

Serrano Magazine
July 2011

“It was the Best of Times, It was the Worst of Times”

“It was the worst of times” from Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* feels true today for many folks in education, especially those who work with budgets and finance. For educators there is a great deal of concern regarding how to deal with a consistently decreasing budget. The decisions are not easy. Does a school cut programs, staff, and/or bus routes? How many children can be taught in a classroom without negatively impacting the quality of the educational program? These are tough questions and the answers are just not clear.

Amazingly, we don’t have all the facts yet. We are still unsure of our funding for the 2011-12 school year. Yes a state budget has been approved, but there are a number of unknowns in that budget and if the revenue does not materialize as projected, mid-year cuts will be made to education. A \$10 billion state deficit is a daunting number. Education is a major receiver of any funds in a state budget, and if this huge deficit continues, education will definitely be impacted by further reductions.

In order to gain some perspective for those not in education, how would this look if we weren’t talking about a state deficit, if we instead we were talking about a household budget. Let’s say you are a family of four, two parents and two children. You have a dog, a cat, two cars, and a mortgage. Dad works full-time and Mom part-time while the kids are in school. As a family, your income is \$100,000 a year. For some that

may be a bit high, for others a bit low, but let's go with that figure because it will make it easier on the math to describe how this works.

The \$8,333-a-month income sounds like a lot. Let's see where it goes. Twenty-five percent will go to taxes and another \$1750 will pay for your mortgage and other related house-owning costs. We now are at \$4500. Still good. Then there's the car payment, insurance for everything we own, utilities, phone, and cable TV. Don't forget food, clothes, braces, vet bills, and credit cards. Okay so you end up with a few hundred dollars a month you can put into a savings account for the college fund. Sound somewhat normal?

Now let's compare that to our school district budget. Let's just say as an analogy that we expect to receive \$100,000 per classroom to run the school this year. The school district has planned the year on that number, hired teachers and staff, plugged in the computers, and are ready to go for August. The legislature and the governor, however, have not agreed. Because there are not enough funds to pay for all the services the government is now running, they are still discussing how and what to fund.

The districts are counting on the funding to be able to pay all those staff they've hired. However, the state has reduced what schools are going to receive and instead of \$100,000 per classroom, it is closer to \$80,000. And instead of being paid that \$80,000 on the schedule that we had anticipated, now about one-third of that funding has been delayed, or in the state's terminology, deferred for several months. Now the school may not have enough to pay for all the services planned for the year, or at the very least they do not have the cash when they need it.

Salaries must be committed for the year based on the best information possible when the budget was created. We have to keep the lights on and feed the children. So what else can we reduce to make the expenditures meet the income? Do we not buy new textbooks? Do we not mow the lawns or clean our classrooms?

For most educators “the worst of times” is having to decide what to cut, what to take away from the support we provide for children and learning. These are never the decisions any of us want to make. Yet these are the decisions every school district is facing right now.

So, during these very difficult times, we ask that you please show your educator friends your understanding and appreciation. They are facing the worst of times, and yet, are absolutely committed to doing the best they can to provide our young people with the education they deserve.