

DH 2002 5167 EI

# Teachers, music, libraries in peril as schools retrench

## Economic woes force districts into painful classroom cutbacks

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Livermore schools plan to eliminate their last remaining librarian. Berkeley may have to close an elementary school and cut 50 teaching positions. Half Moon Bay schools may do away with a popular class size reduction program, putting kindergarten and third-graders in classes of 30 students instead of 20.

California schools are bracing for painful cuts next school year caused by a mix of factors including rising employee health insur-

ance and energy costs, declining enrollment and hefty teacher raises.

Given a grim forecast for the state budget, schools are happy that the governor has at least promised \$46 billion, which provides for a 1.8 percent cost-of-living increase and cash to cover enrollment growth. But school district leaders say the governor's proposed increase won't cover their rising expenses.

"When you realize you've already whacked at the body of the

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# Schools face cutting staffs, popular classes

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system, there's not a lot of fat left," said Bob Bronzan, deputy superintendent of administrative services in Livermore. He said most cuts made in the lean early 1990s had never been restored. "Everything you cut takes something that's real. that's important."

Their budgets aren't due until summer, but Bay Area school boards have already begun hashing out proposed cuts during crowded and heated public meetings.

In Vacaville, a high school jazz band serenaded the school board outside a recent meeting to protest possible cuts to the music program. Vacaville's worst-case scenario entails \$2.6 million in cuts to its \$90 million budget.

That could mean eliminating 49 teacher, counselor, nursing and psychologist positions. It could mean a two-thirds cut in funds for accelerated elementary school programs.

"Everyone's outcry was let's have some accountability with where this money has gone to and do not punish our children and teachers for something they had nothing to do with," said Janetta McGovern, mother of a third-grader and ninth-grader.

Berkeley needs to whack \$7 million from its \$90 million budget because of state cutbacks in certain programs, teacher salary commitments and poor internal bookkeeping.

The district will close the City of Franklin Microsociety elementary school and eliminate about 150 positions — including 50 teachers. A proposal to turn the high school from a seven- and eight-period day to six periods has prompted a student walkout.

In Oakland, declining enrollment and rising medical costs could force a trim of \$15 million from the school district's \$270 million general fund. All the cuts will come from the central administration office, said Superintendent Dennis Chaconas.

He blames the crunch in part on declining enrollment, with charter schools siphoning off district students. Plus, employee medical coverage will cost the district \$4 million more next year.

Chaconas believes that the cost-of-living increase from the state won't keep top teaching talent in the district, so he intends to commit \$3.5 million more to raise salaries. That means central administrators will have to bid farewell to company cars, overtime pay and cell phones. Some mid-level managers will lose their jobs

Cabrillo Unified School District, comprising seven schools in and around Half Moon Bay, was unable to pass a three-year, \$75 parcel tax on March 5, which forces the district to find up to \$1.2 million in cuts to the \$25 million budget, said Superintendent John Bayless.

Cabrillo has no district-financed arts or music programs left to trim, so it is likely that kindergarten and third-grade classes will be increased to 30 students per teacher, up from 18 to 20. Middle and high school counselors will also be reduced, as will library technicians — who replaced actual librarians during a previous budget crunch — and custodians.

The decline in high-tech jobs dealt Livermore schools a blow. Fewer people are moving into the commuter community, which means declining enrollment and fewer per-pupil dollars than expected. Teachers got a 14 percent raise over the last two years but aren't likely to get much next year. School board leaders are moving to reduce custodial services and eliminate the last librarian position in the district, and they may offer an early retirement incentive to teachers.

"The library technicians spoke very heartily (at a board meeting), saying, 'We need somebody who understands how a school library is supposed to operate because we don't know that,'" Bronzan said. "We're just moms who want to help."

Antioch teachers were promised a 12 percent raise over three years, but now the district is using a contract clause to back out on part of the deal. Teachers have staged a protest rally, and the two sides are at an impasse.

San Francisco Unified's chief financial officer Sarah Hart said the district might need to cut back next year.

"We were able to balance the budget this year because we had a lot of one-time money," Hart said. "We hadn't preplanned for the things that the governor cut in the middle of the year, things like the energy credit."

She also expects that the sales tax revenue that normally generates as much as \$23 million a year for the district will be down by at least 10 percent.

"I'm budgeting for us to lose \$2 million in sales tax revenue, but it could be as high as \$4 million."

Hart is carefully monitoring monthly revenues, she said. If next year's cost-of-living adjustment remains 1.8 percent, and the district continues to see a decline in student enrollment, cuts to either programs or staffing are likely.

Other school districts, including Vallejo, Mount Diablo in Contra Costa County, Hayward, Jefferson Unified — south of San Francisco — Pittsburg and Sonoma County's Santa Rosa and Cotati-Rohnert Park are also predicting cuts.

Some parents and teachers have questioned why their schools are cutting on the heels of two good years in school financing. Although Gov. Gray Davis gave schools a \$1.84 billion increase two years ago — the greatest boost in two decades — school leaders mandated most of the increase to teacher raises. Teachers said they had gone without decent raises for too long, and districts hoped higher salaries would reduce the shortage of qualified teachers.

With only a 1.8 percent cost-of-living adjustment expected, and costs like employee health insurance climbing 12 to 15 percent, many schools won't have enough to pay their bills without making cuts.

While the state's budget forecast is grim — an estimated \$17.5 billion in the red — there is a slim possibility more money could be coming to schools than the governor has proposed.

Proposition 98 requires a minimum level of financing for schools that is determined by a complicated formula. Final budget figures won't be available until May, but Davis and Legislative Analyst Elizabeth Hill offer up conflicting estimates of how much California schools are entitled to next year under Proposition 98. Hill believes schools will be owed \$715 million more than Davis has indicated.

That \$715 million could be the difference between a lean year and a better-than-average school year, said Kevin Gordon, director of the California Association of School Business Officials. But even if Hill is right, schools still may not get the money. There are ways to get around putting that money toward schools, she has suggested. It's still unclear what lawmakers and the governor will ultimately decide.

March 18, 2002

San Francisco Chronicle