



Eureka School district keeping education whole despite state's growing hole

By Megan Wood The Press Tribune

The Eureka Union School District budget is best explained by a drawing of a train on a trestle, above a gaping hole approaching the end of the tracks.

That was the image shown to attendees at two State of the District forums this week, leaving school board members, teachers and parents to ask the question, "How can education be kept whole if the hole keeps growing?"

Eureka School District officials presented parents and teachers with updates on next year's school budget and how the state's fiscal mess will affect the eight district schools.

School board member Lori Dangberg said that although some of the issues had been anticipated, the state's continued fiscal troubles came as a surprise.

"Three years ago we saw some of this coming and have been prepared," Dangberg said at Tuesday night's community forum held at Excelsior Elementary School. "What we didn't expect was how fast they came and how bad the states fiscal mess would be."

Dangberg said a 12 percent reserve has cushioned some of the fall, but would not sustain the district beyond the 2010/11 school year.

A continued decline in student enrollment and the state funding rate will reduce the school's funding an estimated 18 percent to \$25 million. This doesn't include additional cuts to funding per child from the state by about \$200.

"This year we're looking at a reduction (of school expenses) of about \$2 million," McCarty said. "That's a pretty substantial hit because we're already the lowest funded district in the state."

Currently the Eureka district is looking to reduce staff by an estimated \$700,000 by reducing substitute teacher budgets and cutting eight full time teachers across the district.

"That's hard to do because we have such great teachers here," McCarty said. "And we pride ourselves on small class sizes, which we will still maintain."

Eureka district school board has plans to maintain class sizes of 21 students for kindergarten through third grade and 30 students for fourth through sixth grade.

Although numbers for fall enrollment are grim, McCarty said if enrollment turns around, the school board would try to rehire as many teachers as possible.

Among the staffing cuts is reducing Health Services staffing, a cut that has Excelsior school nurse Kay Lehr concerned.

"There are only three nurses that share our district, only one is full time," Lehr said. "There are still health assistants but I think it's important to the safety of our students to maintain the nurses who, right now bounce between three schools."

Eureka School Foundation president Renee Nash presented parents and teachers with the districts one saving grace to salvage the reductions.

"We started this foundation so we didn't have to rely so much on state funding," Nash said. "Donations from parents are the supplemental funding that continues enrichment programs like music, libraries and sports. Without that, we'd be like several other districts that don't offer those programs."

Since its inception in 1992 the foundation has raised about \$4.5 million and currently supports the district's enrichment programs.

Last year, donations to the Eureka School Foundation was able to salvage cuts to staffing by paying some of the teacher's salaries, funding they hope to repeat to save teachers again this year said former Eureka School District parent and Eureka School Foundation member Barbara Schorer.

"We have bigger challenges this year and I think involvement is crucial to save the quality of education for our children," Schorer said. "I hate to see it come to our teachers and programs suffering because of the state's fiscal problems. I think it's awfully shortsighted to shortchange the schools. This is our future, doesn't the state get that?"