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Deep cuts on the table for Paso Robles schools

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Reorganizing an elementary school, laying off more employees and cutting teacher pay are among a new batch of budget ideas proposed for Paso Robles Public Schools, the district announced this week.

The proposals came after millions of dollars have already been shaved from the district as a result of state budget shortfalls and declining enrollment.

"I want to stress that this is a preliminary list and will require a lot of work before we take our final recommendations to the board," Superintendent Kathy McNamara said Thursday.

That list — which also includes class-size increases, staff furloughs and cuts to libraries, music and sports programs — is part of an effort to save the district at least \$7.4 million over the next 18 months.

"What is happening at the Paso school district is an example of what is happening statewide," said Mary Jarvis, assistant county schools superintendent. "The cuts are directly related to the reduction in revenues for schools that have occurred over the last two years."

The cutbacks on the table are the worst that one union leader says he's seen in his more than 30-year career.

"This is like a big bomb that is going to explode, and it is destroying the school system," said Jim Lynett, president of the Paso Robles Public Educators teachers union. "We have to put our heads together and discuss other solutions that may involve the community and look under every rock that we can find to seek some sort of solution."

The district asked its unions to discuss the proposals by Jan. 15 so it can bring a formal list of cuts to the school board between February and March, McNamara said.

The district approved its last round of cuts in August. That \$895,000 in savings meant fewer nurse visits and taking thousands of dollars from school and library improvement, summer school and programs to help students pass the high school exit exam.

Jarvis said school districts this year are receiving 18 percent less in revenue than what they should be getting from the state to operate. That decrease is on top of an 8 percent cut last school year — leaving districts with 26 percent less in operating funds than two years ago.

The Paso Robles district's declining enrollment is adding to its revenue loss, Jarvis said.

The district reports that it has 6,781 students this year — 90 fewer than the 6,871 it had last year.

Paso schools employ 340 certificated teachers and 325 classified staff at 11 schools.

It is unclear how many positions could be cut, but more than three dozen are on the list for possible elimination. That follows the issuing of layoff notices to 52 teachers in the spring. Of those, the district hired back 15, but not all full time.

"In the past when big layoffs happened, people would eventually get their jobs back," Lynett said. "That isn't happening now."

The union that represents classified staff, such as custodians, secretaries and other office staff, says the biggest impact may be on the students.

"There are a lot of classified positions at stake," California State Employees Association President Kathryn Nay said. "But it is our children that are going to lose with these cuts because of the loss of services, including huge hits to enrichment programs, fine arts and athletics."

"School districts are going back to the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic," she said.

Classified positions to be considered for elimination include four custodians and a district secretary, and a reduction of office staff at all school sites is a possibility.

Other districts in the county have so far been able to stave off such significant cuts, or they have already made them. Templeton Unified School District had a significant cash reserve built up that leaders there are able to use to help cushion the deficit, Jarvis said.

Bauer-Speck may lose the Bauer side

The idea that part of a longtime Paso Robles elementary school might close did not sit well with some parents on Thursday.

"This is just a great little school, a family school," mother Anna Zamudio said of Bauer-Speck Elementary — a 500-student school broken into two campuses at 17th and Vine streets.

Paso Robles Public Schools is proposing to close the Marie Bauer side of the campus — six classrooms with a playground and community roots dating back to 1887.

Bauer has kindergarten and first-grade classrooms, while the Speck side houses second through fifth grades across the street. If Bauer closes, its classes would move to the Speck side.

Administrators aren't certain when the school could close, they said, noting that the decision is not final.

Its closure is among the district's list of possible cuts being sorted out.

If the Bauer side of the school is shut down, it's not decided what would happen with the campus, officials said. Closing it would mean savings in clerical, custodian and utility bill costs totaling \$52,300.

A look at possible cutbacks at paso robles schools

- The closure of the Marie Bauer side of Bauer-Speck Elementary School at 17th and Vine streets.
- Increasing class sizes from 25 to 30 for kindergarten through third grade.
- Eliminating stipends for Paso Robles High School coaches and various extracurricular teachers.
- Cutting teacher pay by 1 percent.
- Cutting school board members' stipends by 50 percent.
- Furloughs — possibly five days in 2009-10 and eight days in 2010-11.
- The possible elimination of more than three dozen positions, including teachers, librarians, counselors, custodians and secretaries.
- Eliminating music in kindergarten through fifth grade.
- Bus route reductions.