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Schools still uncertain about earthquake toll

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More than two months after the earthquake, Pajaro Valley schools are still unsure how much of their loss they will be able to recoup, and whether students whose families moved out of the district after the quake will return.

Bob Peterson, assistant superintendent in charge of finances for the Pajaro Valley Unified School District, reported to district trustees this week that enrollments continued to decline at above-normal rates through the first part of December.

By the first part of November, the district lost 271 more students than it normally would, even with the yearly decline when the children of migrant farm workers head to Mexico with their families for the winter months.

A month later, the district had lost a total of 575 more students than it would have in a normal year.

When that number is multiplied by the nearly \$3,000 the state gives the school per student each year, the potential loss to the district is severe, district officials say.

But no one knows how many of the students will return before April, when the district reports to the state.

"The suspicion is that with the limited housing now, (the missing students) may not come back," school board chairman Manuel Osorio said. "That's the factor that's going to make the difference, because it looks like the jobs will be here."

Ultimately, if they don't return, the district would have to trim its budget, possibly by reducing its workforce, district officials say.

A report prepared by the principal of Mintie White Elementary School shows that children were still moving because of the

earthquake by the first part of December. The vast majority of them were leaving because their homes were unlivable.

The district must try to report to the state who left for what reason and where they went, Peterson told the board, because the state will want to make sure it's not paying for the students twice — once in Pajaro Valley and once in the district they moved to.

At Mintie White, many of the students had moved within the district, and others had gone to Southern California, the South Bay, or Mexico. Only a few had left the state.

Meanwhile, the state has agreed to pay the district for the four days the schools were closed immediately after the quake. The school board gave the go-ahead Wednesday for staff to apply for funds to make up for losses since then.

Jim Baker, district superintendent, says the district lost funds not only for students who left the system, but for those who were absent temporarily after the quake. The state will pay for attendance for absent students only if they're ill or have experienced a death in the family.

The district is also still in the process of repairing school buildings and applying for federal disaster aid to cover those costs. At Watsonville High School, the board received two bids for making earthquake repairs, and both were more than twice what the board had estimated.

Trustees awarded a contract Wednesday of \$118,258 to fix the roofs of the main building and the gymnasium, and the plaster in the cafeteria. But it held off on awarding the bulk of the work, repairing the interior sheet rock and plastering of the main 1917 building — now estimated at around \$360,000 — until it gets a firm commitment from the federal government.