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From the community: Burden of cuts falls on students

Contra Costa Times
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By JOSEPH OVICK

BY THE TIME you read this piece, you will be well aware of the proposed drastic cuts that the governor is suggesting for public education. For the current year, he is recommending that we reduce Proposition 98 funding by approximately \$400 million for 2007-08. The total proposed reduction for 2008-09 is \$4.7 billion.

To accomplish the reduction in 2008-09, the Legislature and the governor will have to suspend Proposition 98. You may recall that the voters of California passed Prop. 98 to guarantee a minimum amount of funding for our children attending public schools.

Currently, even before we began the mid-year cuts for this year, California ranks 49th in class size among the states, 49th in students per administrator, 51st in students per guidance counselor and 51st in students per librarian (these figures include the U.S. territories).

In a recent publication, John Mockler, former executive director of the California State Board of Education, reported, "In the mid-1960s, California spent 5.6 percent of all its personal income on K-12 schools, and, in that year, 6.5 percent of California's personal income on health care.

This year, we will spend 4.4 percent of our personal income on K-12 public schools and 15 percent on health care. The drop of 1.1 percentage points in personal income devoted to K-12 public schools is not trivial.

In California, 1.1 percent of personal income is equal to \$15 billion. If we increased K-12 spending

back to 5.6 percent when Ronald Reagan was governor, we would increase our annual spending on K-12 public schools by about \$18 billion per year.

It is interesting to note that the recent 22 studies, which were commissioned by the Legislature and the governor to recommend how we can

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improve schools, recommended that we should spend the percentage that Reagan spent during his tenure as governor.

March 15 of this year will be a difficult day for public education. Because of the uncertainty of funding for our schools and our children, school districts and county offices of education are required by law to notify certificated staff members -- counselors, teachers, administrators, etc. -- that their employment will no longer be needed for the ensuing year.

This will create hardship for many of our best teachers and administrators, and it may have a devastating impact on our children.

It has been purported that this funding shortfall is the result of the revenue forecast for 2006-09 having been downgraded by a total of \$7.5 billion, spending is higher than anticipated due to lower-than-expected property tax and an ongoing imbalance exists between revenues and expenditures.

The bottom line is that the governor and Legislature have overspent and are unwilling to suggest a tax or revenue enhancement. For example, if the state were to restore the Vehicle Registration Fee, the state's revenue would be increased by \$6.1 billion in 2008-09.

As a result, the burden of the state's overspending will now fall on the backs of our children. I hope you will join the PTA, local administrators, school staff members and the community at large to do everything you can to protect the future of our children by providing the resources necessary for them to succeed.

We need to let the governor and Legislature know of our displeasure.

Ovick is superintendent of schools for Contra Costa County.

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