

Alameda County's school chiefs appeal to lawmakers

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By Katy Murphy
STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — Public schools in California will suffer if the state slashes education funding to help balance its \$40 billion deficit, a group of Alameda County superintendents told reporters at a Wednesday news conference at East Oakland's Roosevelt Middle School.

"As a state, we need to reorder our priorities," said Oakland's in-

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LAURA A ODA/STAFF

SHEILA JORDAN, Alameda County education superintendent, speaks at the Wednesday conference.

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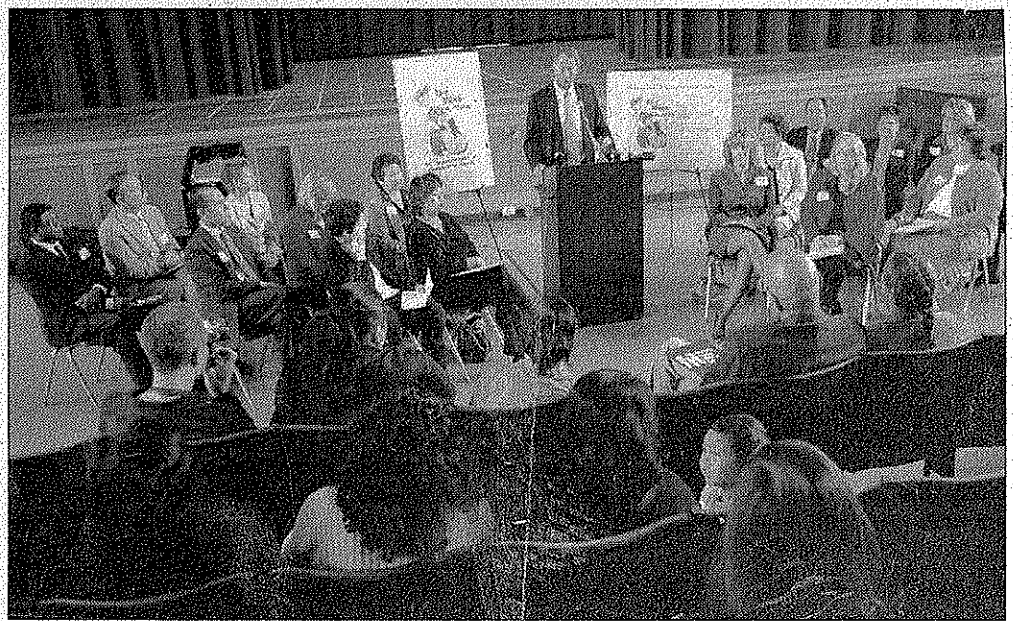
As they have in past budget cycles, the school leaders came together in an event coordinated by the Alameda County Office of Education. But — perhaps as a sign of the ballooning state deficit and global economic crisis — this year's appeal to state lawmakers was noticeably more modest.

"Please, do not give us less money than we had the prior year," said John Casey, superintendent of the Pleasanton school district, who noted that the superintendents were not asking for additional funds.

In his January budget proposal, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger recommended that the state government cut more than \$8 billion in funding for public schools and community colleges by the end of the 2009-10 school year, according to an analysis by the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office.

Schwarzenegger also wants to lift restrictions on the use of special-purpose grants, including those earmarked for smaller class sizes, adult education classes and after-school programs — a controversial proposal that many superintendents and school business officers support but which the state PTA and the California Teachers Association oppose.

H.D. Palmer, the spokesman for the state Department of Finance, said the Republican governor has proposed \$14 billion in new revenue to mitigate



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EIGHTEEN DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS from Alameda County join other education leaders in a news conference Wednesday to talk about reform for education funding in light of the state's budget crisis in the Roosevelt Middle School auditorium in Oakland.

the impact of the shortfall on state programs. Still, he said, "no one is going to come back to sea level in this proposal."

Faced with millions in potential reductions, school districts including Berkeley, Livermore and Dublin plan to notify some employees by March 15 that they might lose their jobs. State law requires districts to inform staff of potential layoffs by that date, long before the state budget is passed and school districts know how much money they have to spend.

William Huyett, the superintendent of Berkeley schools, said his district would likely be forced to cut its support services — such as transportation, custodial, and food service — by up to 25 percent, ac-

ording to Schwarzenegger's January proposal.

"That's a severe cut," Huyett said. With \$9 million in planned reductions, he said, "I think that the district, in many ways, could not function effectively."

Oakland schools plan to cut \$29 million from its general purpose fund, which now amounts to about \$230 million. Under the district's latest plan, each school would see its funding drop by 4.5 percent in 2009-10. Central office departments would absorb the rest of the cuts.

"We're working to ensure that we won't have to lay anyone off, but at this time, we can't offer any guarantees," said district spokesman Troy Flint.

California's constitution requires the state budget to be approved each year by two-thirds of the Legislature, a threshold some Democrats are pushing to lower to a simple majority. The Republican minority has taken a stand against new taxes, arguing that the government should balance its books exclusively by curtailing its spending. Stalemates are common; school district financial planning involves a fair amount of guesswork.

For that reason, Stephen Hanke, the superintendent of Dublin schools, said the district plans to send pink slips to all teachers paid from special-purpose funds.

"We must plan for the worst and hope for the best," Hanke said.

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