

Orinda would be short this year in the range of \$60K -\$95, according to Jaconette. The district held a special board study session last week to discuss the budget and the financial options. “We will be planning for the worst case that we know at this time,” Jaconette confirmed.

At this point in the school budgeting process the final fiscal picture remains hazy. “There are still a lot things to play out,” noted Superintendent Negri in discussions with the Governing Board. “We are working off the Governor’s proposed budget,” he added. “We have to. Whether it comes out that way, we won’t see for a while.” Although some things may change or be clarified with respect to the budget and education funding as the state legislature begins to tackle the issue over the next few months, the Governor’s May Revision will provide the next major budget update, according to Negri.

Despite the murky picture, school administrators throughout the area moved quickly to begin to identify areas to be reduced and ways revenues could be increased to offset the expected funding shortfall.

Assistant Superintendent Learned has already met with the AUHSD Budget Advisory Committee, which is comprised of parents, students, teachers, and staff, to brainstorm ways to reduce. “One of the things that keeps coming up is our energy costs. What can we do to be more energy efficient in this District? But that’s hard to measure,” explained Learned. “And 86% or maybe a little less of our budget is salaries and benefits. So it’s unavoidable for the District to not affect people of this District,” he added.

Superintendent Schafer is also planning to meet with members of his District to get input prior to the development of final budget recommendations. “We need to plan now, but no decisions can or should be made until the budget really begins to take shape in May,” added Schafer.

Enrollment is another factor affecting Lamorinda schools budgets. According to Learned, enrollment has been in decline in

the Kindergarten thru 8th grade schools districts for the past few years and that decline is now affecting AUHSD. He is projecting enrollment of 150 fewer students across the District next year. “We would have been compressing our budget anyway. Some our lost revenue is due to enrollment decline,” Learned noted.

Moraga School District also faces a declining enrollment trend and the related decreased revenues but Superintendent Schafer cautioned, “As we look forward, we must balance spending reductions with our mission of educating all students. However, the cuts away from the classroom must be carefully analyzed and thoroughly explained before we take action.”

When asked what the school community can expect over the next school year Superintendent Schafer responded, “Any and all reductions will have an impact. Prioritizing where and what to reduce can become contentious and leave stakeholders uncomfortable at best and angry at worst. For the next six to eighteen months our entire educational community will need to practice the Lifeskills of cooperation, flexibility, patience, and problem solving at levels never before imagined.”



Acalanes High School in Lafayette