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UCLA report on impact of budget cuts on Calif. public schools a “wake-up call”

New report on educational opportunities and conditions details just how much schools have had to cut since recession began

LOS ANGELES (March 21, 2011) — Two years of budget cuts have led to falling opportunities in California’s public high schools and have worsened the disparity between schools serving low-income students, according to a new UCLA report released Monday.

“Free Fall: Educational Opportunities in 2011” by UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access outlines the falling educational opportunities in California’s public high schools and their consequences for student learning and progress to graduation and college.

“This report is a wake-up call for Californians and their leaders,” Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson said Monday during a teleconference. “The lights are on [but] the public doesn’t really see how terribly hurt the schools have been and education has been diminished over the last three years.”

The new report is based on a summer survey of 277 high school principals—almost a quarter of the state’s high school principals—and follow-up interviews with a representative sample of 78 of those principals. The majority of those principals reported less instructional time, materials and attention.

- Forty-nine percent said they had shortened the school year.
- Seventy-four percent said they had increased class sizes.
- Sixty-three percent report reduced calculators, measuring instruments, and other key mathematical tools.

Also, 88 percent of principals said the budget cuts have all but halted their school reform efforts, as key staff have been let go and time for professional development has been eliminated.

Paula Hanzel, a principal at Sacramento New Technology High School, said in her small school of 300 students, every person is key to the success of the program. This year, three teachers have received pink slips.

“We’ve cut as much as we can cut in my school, quite frankly without giving blood,” Hanzel said.

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Todd Ullah, principal at Washington Preparatory High School in South Los Angeles, said his school had also been hit hard in the last three years with layoffs to his teaching, administrative and clerical staff, and security personnel.

“However, the staff and community remain committed to making the school a world-class school,” Ullah said, citing gains in attendance, number of students going to college, and Academic Performance Index, a number that measures students’ progress in standardized tests from one year to the next.

But, Ullah said he’s not sure how far that strong commitment will take them next year.

“We hope to reform and continue to reform,” he said, “but it’s going to be very difficult to ask people to do more with so much less.”

Though the recession has hit all schools, it has had a disproportionate impact on schools in low-income neighborhoods. They are unable to raise as much funds as their counterparts in wealthier communities and are reluctant to ask already-strapped families to contribute for music and arts classes, field trips or sports.

The study found that high-poverty schools raise \$1 from private donations for every \$20 that low-poverty schools raise.

“It is not too late to stem California’s free fall,” said UCLA IDEA Director John Rogers, “but to do so, Californians will need to understand and act upon the connection between budgets, opportunities and learning outcomes.”

Sacramento principal Hanzel agreed: “I wonder when people in the state of California will recognize you get what you pay for and that we are once again mortgaging our future by not understanding we have to pay for education now if California is going to be strong economically in the future.”

The full report, along with information on individual school and legislative districts, is available online at www.edopp.org or www.ucla-idea.org

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