

Long Beach, California school board votes for deep cuts

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The California budget recently worked out between Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the state's Democratic-majority legislature will cut \$8.6 billion from education, including \$5.4 billion from kindergarten through 12th grade. School districts across the state are scrambling to cope with this massive reduction in funding.

The situation unfolding in Long Beach, California is a microcosm of what is happening to educational systems in medium-sized cities throughout the state. The budget cuts being implemented in this school system, which cover everything from staffing to supplies to programs, are being replicated elsewhere across the state.

Located along the Southern California coast, the city of Long Beach is known as the "International City." Its economy, which is based on shipping, tourism, aerospace and other industries, is especially sensitive to international economic developments. Import-export traffic through the Port of Los Angeles/Long Beach, site of 40 percent of US container traffic, has slowed drastically. With other industries in the doldrums as well, the state's 5th largest city (population 492,000) has seen its revenue base shrink.

Long Beach's international character is also due to the fact that it is the most ethnically diverse city in the US, with significant numbers of Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, African Americans and other groups represented in the city's population. This fact poses special challenges for the city's educational system, and a variety of programs have been developed to meet the needs of Long Beach's mixed immigrant and non-immigrant residents. The Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) is California's third largest.

Translated to the local level, the state education cuts come to \$24 million for the LBUSD. That is, approximately, a 15 percent reduction in funding this year, with further cuts slated for next year.

A public input meeting of the Long Beach Board of Education held March 30 highlighted the grim prospects the

city's students and parents face. LBUSD Superintendent Christopher Steinhauser explained the school board's predicament, which has actually been going on for several years.

Over the last five years, the school system's budget has been cut by over \$120 million out of \$720 million. "We are taking huge hits," remarked Steinhauser.

Despite the fact that federal stimulus money is supposedly coming to the state to offset some of the recently enacted budget cuts, and Governor Schwarzenegger promised recently that these funds would not be diverted to shore up other parts of the state treasury, among educators there is skepticism that this money will ever reach the school system.

In view of the state's budget crisis and the likelihood that more than \$50 million more may be cut from the LBUSD budget in the future, Steinhauser said, "We're not counting on any stimulus money until we see it."

LBUSD Chief Business and Financial Officer Kim Stallings did a power-point presentation of an analysis of the 2008-09 and 2009-10 state budgets carried out by the Association of California School Administrators and released on February 20. The analysis divided school programs into three tiers "for purposes of protecting some and providing flexibility to others"—in other words, for the purpose of deciding which programs will be preserved and which will be wiped out.

The tiers go as follows: Tier I: "No funding reduction, no program flexibility, no statutory requirements waived;" Tier II: "Funding reduction of approximately 15 percent from 2008-09 previously enacted levels, but no flexibility, and programs are to be operated according to the current requirements;" Tier III: "Funding reduction of approximately 15 percent from 2008-09 levels, but with maximum flexibility to move funding to any educational purpose (including to unrestricted General Fund)."

The word "flexibility" is a term used by bureaucrats to avoid stating realities in plain language. Cutting through the terminology, Tier III programs are those that are the most

vulnerable as, in addition to having their budgets slashed, they can also be eliminated entirely if it is determined that those funds are needed to shore up the budget elsewhere.

The Tier III list is a long list indeed, with Adult Education, Arts and Music Block Grants, Community-Based English Tutoring (CBET), Bilingual Teacher Training, and American Indian Education Centers included among its 40-plus programs. Among Tier II programs are Adults in Correctional Facilities, Apprenticeship Programs, English Language Acquisition Programs and Foster Youth.

Tier I includes such programs as Child Development, Child Nutrition and Special Education. Tellingly, it also includes Proposition 49 After-School Programs. Prop 49 was a 2002 ballot initiative spearheaded by Schwarzenegger and used by him as a springboard into California politics. Though it increased funding for after-school programs, it did so by diverting funds from other programs in the state's general fund.

Despite the division of school programs into "tiers," there is no guarantee that should the budget crisis accelerate those in the supposedly more protected tiers would not be axed.

Among the proposed cuts that Stallings mentioned were a hiring freeze, a spending freeze, reduced use of substitute teachers, reductions of summer school offerings and reductions in middle school sports programs, which were already reduced last school year. Cuts in special education, office services personnel, custodial positions, staff development, counseling programs and campus security were also proposed for the chopping block.

The March 30 meeting saw a number of teachers and parents pleading with the board not to eliminate one of the programs likely to be axed—Camp Hi-Hill outdoor education program, which, since 1948, has provided fifth grade science classes in an overnight camp setting. The highly successful program has drawn praise for its positive effects on students' test scores, self-esteem and interpersonal skills. Its elimination would slice \$945,000 from the budget.

When the school board convened again on April 6, among the speakers during the open microphone period was an 8-year-old student who urged the board to retain the Hi-Hill Camp program. However, shortly afterward the board agreed 4-0 that the Hi-Hill program would be suspended for the foreseeable future, along with cuts in middle school sports programs.

Since the tone of the discussion among board members had been one of uncertainty about the future of other programs and personnel positions—or rather, the likelihood of more cuts down the road—the attendees did not appear particularly reassured by board member Jon Meyer's claim that Hi-Hill is "a jewel in the crown" and that "the jewel will come out of the vault some day soon and be back on our

crown."

Other teachers and educational employees spoke out at the April 6 meeting, entreating the School Board not to enact various cost-saving measures.

A special education worker urged the board not to switch to roving evening custodial crews to replace school-based crews. She cited the experience of other school districts that switched to the mobile evening crew system, a move that resulted in chronic problems, including lack of cleanliness, supply shortages and delayed repairs of plumbing malfunctions.

A teacher in the Long Beach School for Adults older adult program stressed the importance of the program's outreach to senior citizens in nursing homes, senior centers and convalescent facilities throughout Long Beach, and the negative impact that cutbacks would have on the quality of life for older participants, many of whom have few or no other means of social interaction and intellectual stimulation.

At the meeting, the School Board announced the elimination of more than 50 non-teaching positions. Among these are 35 custodial jobs. Central office staff and assistant principal positions were also slated for reductions. \$2 million in discretionary money that schools utilize for field trips, supplies, technology and professional development was lopped off as well. Cuts have apparently already been made in central office staff and phone service, such that callers will now get voice mail instead of talking to staff.

At one point, LBUSD Superintendent Steinhäuser stated that the board "tried to spread the cuts around," but that "this is just part one," and more cuts were slated. Steinhäuser, taking a "worst case scenario" approach, said that "everything was on the table" and that there would be "painful choices," since there was nothing left to trim and they had "pared the central office to bare bones."

The Teachers Association of Long Beach (TALB), which represents LBUSD teachers and other educational staff, was conspicuous by its absence, or at least by its silence, at the meeting. The only union to speak at the event was the California School Employees Association (CSEA), which expressed understanding of the district's actions and merely made a plea that "any cuts must be fair."



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