



Lamorinda Schools Face Tough Budget Decisions

By Andrea A. Firth

Since Governor Schwarzenegger announced his proposed cuts to education funding back in January, administrators, educators, and parents throughout Lamorinda have spent countless hours in meetings and discussion trying to determine the best way to manage through the current school budget crisis. “Obviously budgeting is on everyone’s front burner,” explained Superintendent Jim Negri when he addressed the Acalanes Union High School District Governing Board at their most recent meeting. The Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD), which encompasses three high schools in Lamorinda (Acalanes, Campolindo, and Miramonte), and the kindergarten through 8th grade school districts in Lafayette, Moraga, and Orinda each presented preliminary budget scenarios to their Boards and stakeholders over the past two weeks.

AUHSD

The Acalanes Union High School District faces a loss of \$3.3 million in State revenue for the next school year. This revenue deficit includes \$2.75 million less in revenue limit dollars—the Districts main source of funding—and about \$550,000 less in categorical program funding which includes monies for class-size reduction, special education, instructional materials, and professional development. At the School Board meeting held on February 20th, Assistant Superintendent Chris Learned outlined a “worst case scenario” budget that included the elimination of 46 positions across the District. Although many of the positions at risk are not full-time, the staffing cuts would affect certificated teachers, special education staff, and classified and administrative employees.

Some of the budget shortfall will be offset by a \$1 million donation commitment from the District’s Parent Clubs and Education Foundations. “This will help to cover counseling, libraries, and some categorical program reductions,” stated Learned. The additional non-personnel reductions proposed included cuts to the District office, curriculum development, fiscal services, human resources, and the popular Summer Institute—a continuing education program for teachers. “This is painful,” stated Board member Vanessa Crews as the budget presentation concluded. At the next School Board meeting, budget adjustments and staff reductions will be presented for the Board to vote upon.

Lafayette School District

The financial impact of the State revenue cuts will leave Lafayette School District \$1.74 million short for the 2008-2009 school year. By freezing spending and budget planning that includes program reductions and staff cuts, Superintendent Frank Tom hopes to keep Lafayette’s budget balanced. The District held two budget study sessions in January and February to solicit community input regarding the budget dilemma and to help set spending priorities.

Lafayette’s School District is also actively exploring ways to boost revenues. “Two [School] Board representatives and I have met with the Presidents of the parent groups to ask them for financial support in preserving many of our exemplary educational programs that are at risk of being reduced or cut,” stated Dr. Tom. “Board representatives and I will also be attending parent group meetings at each school site to talk about the State budget crisis, its negative impact on the District’s programs, and asking them for financial support. A Board representative and I have also met with LASF [Lafayette Arts & Science Foundation] to request financial support from them. Over the next couple of weeks, our collective goal is to develop a coordinated and focused fundraising plan with our parent groups and LASF to preserved our programs and to minimize lay-offs.”

Moraga School District

Moraga School District’s budget reduction target for the 2008-2009 school year is \$937,000. To that end, Superintendent Rick Schafer presented the Moraga School District Governing Board with a laundry list of potential budget cuts last week. Schafer had recently held a Budget Advisory Meeting with representatives from the District’s Teachers and Classified Employee Associations, PTAs, and Education Foundation to review and prioritize the list of possible cuts. Regarding this process, Schafer noted, “We are working from the outside then moving inward. We are employing a model that starts as far away from the classroom as possible.” The list ranged from reductions for nonacademic expenditures such as cleaning and groundskeeping to the elimination of administrative positions, classroom aides, counseling services, and classroom teachers. Through attrition and job shares, Schafer hoped to be able to avoid eliminating some teaching jobs.

Although the exact amount of the education funding reduction has yet to be finalized by the

State, Districts are required to announce any potential cuts to staffing for the next school year well in advance. “Release notices have to go out by the 15th [of March] establishing the legal process that positions may or will be eliminated,” explained Schafer the Moraga’s Governing Board.

“I do believe that the District will make every effort to keep the cuts as far away from the classroom as possible,” stated Mary Ellen Viboch, President of the Moraga Teachers Association. “But we won’t really know until May or even over the summer what some of those true cuts are going to look like,” she added. “[My] colleagues are worried. They’re frustrated. We just don’t know anymore. We are working on a wait and see basis at this point.”

Orinda Union School District

Despite the fact that the Orinda Union School District (OUSD) faces a \$1 million loss in State funds next year, staff reductions are not expected. “Through cost-savings and [staff] attrition we are trying to keep whatever cuts we make as far away from the classroom as we can,” stated OUSD Governing Board President Pat Rudebusch. “We really want to preserve the programs that we have in place and avoid doing layoffs.” Cost savings and staff attrition are projected to cover almost half of OUSD’s revenue deficit. “In addition, we have gone to the Parent Clubs and the Education Foundation (EFO) and asked them to contribute to help make up the budget shortfall,” stated Rudebusch. The Parent Clubs and EFO have been asked to increase their financial support by \$400,000 to \$600,000 for the next school year.

Although the budget crisis has consumed and at times overwhelmed the local Districts, there still seems to be some hope among administrators that the State cuts will not go quite as deep as originally outlined. “I still anticipate that the Governor’s budget will change dramatically over the next few months and additional funding will become available,” stated Superintendent Schafer. Chris Learned noted that Legislative Analyst Liz Hill recently presented the Governor with an alternative budget that would limit the education funding deficit and cuts to special education. “My feeling is the cuts will not be any deeper [by May], and I hope that the Governor and the Legislature seriously consider Liz Hill’s suggestions,” stated Learned.