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For California schools, next year stands to be worse

kyamamura@sacbee.com

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School districts already have crammed more students into classrooms, shortened the school calendar and stopped buying new textbooks.

As bleak as things are for California schools, however, next year stands to be worse.

K-12 schools and community colleges could receive at least \$2.2 billion less because of lower state tax rates in 2011, state budget analysts say. To make matters worse, many districts will have less federal aid to rely upon.

The reduction seems to be a foregone conclusion at the Capitol because the state's projected 18-month budget shortfall – as great as \$29 billion – would otherwise be higher.

So districts are bracing for another round of teacher furloughs, school closures and the elimination of programs outside the core teaching mission.

"To paint the mental picture, it's as if two people are looking over a forest of stumps, and one person says, 'Let's go get that low-hanging fruit,' " said Elk Grove Unified School District Superintendent Steven Ladd. "Well, there's not even a tree out there."

Since the recession hit, state leaders have relied heavily on education cuts to help reduce deficits. That's not only because K-12 schools take the largest share of the state's general fund budget, but also because federal restrictions and court decisions spared other programs.

In 2008, lawmakers and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger agreed to provide \$58.1 billion to K-12 and community colleges through a combination of state funds and local property taxes, the high-water mark for schools. But that funding level never came to pass, and the state since has assigned less than \$50 billion to schools.

Next year's level will drop even further, to \$47.5 billion, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office. The federal estate tax change will deepen that cut.

Gov.-elect Jerry Brown urged about 200 school officials at a Los Angeles budget forum Tuesday to "please sit down when you read the stories on the budget," underscoring the severity of cuts on the way. Several officials asked Brown to work to extend tax increases expiring next year at the ballot box, an approach he is expected to pursue.

One option under discussion is sending some of that tax revenue to local governments directly, along with new program responsibilities.

So far, school cutbacks have varied from district to district; some had strong enough reserves or property taxes to avoid the harshest effects of state deficit problems. But many had to slash programs – in particular those programs state leaders opted not to protect.

The state relaxed penalties for districts with K-3 classes larger than 20 students, so districts laid off teachers and allowed class rosters to grow. The state cut the school year minimum from 180 days to 175 days, so districts furloughed teachers and shortened the calendar by up to five days. Money once dedicated to textbooks, adult education and professional development has gone toward keeping classroom doors open.

Another \$2 billion in cuts would mean more layoffs or furlough days, said Jennifer Kuhn, K-12 education director for the analyst's office. Districts could also reduce health benefits and rethink retirement benefits, she said.

The analyst's office has recommended the state go even further by eliminating all penalties related to K-3 class sizes, removing protections for school transportation and asking voters to undo restrictions on after-school funding.

Senate Republican leader Bob Dutton of Rancho Cucamonga said schools should focus on becoming more efficient rather than continuing to ask the state for more money.

"Businesses surviving in this economy are figuring out how to deliver product for less cost and with more efficiency," Dutton said. "Government needs to do the same thing."

Dutton recommended changing tenure rules so young, high-performing teachers are not laid off first. He also said schools should be allowed to contract out for non-classroom services. Both ideas have met resistance from Democrats and labor unions.

But teachers across the state have agreed to concessions that have helped districts survive the budget crisis so far.

"Many districts have taken up to 10 furlough days, which means teachers aren't getting paid 10 days in order to save jobs and keep their colleagues working," said California Teachers Association President David Sanchez. "It's amazing how many teachers took a cut in pay to save programs."

Locally, Elk Grove teachers agreed to nine furlough days, as well as a 1 percent to 2 percent pay cut and higher doctor co-pays. The number of furlough days was so great that the district shortened the school year by the maximum five days. The district also preserved jobs and kept class sizes smaller.

San Juan Unified School District has relied on a healthy reserve to avoid pay reductions and furloughs in the current economic crisis. To deal with next year's deficit, however, district officials have proposed increasing K-3 class sizes, eliminating adult education and ending school bus service not mandated by the federal government, according to spokesman Trent Allen.

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Call Kevin Yamamura, Bee Capitol Bureau, (916) 326-5548.