

San Francisco, CA
(San Francisco Co.)
Sunday Chronicle
(Cir. S. 354,752)

JAN - 8 2012

Allen's P. C. B. EST. 1888

Voters to face tough choices on budget

By Wyatt Buchanan

CHRONICLE SACRAMENTO BUREAU

SACRAMENTO — Gov. Jerry Brown's budget plan released last week poses a stark choice for Californians: approve a five-year \$35 billion tax increase in November or watch the hatchet drop on public school funding — with cuts so deep the school year could be shortened by almost a month.

Under the proposal, schools would face the bulk of midyear cuts if voters reject the taxes. Of the \$5.3 billion Brown wants to slice from the budget if his plan is turned down, \$4.8 billion would be taken from public schools.

In releasing his budget, the governor rejected the notion that choosing schools to face the largest proposed cut was a political move to motivate voters to approve his tax plan. Numerous

Budget continues on A10

P1 42

Brown's budget proposal gives voters stark choice

Budget from page A1

polls show Californians rank public school funding as their top priority.

When asked why he is aiming the possible cuts at schools, Brown replied, "That's where the money is!"

Shortening the year

The governor's proposal — if the taxes are approved — would provide \$52.5 billion to schools, an increase over the \$47.6 billion in this year's budget. But if that does not happen, schools face dark prospects that may include a significantly shortened school year.

Administration officials said they have yet to decide whether that will be the route to achieve those savings, and doing so would require approval by the Legislature along with negotiations with teachers unions across the state. Getting both to sign on, which would mean teachers agreeing to cut their pay by more than three weeks, would be a difficult task.

Nancy Waymack, executive

director of policy and operations for the San Francisco Unified School District, said teachers in the district would not agree to such a change. The district has made about \$113 million in cuts over the past several years, she said.

Responding to the governor's rationale for targeting schools, Waymack said, "From my perspective, that's where the kids are and that's where the future of California is."

Ron Bennett, president and CEO of School Services of California, which advises school districts across the state on policies and budgets coming from Sacramento, agreed that weeks of school closures are unlikely to happen. He noted that the Legislature gave school districts the option to cut up to seven days in the current school year in response to midyear cuts triggered this month but that very few districts negotiated with teachers to do that.

Also, doing so would cause turmoil in planning tests, final exams and graduation ceremonies, among other things.

Bennett called Brown's education spending plan, "Very, very convoluted and very confusing." He said that regardless of whether the taxes are approved, the budget calls for the elimination of all funding for home-to-school transportation for districts next year.

He said he will advise districts to create their next budget as if the tax plan will fail because not planning for cuts would be chaotic if they happen.

Years of slashing spending already have had significant impacts on schools, where low-income students also are affected by cuts in the state's health and social services safety net, said Sheila Jordan, superintendent of the Alameda County Office of Education.

Not much left to cut

She also rejected the notion of lopping several weeks off the calendar. "It's such a disgrace to even think about something like that," Jordan said.

It's not clear what else schools have left to cut, though

some districts are likely to tap into any remaining reserves if that happens.

Schools already have made extensive cuts, with teacher layoffs or in some districts adding furlough days for teachers, eliminating many extra-curricular activities and field trips, and slashing budgets for classroom supplies.

Class size limits

Another part of Brown's proposal would do away with the state setting aside specific funding for districts to reduce class sizes.

The California Teachers Association, the largest teachers union in the state, issued a statement saying the organization has "grave concerns" about the class size reduction proposal.

Eric Heins, vice president of the union, said the organization has not yet endorsed Brown's tax proposal or any other of the ballot measures that would increase taxes. He said none of them will return California's schools to an appropriate level of funding.

"Even if a funding initiative and (Brown's) funding proposal goes through as it is, it really keeps us at 'awful' because we're already bare bones," Heins said.

He said even if education funding does return to high levels in the future, it won't matter to kids in California schools now.

"Those are the ones who are really getting cheated, and those are the ones we can't pay back for what they have lost," he said.

But some leaders in the state say that even if Brown's plan passes, it will do little for schools and say he is using students politically.

"The governor's tax proposal is just a politically motivated ploy to trick voters into supporting taxes that will not ultimately help our students," said Assembly Republican leader Connie Conway of Tulare. "California voters will see through the governor's smoke and mirrors."

E-mail Wyatt Buchanan at wbuchanan@schronicle.com.

JKO

P282