

School still reeling from 2004 closures

By **MATT KING**

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Layoffs at Gault Elementary are reviving tensions over how to serve the school's low-income and Spanish-speaking students and not drive off wealthier families from the surrounding Seabright neighborhood.

Santa Cruz City Schools voted Wednesday to lay off nine part-time classroom aides for Gault's neediest students. At the same time, the district has guaranteed funding for the school's Life Lab garden and is considering adding a Spanish teacher requested by Gault's English-speaking families.

District leaders say the layoffs are due to a cut in federal Title I funds for poor students and say they will try to restore at least some of the assistants if they can find an alternate source of money.

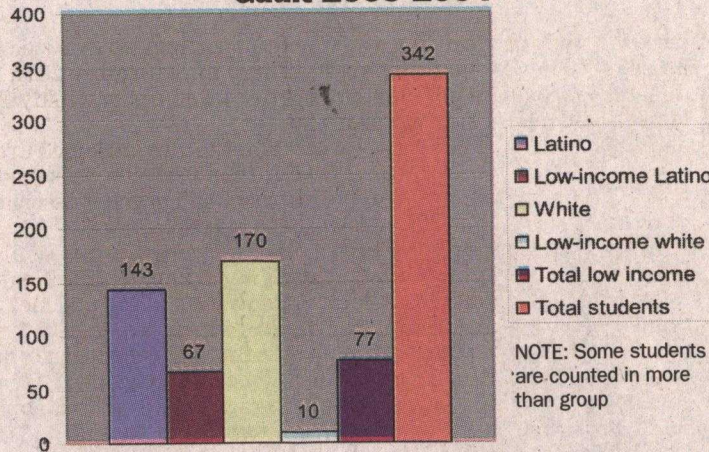
But the cuts are causing parents to question the district's commitment to low-income students, who were assigned to Gault in large numbers in 2004, after the district closed two other elementary schools.

Gault is now the district's poorest school and is under the sanctions of No Child Left Behind because its poorer students, who typically are native Spanish-speakers, don't fare well on standardized tests.

Reyna Ruiz, a Beach Flats community activist who pulled her daughter from Gault earlier this year, said the district is proving to be better at talking about fairness than actually delivering.

"Actions speak louder than words and I don't know that our priorities are in the right place" Ruiz said. "People want enrichment, but for a lot of students it isn't about enrichment, it's about

Gault 2003-2004



The number of poor and Latino students has risen dramatically at Gault School since the Santa Cruz City Schools district closed two elementary schools in 2004.

bare survival. How do we add enrichment programs when students aren't at grade level? How do you balance that?"

The divide at Gault dates to

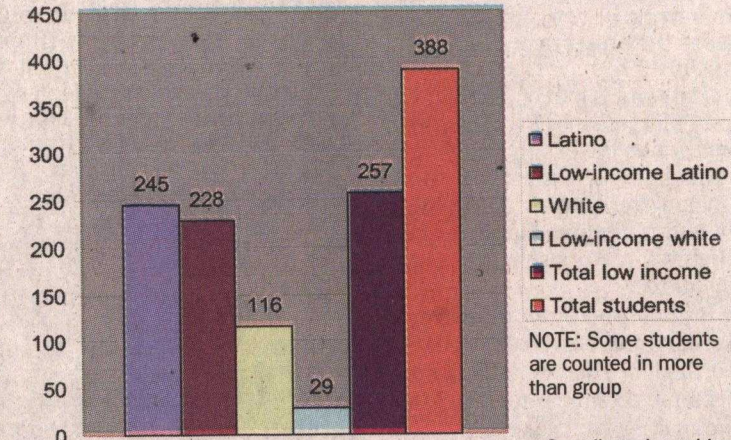
2004, when the district closed Branciforte and Natural Bridges elementary schools. The closures transformed Gault from a neighborhood school to a regional cam-

pus with many students from the impoverished Beach Flats area.

More than half of the school's 388 students are now considered English-learners and 66 percent of

them qualify for free or reduced lunch, three times as many as in 2003.

Gault 2006-2007



Contributed graphics

Closures

Continued from Page A9

No Child Left Behind sanctions include cuts to funding schools can spend in classrooms and Gault lags behind others in the district in parent fundraising and volunteer time because many of its families are working poor with little time or money to spare for the school, according to teachers and parents.

Even white families at the school say the campus is segregated because kids don't speak a common language and the English-learners spend one period a day in special language classes.

What those families want is Spanish instruction for their children, which would cost the district about \$75,000 a year for a teacher. Spanish classes, the parents say, would give families another reason to stay at Gault and help white and Latino students bond.

Barbara Lawrence, a parent who is on the school's site council, said one of her sons is leaving Gault because his friends are leaving and he's not happy there. Lawrence said several families are looking at other options because teachers have a difficult

time giving attention to kids who are not struggling.

"When you lose the middle class, whether Hispanic or white, you lose what makes a school cohesive, you lose parent involvement, you lose trust," Lawrence said. "We like the [school] board but it's hard to trust that they will give us aid, that they will give us the money we need."

And trustees are now faced with the possibility of choosing between bringing back classroom aides or adding enrichment programs.

District leaders say they don't want to commit to paying for the aides with general fund money — as they did with the Life Lab and would for a new Spanish teacher — because doing so could make it impossible to ever again receive federal money, known as categorical funds, to pay for classroom support.

Gault Principal Mary Anne James recommended the layoffs, which will save the district about \$69,000 a year, to meet her school's budget, but said she trusts the district will find a way to address the needs of all of its students.

Some trustees said they had no choice but to vote for the layoffs because they had to comply with laws requiring employees to get a certain amount of notice before they lose their jobs. Board

President Rachel Dewey Thorsett blamed the cuts on complicated school funding rules and said voting for layoffs was a painful — and ironic — way for a chance to have aides and a new Spanish teacher.

"You feel like you're going through a hall of mirrors, but my expectation is at least some of the positions will be back in the fall," she said. "If we commit now to support these positions in the general fund, even if the categorical money comes through, it would be impossible to support the Spanish teacher."

Dewey Thorsett was joined in her vote by Wendy Strimling, John Collins and Felix Robles. Trustee Ken Wagman was absent. Don Maxwell and Cynthia Hawthorne voted to keep the aides.

"Here we are on our side of our mouths talking about equity and access, and on the other side we're saying let's give Gault the biggest hit of all," Hawthorne said. "But this is just one step in a very long budget process and this is the time for parents to stand together and continue to work and not get disheartened, because together we can make sure Gault gets what it needs."

Contact Matt King at
mking@santacruzsentinel.com.