

Fourth District Legislative Advocacy Communicator



FOURTH DISTRICT ADVOCACY TEAM

JANUARY 2011

Continued state budget woes

More California education funding challenges on the horizon this year

A recent EdSource report, *Challenging Times: California Schools Cope with Adversity and the Imperative to Do More*, discusses the extent to which California's state budget troubles, including the record delay in passing the state budget, have strained the ability of school districts to manage their budgets responsibly, creating financial uncertainty. (Full report at www.edsource.org/pub10-challenging-times for \$8.)

One of the key reasons why overall economic difficulties hit education harder here than the rest of the nation is that California's state government controls about 80% of the revenues that school districts receive, with over half coming from the state's General Fund, which relies on unstable state tax collections (sales and income) that evaporate during an economic downturn. Local property taxes, although down somewhat, are still a more stable revenue source, but they account for less than a quarter of total school revenues in California, as compared to about double that proportion in Texas, Florida, and New York. Moreover, California's public schools serve the country's largest student population, one that is quite diverse and faces substantial challenges.

To help keep its financial ship from sinking, the state has cut education funding and delayed allocations to school districts. As a result, about one in six of the state's more than 1,000 local education agencies have certified that they might not be able to meet their financial obligations within the next two years, including 14 that reported being close to insolvency this year.

State allocations have kept per-pupil spending below the national average, and relatively high labor costs here have



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March 21-22, 2011

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Calendar of Events

Advocacy Roundtables:

- Friday, January 21, 9:30-11:00 a.m., Fountain Valley School District Board Room (10055 Slater Avenue, FV); Governor Brown's January budget proposal and school finance issues
- Tuesday, February 16, 11:30 a.m.; Joe Mathews on Reforming California's Political System, cohosted with League of Women Voters; Red Lion Inn, Anaheim (\$ for lunch; RSVP)
- Friday, April 15, 9:30-11:00 a.m. at FVUSD Board Room

2011 Sacramento Safari:

- Monday, March 21 – Tuesday, March 22
Be sure to vote to approve your representative!
- **Orientation:** Friday, February 25, 9:30-11:00 a.m. at Fountain Valley School District Board Room

resulted in staffing levels that are nearly the leanest in the nation. Because personnel costs represent over 80% of the average district's operating costs, reducing staffing costs is almost inevitable. To add to the pressure, some costs, such as medical benefits for employees and retiree benefits, continue to rise. Another round of cuts in state funding, which is being predicted, could have devastating effects on classrooms and school sites throughout the state. Staffing ratios in California are now 48.1 per 1,000 in California, while the national average is 64.5 per 1,000.

For many districts, the need to make cuts—likely including layoffs—will continue. For districts that have already reduced their reserves and staffing levels drastically in recent years, few options remain. Already, districts have taken drastic actions to deal with fiscal difficulties, such as cutting the length of the school year or instituting staff furloughs.

Even before officially taking office, Governor-elect Jerry Brown conducted two forums to describe how serious the state's financial situation is going forward and how difficult it will be to find solutions. At the December 14 event for educators held in Los Angeles, he did not promise to protect education but pointed to the need for greater public understanding of the complexity of the problems. According to the report at Brown's summit, the state has experienced a 20% decline in Proposition 98 education funding per pupil between 2007–08 and 2010–11.

This month, Brown and the Legislature will begin their deliberations on ways to address the financial situation. It remains to be seen whether state leaders will continue to use education funding cuts and delays to mitigate the state's budget shortfall. If they do, they may risk pushing a critical mass of the state's schools to the point where financial survival takes priority over educational concerns.

Local advocacy makes the difference

While the ongoing state budget crisis will require high-level cooperation to eventually resolve, it becomes more important than ever to utilize local PTA advocacy efforts to make a difference for children, youth, and families, and to show the relevance of PTA to your local community.

Where do you begin if you're concerned about a local issue and want to do something about it? A good place to start is by having your PTA form a study committee. This will help you



gather all the facts, investigate carefully, and prepare a report for your PTA that enables your group to determine how to act on your findings with well-informed authority. When completed, a formal study will give you the clout you'll need to act effectively and with influence.

You can address matters of health, safety, education, local policies, enrichment, outreach, the arts, child care, cultural effects, school facilities, literacy, or – most effective of all – respond to a known need or problem. Some examples include addressing crosswalk or crossing guard needs; library utilization and access; advocating for more family-friendly homework policies; addressing problems involving substance abuse, media usage, language issues, and violence; establishing useful school readiness guidelines; creating meaningful after-school program options; finding better ways to keep parents informed; setting up a parent education program; safeguarding recess rights for children; ensuring proper at-school nutrition standards; or just finding out what is going on with an issue important to your community.

Accordingly, the purpose of a study may be to simply research and learn about a topic, respond to an issue, develop a resolution for presentation to your local school board or for consideration at our PTA State Convention, or to urge action to be taken by another appropriate group.

To kick off your study, ask your unit or council president to put the topic on the agenda for either your executive board or association – depending on how your organization works –



and explain why your concern is right for PTA action. Also discuss how YOU hope to be involved in the process. To form your Study Committee, your president will appoint the chairman and members of the committee, with a size manageable for your organization. Be

sure to include any PTA chairmen whose duties are related to the topic, and get a school representative, as well as any relevant community members who would help you in this area.

When your study committee has been formed, appoint a clerk to keep minutes so that your work is documented. Identify exactly what is to be included in the study, so everyone's on the same page. Decide whether the committee should simply gather information or develop recommendations for action. (This might depend on how much expertise is needed to solve a problem; there might be a clear solution, but if not, you can always suggest a different committee to come up with

Ask the Advocacy Team

If you have any questions concerning advocacy issues, please contact us at: advocacy@fourthdistrictpta.org.

Key PTA Links

www.fourthdistrictpta.org – Click on **Advocacy**

www.capta.org – Select from menu: **Programs and Services: Advocacy** and **Children's Issues: Legislation**

www.pta.org – Click on **Take Action**

recommendations.) Determine the scope of the study: How much information will be needed to reach the goals? What areas of the subject/issue will the committee try to cover? Assign responsibilities for research, giving each member of the committee a specific assignment. If it's a complex subject, subcommittees may be helpful in completing the research, especially if you're running surveys or polls. All research should be available to all members of the committee. Utilize information resources such as reliable websites, agencies, government sources, relevant experts, newspapers, publica-



tions, films. All sources should be verified to ensure the accuracy of the information – especially Internet sources; use primary sources if possible, not blogs, newspaper opinion columns, or studies that have been subsequently debunked. And don't

forget to check on your PTA sources! A great many matters of concern to children, youth, and families have already been researched and documented at length by California State and National PTA. Check out existing policies, platforms, resolutions, etc., to see if PTA has already given you the background and authority to act on an issue.

All solutions and conclusions should be listed with an evaluation of how each will affect the subject or issue. Additionally, test your solutions to see if they meet these criteria: solutions should align with the purposes and basic policies of the PTA; be expected to accomplish the desired results; be practical, using only available resources; must be in the best interest of children and youth; and completely address the matter as defined in the scope. (Watch out for proposed solutions that create other problems!)

The chairman should write the final study report, and include an appendix listing all your research sources, to give the report the weight of authority. List any recommendations for further study, implementation, or action. After review by the rest of the committee, the report should go to the executive board, and is then presented to the association. Your PTA may opt to refer the report to a different group for action. If you want your study forwarded to other PTA groups, either for action or just to share information, go through channels.

See the California State PTA Toolkit (p. 243) for details, and for guidelines on developing and implementing an Action Plan based on your study results.