

Long Beach, California school board approves 755 layoff notices

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In response to California's ongoing multi-billion-dollar reductions in spending for public and higher education, the Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) recently authorized the sending out of 755 layoff notices, or "pink slips," to teachers, counselors, and administrative staff. The school board's move is part of the implementation of \$32.6 million in cuts slated for the 2010-11 fiscal year.

The LBUSD is preparing to make these cuts, and an additional \$50 million worth the following fiscal year, because Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's latest budget proposal calls for an \$2 billion reduction in funding for K-12 education statewide. Over the past five years, Long Beach has gutted more than \$100 million from education.

In order to issue the layoff notices, the LBUSD had to overturn its Class Size Reduction program, which put the student-to-teacher ratio at 20:1 for kindergarten through the third grade classes. Class sizes will increase from 20 to 30 students beginning in the fall of 2010. This will cover \$11 million of the budget shortfall.

Even though cuts have been widely anticipated, the school board's announcement still came as a shock to workers throughout the district, which serves approximately 87,000 students in this port city south of Los Angeles.

On March 15 the LBUSD will send out pink slips, which notify employees of a possible layoff, to 470 elementary school teachers, 41 middle school teachers, 145 high school teachers, 30 counselors, 11 social workers, 40 vice principals and assistant principals, and 17 adult education teachers. One school psychologist told the *Long Beach Press Telegram*, "Four years ago, we had 68 [school psychologists throughout the district]. To be at 45 [now]...is a substantial reduction."

On May 15 teachers will be told for certain whether they will be out of work. The final number of layoffs will depend on several factors, including retirements, resignations, the state budget, and concessions extracted from the unions.

Eight nurses and three librarian positions will also be cut due to attrition, as well as four music-teaching positions, some of which are shared among part-time workers. Other budget cuts recently announced include the elimination of elementary science and physical education programs, as well as the closure of a special one-room schoolhouse on Santa Catalina Island, which serves students in this remote area.

At the end of last school year, Camp Hi-Hill, the district's outdoor science and nature camp for fifth graders in the Angeles National Forest, was closed. It had been operational for almost 50 years. This year five of the laid-off outdoor education teachers rotated through elementary schools providing lessons in physics, chemistry, geology, and biology. But the board has ended funding for that replacement program for the coming year.

Long Beach is known as the "International City," with a large and growing population of immigrants from throughout the Pacific Rim and Central America. For decades, the district offered free adult ESL (English as a Second Language) classes through the Long Beach School for Adults (LBSA). In addition, adult school programs provide students with high school and equivalency diplomas, as well as vocational training, basic literacy education, computer skills, and a wide range of other classes for high school dropouts and others. Some programs have offered childcare for young parents.

These services are now at risk. The looming layoffs will mean that the school district will be unable to

provide the same range of courses to as many people. Even as the need for these services increases—some adult education classes currently have as many as 40 enrollees—LBSA teachers have been informed that summer sessions and night classes will likely be eliminated. Since many immigrant adults work during the day, the cutting of classes at night will critically hamper their efforts to learn English.

To address the federal and state cuts to education, the district and the Teachers' Association of Long Beach (TALB) had put forward other ways to deal with the financial crisis, all of which sought to squeeze more money out of working people. One such proposal was a parcel tax that would have levied \$92 per year on all owner-occupied houses—this is an area with an unemployment rate of 11.3 percent as of December 2009. Despite an all-out door-to-door canvassing effort, the measure was defeated on the November 2009 ballot.

Another alternative was an early retirement package offer for senior teachers, who would have received a pension only slightly better than that which they would have gotten under normal circumstances. The aim was get rid of more experienced and better paid teachers, replacing them with junior faculty at a significant cost savings.

An effort was made to shift the blame for looming layoffs onto long-time teachers who refused to agree to the early retirement offer. A major campaign ensued with mailings and the holding of informational meetings.

However, while the district supposedly needed 220 teachers to sign on in order to lessen the job cuts, only 191 did so. Many of those who refused to partake cited the layoff or expected layoffs of their spouses, investments that had gone bad, and general economic uncertainty as reasons.



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