

California School News

Budget cuts put schools ‘in crisis,’ O’Connell says

CDE survey shows local reductions across a broad range of services and operations

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell last month outlined the effects of state budget cuts on local schools at a press conference in a poignant setting—a school library that is being closed because of those state cuts.

Natomas Unified School District board member Bruce Roberts, interim Superintendent General Davie Jr. and other district personnel and students joined O’Connell at Natomas USD’s Witter Ranch Elementary School in Sacramento. Roberts, a Region 6 representative on CSBA’s Delegate Assembly, called the cuts the district has been forced to make “brutal, life-changing.”

“We’re cutting to the core with the closure of our eight elementary school libraries,” Roberts said, going on to describe other “heart-stopping” cuts, from layoffs—including 30 percent of teachers, classified staff and administrators, and all health aides—to the elimination of summer school, increased K–3 class sizes and beyond.

“A generation of students is impacted in ways that will affect their entire lives,” Roberts said.

Two of those students, student body Vice President Ashanti Norman and fifth-grader Anna-Christina Ellertson, both 10 years old, also spoke, voicing the value they placed on their education and beseeching adults to understand the impacts their actions have on children.

Schools ‘in crisis’

O’Connell, speaking first at the June 3 press conference, acknowledged that school leaders throughout the state “are making heart-rending decisions to balance their dwindling budgets while trying valiantly to keep students’ best interests in mind,” and he laid the responsibility squarely on Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the state Legislature.

“Our public education system is in crisis. These cuts hurt students and hurt California’s future economic viability,” O’Connell said. “I call on the governor and the Legislature to show the courage and leadership needed to find a budget solution that puts students first and protects our schools from further cuts.”

Responding to reporters’ questions, the state superintendent, who is termed out of office at the end of the year, said gains in student achievement over the past seven years are endangered by budget cuts.

“The Democrats have stepped up to the plate,” O’Connell said, referring to alternatives to the governor’s budget that have recently developed in the state Senate and Assembly which include provisions for new revenues. “These are the budget proposals we need to work with.”

Even the most drastic cuts imaginable, such as shutting down the University of California and California State University systems and state’s prisons, would still fail to close the state’s \$20 billion budget shortfall, O’Connell pointed out.

Dozens of categories of cuts

The state schools chief outlined the results of a survey conducted by the California Department of Education earlier this spring asking administrators in county offices of education, school districts, and charter schools how they have balanced their budgets in light of \$17 billion in state funding cuts over the past two years. Nearly 400 local educational agencies responded, representing 1.7 million students—more than a quarter of the state’s enrollment.

Three dozen categories of cuts are covered in the survey.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported reductions in maintenance, and 58 percent reported cuts in central administration costs, but most reductions carved directly into student services and classroom instruction. Fifty-eight percent reported cuts in instructional materials, for example, and nearly half reported cuts in counselors, nurses and psychologists; arts, music and drama; and classified and certificated compensation.

Easy links:

- [Read the CDE press release and survey summary.](#)
- Visit CDE’s online [Budget Crisis Report Card.](#)

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