

Casualties of budget cuts

New school and medical center in Riverside, California to remain closed

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California Governor Jerry Brown has passed a new brutal austerity budget that reduces state spending by \$15 billion, bringing it to its lowest level in 29 years. The budget cuts include billions more slashed from education, health care and other crucial services.

The cuts will reverberate in many ways throughout the state. Millions of people will find themselves without even the most minimal health care, schools will shut down, tuition will soar once again.

Among the casualties of these and previous cuts are a new high school and new hospital in Riverside, which were intended to relieve the disastrous overcrowding of the local school district and severe shortage of doctors for the region. Riverside is part of the “Inland Empire,” a desert metropolis east of Los Angeles that is beset by high unemployment and home foreclosures.

A new high school in Riverside, California that cost \$105 million to build will remain unused until the local school district can find the funds needed to operate it. Given the enormous cuts to K-12 education statewide, this may be several years, if it happens at all.

Hillcrest High School was due to open this September to relieve overcrowding at a nearby high school in the Alvard Unified School District. However, the cost of hiring new teachers and staff has proven to be too much for the school district to operate it.

The school was touted as a state-of-the-art facility with wireless Internet access, a robotics lab, a performing arts center, and smart boards in every classroom. Construction of the school began more than five years ago when the

school district voted to relieve overcrowding at the nearby La Sierra High School. La Sierra High has 3,400 students, even though it was only built to house half that number. The main classes are packed with 35 to 37 students each.

Funding for Hillcrest was guaranteed by a 2007 voter-approved bond, but the money needed to hire not only new administrators and staff, but also maintenance, exceeded \$3 million for the upcoming year. Meanwhile, it will cost \$1 million a year just to prevent the idle campus from deteriorating.

California has cut more than \$18 billion from K-12 education over the last three years. The Alvard Unified School District, where Hillcrest resides, was forced to choose between firing more teachers or keeping the new school closed. The \$130 million operating budget for the Alvard Unified School District has seen a \$25 million reduction.

According to a survey by the Legislative Analysts Office, more than half of responding school districts throughout the state reduced their instructional days in 2010-2011 compared to 2007-2008, and 30 percent reduced the school year by an entire week. More than a quarter eliminated programs supported by arts and music grants.

A University of California Los Angeles survey of high school principals found that almost three-fourths of principals reported increased class sizes, nearly two-thirds reduced or eliminated summer school, and half reported reducing the number of counselors. California has the highest student-to-counselor ratio in the country.

Democratic Governor Jerry Brown's March budget proposal included a \$2.7 billion increase in K-12 Proposition 98 spending. In reality, this increase was to reverse delays in payments to schools, so-called "deferrals." Even with the "extra" funds, K-12 Proposition 98 spending will be \$3.8 billion lower in 2011-2012 than in 2007-2008.

Health care is another casualty of budget cuts. According to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*, a new medical school in Riverside, set to open next year, may be delayed because University of California officials are unable to raise \$10 million a year for the school's accreditation.

The school, which would be UC Riverside's first medical school and the UC system's sixth hospital, was expected to open next summer. The UC Board of Regents approved the new school in 2008 to improve UC Riverside's academic standing and train physicians that are badly needed in the "Inland Empire."

There are 36 primary care physicians per 100,000 people in Riverside County, less than the state average of 59 physicians per 100,000. Sixty to eighty doctors per 100,000 are what is needed according to a 2009 study by the California HealthCare Foundation. Parts of Coachella Valley, home to a huge undocumented agricultural workforce, have doctor-to-patient ratios that would qualify as a shortage in the most impoverished countries, according to Dr. G. Richard Olds, dean of the School of Medicine at UC Riverside.

In total, San Bernardino and Riverside Counties combined have a shortage of 3,000 doctors. But this number may grow to 5,000 in 10 years, according to Olds. Now that the opening of the new medical school has been delayed, this scenario is becoming more and more likely.



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