

Post-quake school enrollments sinking

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Declining student enrollment since the Oct. 17 earthquake threatens revenues at nearly all of the Santa Cruz County school districts.

School administrators said they will be monitoring budgets carefully this year in anticipation of funding losses.

Pajaro Valley Unified School District has experienced the most dramatic decline, with nearly 600 students from its 16,000-member student body unexpectedly dropping out since the quake, as well as the approximately 300 students who would usually drop out.

The district, which receives funding based on attendance, anticipates losing up to \$600,000.

Trustees recently asked the state Department of Education to "forgive" the district and allocate the money despite the drop.

"The state is sympathetic, but it probably will not provide forgiveness to the point we need," said Pajaro's Assistant Superintendent Robert Peterson, adding that the district is also seeking funds through special legislation.

If state funding cannot be obtained, teachers may be laid off, Peterson said at a recent school board meeting.

While officials speculate that many of the students

may have returned to Mexico, they say they do not know when or if they will return.

The problem has become an issue in contract negotiations currently going on between teachers and the district, said Superintendent James Baker.

Many of the other districts throughout the county also reported a drop in enrollment. Only Happy Valley, Bonny Doon Union and Pacific elementary districts reported no change.

Santa Cruz City Schools, which currently has about 8,400 students, reported losing 77 students since the quake.

"I suspect housing becomes less and less available and people have to leave the area," said Trustee Art Pearl.

While there are no proposals for cuts in the district, Santa Cruz officials have been working with the Pajaro district on obtaining special relief legislation, he said.

In the other districts, Soquel schools reported having 2,234 students — a drop of 61 students since the quake. San Lorenzo Valley Unified School District, which normally loses about 10 to 20 students by this time, has lost 47 students for a current enrollment of 4,113. Twenty students reportedly left Scotts Valley Union Elementary School District schools, dropping its enrollment to 1,390. Live Oak schools lost eight students for a current enrollment of 1,792.

The decline could mean a loss of \$167,000, about 2

percent of the budget, for Soquel Union Elementary School District, said Richard Moss, assistant superintendent for business services.

"We'll probably take it out of the reserves," he said, adding that no layoffs are planned.

Officials at other districts also said that no cuts are anticipated, but that their budgets will be closely monitored.

"We'll be watching it to see what happens and to see if the budget needs to be adjusted," said Karen Darocy, director of business services for the Scotts Valley district. "At this time, it doesn't look like it needs to be."

Live Oak, which anticipates losing about \$22,000, will be tightening the purse strings.

"We're making sure not to incur any other expenses," said LOSD Superintendent Rudy Carino.

Mountain Elementary School, located in the Santa Cruz mountains about two miles from the earthquake's epicenter, lost eight of its 165 students, including its only two Hispanic pupils, said Karen Ancic, district administrator.

While officials do not know where those students have gone, they speculate that some of the other families moved out of the district for new homes and new jobs.

"We've been trying to keep our economic reserve high," Ancic said. "We hope to recover naturally as people shift around."