

Superintendents' Forum—the Budget Discussion Continues

By Andrea A. Firth



(L to R) Superintendents Rick Schafer (Moraga), Joe Jaconette (Orinda), Frank Tom (Lafayette), Patricia Wool (Walnut Creek), and Jim Negri (AUHSD). Photo Andrea Firth

The Las Trampas Creek Council of PTA's sponsored a Superintendents' Forum last week providing parents in the area with the opportunity to talk to and ask questions of the top administrators from the kindergarten through 8th grade school districts in Lafayette, Moraga, Orinda, and Walnut Creek and the Acalanes Union High School District. Although the discussion questions included topics such as enrollment, equity and parity, staff development, and differentiation, 90 minutes later the only subject covered was the budget crisis and the pending cuts to education spending.

Jim Negri, Superintendent of the Acalanes Union High School District, stated the public education funding picture bleakly, "We have to do our [school] budgets based on the State's January budget. That generated thousands of layoff notices in schools throughout California...The projections are still very bad for next year and the year after."

Rick Schafer, Superintendent of the Moraga School District reiterated Negri's sentiments and added, "We may handle this year's budget problems. But, unless we make some changes, take a long range view, and begin having some serious discussions about

structural reform, we will continue to have budget problems one, two, and three years out from here."

Lafayette's Superintendent, Dr. Frank Tom, concurred with Schafer's prediction that the currently proposed cuts to education funding would impact school budgeting for several years. Although Dr. Tom, like his colleagues, is working to minimize the effects of the budget crisis through cost savings and revenue enhancements, he stated, "I have to be realistic with employees that this will go on for at least two to three years."

Dr. Joe Jaconette, Superintendent of the Orinda Union School District, brought some legislative insight to his comments from his prior experience in government relations and, as he described, stalking the halls in Sacramento. "The legislature has to hear from constituents. Armies of people have to do this and to serve as a constant presence [in Sacramento]. It has an impact."

"When the pie gets smaller, the first thing to go is table manners," stated Schafer with one of his many euphemisms of the evening as he described the efforts of groups in Nevada and Arizona who are aggressively trying to recruit teachers away from California. Schafer went on to explain

that in addition to the loss of existing teachers, the budget crisis has a real potential to discourage students from going on to careers in education which will lead to a drain on talent in schools in the future. Negri noted that this same effect applied to school administrators. "This will lead to a major leadership void [in schools] across the state," added Negri.

When asked by a concerned parent to distill the education message to be communicated to legislators down to one sentence, the Superintendents were consistent in their responses. "We're fighting for education's economic future right now," stated Dr. Jaconette. Dr. Tom responded with just two words, "Adequate funding." And Negri added, "Public school is an investment that we can not afford to cut."

Although the gravity of the budget situation remained a constant theme throughout the night, Schafer tried to close the discussion with a positive thought. "One thing about all of our Districts is that we are trying to make the cuts as far away from the classroom as possible," said Schafer. "Important things will go, but you're going to get the best that we've got."