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Editorial: Classes cut while salaries increase

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the California Legislature did something novel in February to help local school districts. They untied the strings to pots of money that had been rigidly restricted, giving districts new freedom to spend money on local priorities.

Done right, this is a chance for districts to assess which so-called "categorical programs" are working and which are not – and to be creative in shifting money where needs are greatest and resources could be put to the best use. Done wrong, it will reinforce old fears that the money will simply go into salary and benefit increases for staff, with no new educational benefit.

We are beginning to see what local districts are doing with the new flexibility. It doesn't look pretty.

Summer school was the first of the categorical programs to be whacked. Some districts have eliminated nearly all summer school programs. Others are scaling back and offering classes only to students who need to complete courses to graduate. All with little attention to whether summer school programs were working.

For example, in the Sacramento City Unified School District, the board voted June 11 to eliminate summer school for elementary and middle school students, a \$2 million savings. That affected 5,500 K-8 students who need tutoring to get up to grade level. It meant laying off 200 teachers and 100 support staff members. (Working with the city, the district has since salvaged a recreation program for these kids, but academics are still gone.)

Here's the trade-off: To save the summer program for 5,500 kids, the district could have opted for two furlough/unpaid days for all employees (\$2.2 million) or a 1 percent salary reduction (\$2.1 million).

They could have frozen "step and column" automatic pay increases for years of service and education (\$3.65 million) or looked at \$15 co-pays and other modest shared health benefit costs (\$3.8 million).

Of course, these are negotiable. And as Sacramento City board Chairman Roy Grimes said Monday, the board can't just make them happen: "Negotiable items have been difficult to come by."

So teachers and other staff members would rather see programs cut (and their colleagues lose jobs) than accept some pay concessions in the changed budget environment.

Sac City Unified is not alone in this. And summer school is just the beginning. Next year, districts are zeroing out other categorical programs: gifted and talented programs, the arts and music block grant, funding for library materials, "targeted instructional improvement" for low-achieving students, professional development for teachers and more.

What are parents and community members to do? When you hear about cuts to school programs (and the layoffs that come with them), ask where the savings are going. Are they going to other programs that would better serve students, or are they going only to salary and benefit increases?

In the business and nonprofit sectors, people realize that something profound has changed in American economic life. They are weighing layoffs vs. pay concessions, and doing things differently.

Unfortunately, the public sector has lagged. For school districts, the new funding flexibility should be a time to rethink old programs and, perhaps, launch some new ones – not to rely on business as usual.

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