

ORANGE COUNTY REVIEW

Our Opinion

Somber School Funding Forecast

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Dozens and dozens of jobs. Valuable programs and people. Millions and millions of dollars. It's sobering. It's frightening. It's real.

Orange County Schools Superintendent Dr. Bob Grimesey presented his budget to the school board Tuesday afternoon and people cried. People whose jobs would be cut cried. People whose jobs were safe cried. People who actually will have to cut the jobs cried.

Whether they cried out of anger, fear or sadness, they still cried. They cried because the dire state financial forecasts and burgeoning national economic crisis are upsetting our community in a most painful way—by affecting our children.

In the last few years, we've been overwhelmed with news of failing businesses and corporate downsizing. Layoffs and bankruptcies occur so regularly we grow immune—until we feel the sharp sting so acutely. No longer are these dramatic circumstances affecting other people in other communities. They're hitting home and they're hitting hard. And they could hit even harder in the months to come.

Gravely, Dr. Grimesey outlined a proposal that anticipated having to shave, at best, \$4 million from a school budget pared by \$2.7 million a year ago. Reductions could be greater if local funding decreases as well.

"I present this budget under protest," he explained. "These are recommendations I must make, not ones I like to make. It is with deep regret that I bring this formal phase of the budget process."

Four levels of cost-cutting, position reductions, program eliminations and wage cuts were outlined in a seemingly doomsday funding scenario.

On paper, it could mean losing 80 jobs, followed by wage cuts for the remaining staff, cutting school sports, and scarring cuts hurting those in our schools who need the most help.

In this week's paper, we've reported those positions that could be cut. Look at the list. You likely know the names that go with those positions. They're our friends and neighbors, our children's teachers. Their employment hangs in the balance. It's real.

"This is a terrible situation," Orange County School Board Chairman Jerry Bledsoe said Tuesday. "This is just tearing Orange County apart. It is hard to look at this and know

many members of our wonderful staff will be looking at unemployment. The students will be affected. This is all one big mess.”

Indeed. It's a wonder more people didn't cry. They may yet.

Tuesday, Feb. 2 at Orange County High School, Dr. Grimesey formally will present his budget at the regular monthly school board meeting. The public is encouraged to attend.

We need the public to attend, not to preach to the choir—clearly the school board already knows how bad things are—but to offer ideas, solutions, any glimmer of hope. Surely we can offer something beyond our taxes. We can offer our intellect, our ideas, our inspiration. That won't cost us a dime, just our time.

And maybe, with a better understanding of the situation brought home by its alarming reality, we can discover solutions that offer us hope yet.