

Marin County education office eyes 59 layoffs



Mary Jane Burke, Marin County Superintendent of Schools, speaks during a community forum to address issues relating to COVID-19 in San Rafael on March 9, 2020. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

Due to an anticipated loss of state revenue caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the Marin County Office of Education is issuing layoff notices affecting 43 classified jobs and eliminating 16 administrative staff positions for the 2020-21 school year.

“The seriousness of this situation demands drastic measures and the highest level of financial prudence,” said Mary Jane Burke, Marin County superintendent of schools, in a letter this week to affected staffers. “I am hopeful that we will realize additional funding from the federal government or grants — but until then, it is critical that we take these steps.”

Marin County Board of Education trustees voted 7-0 during an online meeting Tuesday in favor of a resolution for the classified worker layoffs. Those cuts include the equivalent of 32 full-time special education paraeducators, plus business education liaisons, vocational nurses and secretaries.

The workers will receive the notices by June 1 as per contract specifications, Burke said. In addition, Burke said she is eliminating 16 administrative positions in the county office — some of which could be from attrition, such as not filling vacancies from resignations or retirements.

The total loss of 59 positions represents about 17% of the 350-person workforce, and a savings of about \$3 million.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has forced our state into a recession that exceeds the deficit levels we experienced during the Great Recession,” Burke said. “The state Department of Finance is predicting a budget deficit of more than \$54 billion, which will impact our schools by an estimated \$18.3 billion.”

The trustees' vote on the layoffs came swiftly and without debate after Burke and Terena Mares, deputy superintendent, outlined the scope of the problem. Mares said the office projects at least a 10% loss in state revenues from its \$50 million 2020-21 budget — but it could be more.

“We see this reduction as the low end of possibilities,” Mares said Tuesday. “According to the state Legislative Analyst’s Office, cuts to schools could be as high as 16%. If we receive assistance from the federal stimulus package, it will help.”

Trustee Bob Goldman, the board’s vice president, wondered if the county was ready for bigger cuts if the state revenue cutbacks are worse than expected.

“Do we have a plan set up if the cuts go to 20%?” he said.

Burke said the county office would prepare a new spreadsheet in that event — but she said she is hoping that schools get some help from grants or federal aid.

Mares said more information could come later this week when Gov. Gavin Newsom unveils his revised May state budget.

“I just want to say how sobering this is,” Mares said. “It began with a health care crisis but now it’s even more an economic crisis.”

It was not immediately clear Tuesday how specific programs would be affected by the layoffs. Some of the cuts were in services that are already dormant because of COVID-19 social distancing — such as running large gatherings at outdoor events or for professional development.

The Marin County Office of Education administers special education programs, outdoor education workshops, professional development classes, grants and a range of other services. It also runs Marin’s Community School, an alternative program for seventh through 12th grades. The county office also oversees Marin’s 18 public school districts, convening weekly with superintendents and developing policies for school closures, public health emergencies and other contingencies.

In addition to the job actions Tuesday, Burke announced a list of cost-cutting measures to take effect immediately at the county office. They include freezing open positions; encouraging retirement, leave or reduction in hours; freezing overtime unless pre-approved for essential work; reviewing all consultant contracts and professional experts; approving only essential purchase orders, travel requests and other expenditures; and conserving supplies.

Burke said the layoffs and cost-cutting measures, while “deeply unsettling,” are necessary because of the “troublesome outlook” at the state level.

“Since the beginning of March, 4.2 million unemployment claims were filed in California alone,” Burke said. “The overall budget deficit is equal to nearly 37% of the state’s general fund spending, and three and a half times the state’s rainy day fund.”

“Given this information,” Burke added, “it is important that we take steps to reduce our expenditures for the coming year to protect the programs and services upon which our students and families depend.”