

Oakland teachers authorize strike

■ Latest offer includes no raise; district optimistic deal will prevent work stoppage

By Katy Murphy

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OAKLAND — Once again, the possibility of a teacher strike looms over the city's school system. Last week, hundreds of Oakland teachers rejected the district's latest contract offer, which did not include a raise, and voted to authorize its leadership to call a one-day strike once it legally can do so.

The district's labor relations director downplayed the development, saying the two sides would settle — as they did in 2006, avoiding a planned strike at the eleventh hour. Only this time, as the state budget crisis deepens, there is less money to go around.

This week, Superintendent Tony Smith will present a plan for shrinking the district's \$250 million general purpose budget by \$39 million for the upcoming school year. The district would cut 86 full-time central services positions under the proposal, including roughly 16 school security officers and 13 custodians.

Individual schools, spared the brunt of the reductions under Smith's plan, will receive a 5 percent cut. Oakland's adult-education program — a safety net for non-English speaking immigrants, disabled adults and school dropouts — would lose about 40 percent of its funding.

Giving employees a modest raise in the face of these conditions is possible, but it would require tough trade-offs, such as school closures, larger class sizes and layoffs, said school board member David Kakishiba.

The average Oakland teacher earns a base salary of about \$53,800 in addition to about \$10,000 in health benefits, according to district figures from October. The average base salary statewide is \$65,000, but in some cases school districts include health benefits when they report salaries.

Unlike most school districts, Oakland must make annual \$6 million payments on a 2003 emergency loan from the state. That money could buy a raise of roughly 3.5 percent for its teachers union members or more than 2 percent for all employees.

The Oakland Education Association's demands include a 15 percent pay increase by the end of the 2011-12 school year and contract language to protect small class sizes. Its leaders say that the administration — which emerged from a six-year state takeover in July — has allowed teacher pay

to lag behind compensation in nearby districts and that it spends too much money on outside contractors for services that could be done in-house.

The mantra of the union, whose contract expired in June 2008, is, "The money is there: It's a question of priorities."

In a letter last fall to the Oakland school board president, Alameda County Superintendent Sheila Jordan wrote that the district needed to devote a much larger percentage of its budget (55 percent, rather than 46 percent) to "classroom" expenses, as state law requires.

Betty Olson-Jones, the union president, said her membership's support for a one-day strike sent a signal that the status quo is unacceptable. "That's certainly our intent, to put pressure on the district and get them to come up with something," she said.

The district administration has tried to find the money for more competitive salaries, though it hasn't seen eye-to-eye with the teachers union on how to do so. In November 2008, Oakland's state administrator placed a parcel tax on the ballot that would have generated millions of dollars for teachers' paychecks. The union campaigned against it, largely because some of the revenue would have gone to the city's 30 nonunionized public charter schools. The measure failed.

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