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AUHSD Prepares for Dramatic Budget Reductions

By Cristina Kim

The Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD), which includes Miramonte, Campolindo, Acalanes, Las Lomas, and Del Oro, is one of the top ranked high school districts in all of California. But the AUHSD has been heavily affected by California's current budget crisis. The Governor's proposed budget creates a \$4.8 million deficit for the school district in the 2010-2011 school year. As a result the AUHSD Board is having to take extreme measures to balance the budget, such as cutting seventh period, electives, closing a school site, and laying off teachers, counselors, and other staff.

On February 3rd, the AUHSD Board held an open meeting to address the financial crisis. The closure of Del Oro High School and the reduction of "Particular Kinds of Service", i.e. the reduction of district staff by 56.9 positions, were the meeting's major deliberations. The small boardroom was packed with concerned teachers, parents, and students.

At the meeting the school board voted to close Del Oro High School. AUHSD Superintendent John Stockton explains, "The proposed closure of Del Oro High School is especially upsetting due to the exemplary efforts and successes of the school. This decision is a result of the state education budget cuts and the costs associated with operating a small school." Del Oro, the district's alternative high school, has a total of 65 students and costs \$650,000 to operate annually.

Del Oro has provided an alternative education for students whose needs were not met at comprehensive schools. The school's closure will deeply impact students, who must now undergo a difficult transition into a new school or individual study plan, as well as teachers and counselors.

Del Oro's co-principal, Rae Eckholm, remains strong and optimistic. In a letter to Del Oro parents after the meeting, Eckholm states, "Our students have been given challenges at Del Oro, which they met and even exceeded...now, we must ask them to take the challenge to make an adjustment to another school setting. But please, rest assured that they will not do this alone. Our motto of 'one kid at a time' will still apply. We will discuss educational options and will put together a transition plan that will best suit the needs of each student."

The closing of Del Oro was not the only difficult decision the Board had to make at the meeting. The Board also voted to reduce the number of teachers, counselors and classes offered in the district. Currently, 85% of the district's budget goes to personnel costs, making layoffs necessary in order to address the budget deficit. Approximately 67 employees will be receiving notices by March 15 with final notifications by May 15, 2010. In addition to these lay-offs the number of periods a student may take and the variety of courses from which students can choose will be limited.

Students recently turned in their course choices for next year, without the benefit of a seventh period class and in the likelihood that they may not their first choice classes. In addition, popular extracurricular classes are likely to be cut. According to Associate Superintendent Chris Learned, "Leadership, journalism, and yearbook could all be high priority cuts. The AP (Advanced Placement) classes won't be entirely cut but they are likely to see significant reductions in class offerings."

Students from all of the AUHSD schools came to the meeting to defend leadership, journalism, and AP courses. The students, including some seniors who will not be impacted by these changes, passionately argued the numerous educational benefits of the at-risk programs. The Board agreed with the students' points, but ultimately had to make decisions based on the financial capabilities of the Acalanes Union High School District.

In spite of the evening's somber decisions, there may yet be hope for the district. Learned explained, "The Governing Board approved calling a \$112 per parcel tax election for May 4, 2010. The parent clubs and foundations are working hard on obtaining donations. They provided \$800k this year to save counselors, librarians and leadership classes."

If approved, the parcel tax and the additional monies raised by parents could change the scenario, but for now the budget seems to have beaten the high school district; lay-off notices are being sent out and Del Oro will close at the end of this school year.

Del Oro High School

Del Oro High School was founded in 1967 to provide an alternative education for students that were not benefiting from the education provided at comprehensive high schools. In 2009 it was named a Model Continuation High School. California's Continuation High Schools were created in 1919 to focus on school-to-career education and provide an individualized space for students that are at risk of not graduating. Del Oro's largest graduating class was in 2008 with 40 seniors. Most Del Oro graduates go on to community college, 4-year colleges, the military, trade school, or full time work.

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