

## An Open Letter to the San Carlos School District Community,

There has been a lot of angst and a lot of confusion about our current budget situation and particularly the “March 15<sup>th</sup> layoff notices” that the District is planning to give (or if you’re reading this after March 15<sup>th</sup>, the notices they have already given). I have personally received quite a bit of e-mail on this topic and have been asked a lot of questions personally, so I wanted to lay out the background and hopefully give some context to the decisions that the School Board needs to make.

### First, a recap of the current situation:

Due mostly to the State budget crisis, the San Carlos Schools District (SCSD) is projected to be around \$2 million short in its 2009-2010 budget. This is on top of an over \$1 million loss we will have this year (2008-2009), which whacked our reserves from about 12% of expenses to about 7%. By law, we need to keep at least a 3% reserve (and prudent districts try to keep a lot more), but any further significant deficit spending would exhaust those reserves within the next two years.

The State of California just passed its budget for 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, and the impact to education is very close to what we expected (which is bad), so it doesn’t change our projections much. However, the State budget is contingent upon a number of statewide propositions that will be on the ballot May 19<sup>th</sup>. If some or all of those propositions do not pass, it is conceivable that the state will revise the budget once again and look for more cuts from education.

Last month, the SCSD staff presented to the board a “universe list” of potential cuts (40+ items) that it imagined the Board could consider in thinking how it will close this budget gap.

Also last month, the Board placed on the ballot a parcel tax measure (Measure B) which would levy a new parcel tax of \$78/year, and if passed by a 2/3 majority on a May 5th all-mail-in ballot, would raise approximately \$800,000 per year starting next fiscal year. In other words, it would solve a little less than half of our problem. A huge impact to say the least. A large number of parents in the community have already organized a campaign around this measure, and I am optimistic that they will be successful in generating enough excitement and support for it.

The District has launched a very comprehensive process to allow the School Board to evaluate all proposed cuts while getting as much input as possible from teachers, administrators, parents, and the community. These steps include:

- Individual school site meetings between the administration and the teachers
- A “town hall” type meeting for teachers and the Board (which happened on February 5<sup>th</sup>)
- A “town hall” type meeting for parents and the general public to meet with the Board, give input, and ask questions (April 2<sup>nd</sup>)

- Meetings with the SCTA (the teachers unions) and the CSBA (the classified employees union)
- A confidential survey which will be sent out the week of March 2<sup>nd</sup> to ask everyone their priorities and opinions on potential tradeoffs

By March 15<sup>th</sup>, the District is required by law to deliver notices of potential layoffs to certain classes of employees. If a notice is not given, and if an employee is not in their probationary period, then the District has no flexibility to change their status for the upcoming (2009-2010) school year. Also, there is a very strict and complex protocol in terms of who gets such notices. The District can pick certain positions, but not specific people. Then the specific employees are chosen on the basis of seniority – effectively “last in, first out.” It’s more complex than this, as certain employees whose position is being eliminated may “bump” a more junior employee if they have the proper credentials to take that junior employee’s job. It’s a protracted process to finalize the list of affected employees before the end of the school year. The District has the right to rescind these notices to employees (again based on the positions, seniority, and bumping rights) before the end of the year.

#### So, what’s my take on all of this?

First, it’s important to understand that the March 15<sup>th</sup> requirement is odd even in a normal year. Given that the District doesn’t complete its budget until the end of June (and often the state doesn’t complete it until after that), it’s somewhat bizarre that we have to effectively make personnel decisions before we have the complete picture. Of course all school districts in California face this same dilemma – in fact a number of school districts are fairly aggressive in handing out these notices and then rescinding them when they finalize their budget. San Carlos has not taken this approach historically but has been rather cautious in its handing out of notices in the past. However, in the Budget Crisis of 2002-2003, a number of notices were delivered, but after the passage of the Measure D parcel tax, most (if not all) the notices were rescinded.

From the perspective of someone who works in the private sector, this is an absolutely awful way to manage human resources. Giving anyone a notice of a potential layoff will cause anxiety and strain relations. But even more specifically, it would cause any reasonable person receiving such notice to look around for another job! And of course, the risk is that your best employees are the ones most likely to find another job quickly! Unfortunately, we don’t have a lot of choice here as a school district. If we think there is any possibility that a position could be eliminated, we must give this notice just to retain that flexibility. A lack of a notice takes it “off the table.”

This year is no ordinary year – it’s worse than 2002/2003, and worse than probably any time in modern California education history. That is why the District has been so diligent and purposeful in its actions. Most of the District staff (including teachers) understand that peculiarities of the March 15<sup>th</sup> timing, and although no one hopes to get a potential layoff notice, they understand that it is not personal, not related to their performance in any way, and not even the intention of the District. It absolutely pains me to risk the loss

of any of our great teachers – we have some fabulous new teachers in the District, and as per the rules, they would be the first to get notices of potential layoffs. But, these are the tools which we are given.

This all brings me to the many e-mails and conversations I've had over the last couple of weeks regarding our music program and particularly K-4 music. I absolutely agree with all of the people who have been espousing not only the value of music education in general, but also the effectiveness of our music programs here in San Carlos. I think this point is indisputable, and I'm fairly confident that the School Board will make every effort not to impact those programs. However, given the scope of the crisis we are facing, the Board has taken the position that "nothing is off the table" until we get through this entire process. We need to continue to get input from parents (including the survey) and there are two other critical items that we need to know: (a) whether or not Measure B passes, and (b) whether or not the State adjusts their budget based on the passage, or lack of passage, of the May 19 propositions. These are the "big rocks" that would materially affect how aggressive the Board would need to get with the budget.

Although I can not legally speak for the entire Board, I am confident that my fellow Board Members agree with me on the following points:

- No one runs for School Board for the glory, and very few look at it as a stepping stone for other political office. My colleagues and I do it for a true passion around education and our belief that we can make a difference.
- As a Board, it is our role to provide the best education for all of our children in this school district and do everything in our power to make that happen
- Instrumental to that role is the establishment of a budget that meets those goals while being fiscally prudent and protecting the district from financial crisis (and potential State receivership if we run out of money)
- Building a budget is very hard even in normal years – the timing is very wacky, and school finances (by law) are byzantine at best
- The budget challenge is not one of asking the question "what's important to you" but rather one of tradeoffs. How does X compare to Y? Would you be willing to sacrifice some of A to retain B? (Those are some of the questions that the community survey will look to get feedback on). It's even more complex than that because all of these programs are interrelated – perhaps losing A makes doing C even more important, etc. So, it's not even about a linear priority of programs – it's a very complex, multi-variable process that is difficult to optimize. It takes a lot of time, effort, feedback, and discussion.
- We do not take this responsibility lightly nor look at any potential cuts casually. Any characterizations otherwise are just plain wrong. As one of my colleagues has been known to say, "if any cuts are easy, that means we probably shouldn't have been doing that in the first place." If cuts will be made, they will be made with an extremely heavy heart and only after looking at every possible option within our power.

There are a number of amazing things that we do in the school district which unfortunately need to be included on this potential cut list, including small class sizes,

music, P.E. associates, school librarians, art, tutoring, counselors, assistant principals, electives, teacher training, technology, teacher salaries, etc.

Because so many people have written me on the topic of our music programs, I do want to address this specifically. Although it would be inappropriate for me to talk about specific employees in this letter, I think we can all agree that we have outstanding music programs in the District largely in part due to the teachers running them. In no way do I want to see them leave or cause them angst enough to have them start looking for another job. However, I also feel an obligation to give due process to the other employees in the District potentially affected by cuts. As I mentioned above, there is still a ton of work to do and quite a bit of uncertainty. We need to have more time to hear from community members who may support various priorities. To do so, we need to get input from the Town Hall meeting, the survey, and all of the other steps I outlined above so that we will be better informed on the tradeoffs we may need to make. Only honoring this process will allow us to meet our obligations of maximizing the educational benefit to our children, maintaining fiscal responsibility, and allowing our entire community to be engaged.

Of course, it is the obligation of the School District to communicate clearly and stay close to its staff and particularly any employees affected by notices of potential layoffs. This is a difficult and stressful time for them, but hopefully with a lot of work a bit of luck, we will make it all though together.

### So, what's next?

Based on all of this, I would like to offer my advice to anyone in the community who is passionate about our public schools on what they should do next.

**Support the Measure B parcel tax.** There is no other single thing that you can do to help ensure that cuts are minimized. I mean support it with your vote and your money, but probably even more importantly, your time. If all of the energy being exerted now were directed toward ensuring that all of your neighbors vote for Measure B, you will have likely ensured the outcome you are looking for. Feel free to send me a note if you're interested in getting involved and I'll connect you to the campaign committee.

Continue to **donate to the San Carlos Educational Foundation.** Now more than ever, your donation is crucial. The current budget – even with the \$2 million shortfall – still assumes that we get \$1.2 million from SCEF. So, it's absolutely essential that they reach this goal, and ideally exceed it. Even an increase to something like \$1.5 million would go a long way to help saving a lot of these program that people feel passionate about.

**Fill out the survey** – this will be a key instrument of feedback from both teachers and parents, so I encourage everyone to make their opinions known and opine on some of the hard choices that are laid out in the survey.

**Feel free to advocate to the Board** – that is your absolute right. However, unfortunately a number of people have taken a tactic I would describe as counter-productive. State Senator Joe Simitian does a wonderful presentation on “13 Tips for Successful Advocacy” (I found a link to them here:

<http://www.redwoodcitychamber.com/action/assemblymansimitianpksthehse.asp>).

Unfortunately a number of people have violated principle #9 – **do not insult the person you are trying to lobby!** It doesn't work! School Members in particular don't feel threatened by “being voted out of office” – it's not a political stepping stone for them and they get compensated for their job. Threatening people only makes them dig in their heels more.

**Appreciate how great of a job our administration is doing** – Being a Superintendent is a tough job in a normal year, but in a year like this, it's pretty brutal. I am continually impressed with how Steve Mitrovich and his staff have conducted themselves with such grace under fire. They have to keep the whole staff focused and motivated while continuing to do the job of the District – all the while ensuring that the Board has the right information to make these tough decisions. And I also want to call out the great work of Tom Green and Mary Jude Doeringhaus, who have in one year completely turned around our Special Ed program, offering better services to our students while at some time saving the district money by bringing the appropriate resources in-house. The whole administration, with very limited resources, is taking on a Herculean effort.

**Stay calm and respect the process.** Even though this is probably the worst budget environment anyone has ever seen, we have very professional employees who understand the peculiarities of school budgets and the March 15 requirement. Of course, no one wants to get a notice that they may potentially lose their job (particularly in this economy), but I think most teachers put this in the proper perspective (note that it happened in the last budget crisis in 2003). My fear is that parents – many of whom haven't been witness to this process before – unnecessarily raise the anxiety of the staff and everyone else. My advice is to be supportive of your kids' teachers, work with us to solve the problem, stay measured, and do the other things I suggest above. With all of us working together, I am optimistic we will come out of this and preserve the wonderful education we have here in San Carlos.

Sincerely,



Seth Rosenblatt  
Governing Board Member  
San Carlos School District