

San Diego teachers and parents left in the dark as school district threatens massive budget cuts

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On Monday, March 25, the San Diego Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD) board held a public hearing to outline its negotiating plans with the teachers union. The Sweetwater Education Association (SEA)'s contract expires June 30.

Hanging over the proceedings, however, is the threat of bankruptcy or state takeover as the district faces a \$68 million shortfall. The source of the shortfall is in dispute, with the district mired in a series of ongoing fraud and mismanagement investigations over their accounting practices.

Two weeks ago SUHSD announced it would lay off 87 administrative support staff for the 2019-20 school year and plan to cut at least \$22.5 million dollars in the next academic year. Worried administrative staff are currently on their spring break and will be issued notices this Saturday, March 30.

The board's "public hearing" provided no specifics or documentation to the over 50 teachers, students, and community members who attended. The audience was angered at both the tens of millions in proposed budget cuts and the lack of information by the district which had merely uploaded a list of the contract's articles to be negotiated on its website, but handed out no new information.

When the meeting began, a parent spoke out. "I have been to a lot of public hearings and normally before I go to a public hearing there is information to review, but there is no information here, none at all. So to me, this is basically smoke and mirrors, it's not transparency."

She continued, "What if your bank asked you to share your opinions on changes they were going to make but they failed to educate you on the specifics? We were

told the deficit would not affect the students, yet ... now undoubtedly with the deficit you're not going to be lowering the class size.

"So what you're asking our educators to do is take on more students. What you're going to be asking our students to do is learn in larger sized classrooms." The parent challenged the board to enumerate its additional, but unspecified, cuts to special education. "When are we going to be told what these SPED changes are?"

While ending the discussion after only five minutes and failing to provide any specifics on proposed cuts, the district has already made its intention clear, calling for negotiations on a wide-ranging numbers of topics. These include: Article 5 (Alternative Education), Article 6 (Calendar), Article 7 (Class Size), Article 12 (Duty Hours), Article 15 (Extra Service), Article 18 (Health and Welfare Benefits), Article 34 (Teaching Assignment), Article 35 (Transfer), Article 36 (Wages), and Article 37 (Special Education).

Article 7, class sizes, is a primary concern among educators, as they fear both the elimination of jobs and a worsening learning environment for students. Within the current SUHSD/SEA contract, teachers can be required to teach no more than 176 students in a five-period day. For physical education teachers, the maximum is 255 students. Class sizes are limited to 12 for moderate/severe or emotionally disturbed special education students, while SPED classrooms with "moderate" students are capped at 18.

In a feeble and belittling attempt to address the concerns by teachers and community members over cuts to the SPED programs, the district is hosting a series of meetings beginning April 9 titled "Cookies with Carrie" to discuss the "future of special education

in the district.” Responding to the condescending invitation, one educator stated on social media, “What if we all brought our own cookies and then just told them that we don’t need cookies. We have our own—what we want is transparency, no bs and our input to be listened to!”

After the district announced the \$68 million shortfall last October, investigations, particularly by the Voice of San Diego news media, have pointed to millions of dollars apparently mismanaged by former Director of Finance Doug Martens and Chief Financial Officer Karen Michel.

For months, Sweetwater Union High School District officials insisted no one knew anything was amiss until revelations first came to light last September. However, multiple workers have come forward claiming they had sounded the alarm to Martens, who himself created many of the dubious entries, stating that Martens had told them “not to worry.”

District personnel unsatisfied with these non-answers went to Chief Financial Officer Michel, who also reiterated that nothing was wrong. Martens and Michel both mysteriously retired from the district over the summer.

An investigation was initiated by the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) in December 2018 by a Fiscal Crisis Management Assistance Team (FCMAT), although to date no charges have been made. However, the FCMAT’s Chief Executive Officer Michael Fine told a December 17 board meeting that 302 entries in the district accounting system had been manipulated to show that the district had more money than it actually did.

For its part, the Sweetwater Education Association is proceeding as if it is “business as usual” and doing nothing to fight in defense of teachers or students. While parents, educators and residents are up in arms over likely criminal activity and mismanagement, the union has accepted that the shortfall must be considered the basis of negotiations. It has gone so far as to oppose demands by teachers and education staff to force the board to resign and implement financial transparency.

The SEA has already colluded with the district in pushing out older teachers and blackmailing them with reduced retirement benefits, eliminating personnel in the Adult Schools and cutting other student programs. Vital programs such as English language and

workplace training classes have been eliminated.

An SEA official has already signaled the union’s foregone capitulation to draconian budget cuts, saying, “The investigation is still unfolding, until any charges, we plan to bargain in good faith.” Students, parents, teachers and educators must reject the line of the district and the unions that they should be made to pay for the corruption and embezzlement of funds and instead demand full funding for public education and all of its vital programs.

San Diego teachers must look to the lessons of the Oakland and Los Angeles teachers’ strikes, which resulted in sellout contracts pushed on the membership by the unions who function as little more than public relations staff for district administrators and the budget-cutting Democratic and Republican politicians. After the passage of these “historic victories,” nearly one third of the public schools in Oakland are slated for closure, with \$22 million in cuts agreed to by the Oakland Education Association.

Teachers and community members should form rank-and-file committees independent of both the unions and the politicians to fight any budget cuts or layoffs and conduct an independent public inquiry into the fraud allegations with full transparency. There would be an outpouring of support for such an initiative. As one educator pointedly remarked at recent SEA meeting, “This board will likely be brought up on fraud charges, why should we bargain with them, why should we accept their numbers when they’re the ones who got us into this mess?”



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