

Opinion: State, union leave TTUSD no choice but to layoff teachers

By Steve Jennings

Financial news for school districts has taken a turn for the worse over the past month. School funding shortfalls at the state level have caused a mid-year drop in revenue for busing that will impact Tahoe Truckee Unified School District by about \$500,000 this year and \$1 million a year starting next fall.

The district had previously projected its 2012-13 budget deficit to be \$4 million; now the deficit has grown to \$5 million.

Currently the school board plans to address this deficit with \$1.8 million in budget cuts as well as spending down reserves by \$3.2 million. It is important to note that, because 80 percent to 90 percent of our expenses are in employee payroll, about \$1.4 million of the \$1.8 million will be a reduction in employment across the district.

There are two primary ways of reducing employment costs:

Reduce the amount of money being paid in wages and salaries – which must be negotiated with the district’s employee groups, or

Reduce the number of employees – which is a legal process that occurs by action of the school board.

The district is taking action to rectify the financial crunch, and the goal has been to find solutions that will have the least impact on the students. The first step is seeking concessions from the employee unions. Negotiations have not

yet begun with the classified union (non-teachers). The district and the teachers union (TTEA) have met several times this year and discussed options including salary reductions, step freeze (which would halt the automatic salary increases based on years of experience), and, as a last resort (due the effect on student class days) furlough days.

At a Jan. 13 meeting the TTEA informed the district that it was not interested in pursuing any negotiated concessions. As a result of this and the fact that we have experienced a decline in enrollment we are beginning a layoff process. This will start with school board action at the Feb. 15 board meeting. The district is still hopeful that we can work collaboratively with our labor organizations on alternatives to layoffs.

The district is not viewing the negotiation process as a win-lose situation. Instead, it is approached as an opportunity to build trust with our union leaders and provide transparency to our employees and public. Regardless of the impact of negotiations on the District's future budget deficits, the district will go on. The district will hold high student achievement and financial stability both as high priorities. How we choose to obtain success in both of these areas appears clear – be open, honest, trusting and transparent. Getting through these difficult times and still having our teachers focused on the most important work for our future is the win-win opportunity that we cannot afford to miss.

In any financial cut back, inevitably there are tradeoffs for all the stakeholders. In this case, layoffs mean budget savings but also larger class sizes and a loss of jobs.

The district continues to pursue other saving including the reduction of utility costs, increased transportation charges to families, district office and administration cuts, etc.

There is still time to find savings and lessen the impact of

revenue reductions and budget cuts. We are hopeful that will happen as we proceed through the budget process.

If you'd like to email me with any comments or questions, my email address is sjennings@ttusd.org.

Steve Jennings is Tahoe Truckee Unified School District superintendent.