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Deficit Spending Continues for Local High Schools

By Cathy Tyson

At a recent Acalanes Union High School District governing board meeting in Lafayette the budget update for the 2015-16 school year included a "budget adjustment target of (negative) \$3,103,000 to maintain a positive fiscal outlook and balanced budget in the district." What's not immediately clear is that "budget adjustment target" is a euphemism for anticipated deficit.

The total projected spending for the next school year is slated to be \$62.783 million to provide an education for students at Acalanes, Campolindo, Miramonte and Las Lomas high schools as well as the Acalanes Center for Independent Study.

This will be the second year in a row of red ink for the district, after logging a \$5.5 million deficit for the 2014-15 school year. To address the current shortfall, the district has a hiring and spending freeze in place to reduce the size of the deficit.

Overall it's been a rough transition to the Local Control Funding Formula, or LCFF, which started with the 2013-14 school year. LCFF is a new statewide funding formula that replaces the old system of general purpose funding from the state based on complex historical formulas. Districts receive more money for high-needs students based on counts of low-income, English learner and foster youth students. The problem is that the AUHSD has very few students who fall into those categories and the base funding level is inadequate.

In this first step of many to craft a budget for 2015-16, the district is actively looking at local and state revenue options to fill the gap, including Parent Club and foundation resources, community support, facility use fees and adult education consortia. In addition, there's an assumption that LCFF revenue will grow due to projected increased tax revenue from the state and projected enrollment growth.

"This district is not going to be fully funded by the LCFF," said AUHSD Superintendent John Nickerson. In March and in May of 2015 the district anticipates getting more complete financial information to further refine the budget.

While noting the uptick in state revenue due to a robust economy is a "pleasant surprise," according to the superintendent, even with an anticipated bump in LCFF funding, that still leaves a projected \$3.1 million problem for the 2015-16 school year.

On the table for consideration to address the shortfall is reduction in maintenance and operations, possible anticipated retirements, and potential cuts or elimination of adult education programs.

In addition, Associate Superintendent of Administrative Services Kevin French was looking at master scheduling options and outlined a new framework for electives. Typically, students get their first choice of elective; he proposed a shift in how the master schedule is built so that students may have to go with their second choice elective. It is possible there will be 10 fewer elective sections in 2015-16, said French.

He also said he thinks it's possible to make slight classified instructional assistant reductions at each school site for the next school year. There's a specific multi-step protocol, if need be, to make reductions in certified employees or teachers.

"We have to do everything we can," said board member Nancy Kendzierski on the belt tightening.

"This is distressing for a lot of people," said new board member Bob Hockett, a former teacher. "I didn't think we'd be talking about this at my second meeting." The governing board is legally required to adopt the annual budget on or before July 1.

Complaints About Sex Ed Instruction

Although there's usually an element of drama when discussing district budgetary concerns, during the public comment portion of the AUHSD board meeting quite a number of opponents and supporters came out once again to share their opinions about the district using Planned Parenthood instructors to teach a comprehensive sex education course that includes discussing HIV/AIDS prevention. The district has used Planned Parenthood as a consultant for over a decade. Parents are given notice of the course and can request their students opt-out.

A group of passionate citizens, including representatives from NOISE (No to Irresponsible Sex Education) urged the school board to remove Planned Parenthood as the provider of sex education instruction, claiming the organization "promotes certain behaviors and promiscuity." Another person commented that "it comes down to prayer; sins exist in the world, sins of the flesh." Another commented, "Religion has no place in school. Whatever happened to separation of church and state?" Citing a marked drop in teen pregnancy, a parent of two teenagers called improvements in comprehensive sex education including contraceptive use "incredible news." The topic will be on the governing board's agenda in April or May; in the meantime, if the item is not on the agenda, governing board members are prohibited from addressing the issue.

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