

Easy Reader

Redondo Beach Unified School District hopes for stimulus fund boost

By [Mark McDermott](#) | August 25th, 2010

The \$10 billion infusion of federal funds intended to save 160,000 teachers' jobs across the nation could allow the Redondo Beach Unified School District to alter plans to increase class sizes by enabling the district to hire more teachers.

But as schools prepare to begin classes this Tuesday, much remains uncertain. The district must decide this week how many teachers to hire, despite not knowing how much money it will receive from the stimulus package or when the money will arrive.

"Anything can happen, but we are planning for the money," said Superintendent Steven Keller. "We are not necessarily spending the money."

The \$26 billion federal stimulus package – which also provides \$16 billion to states for Medicaid – was passed early this month by Congress and signed into law by President Barack Obama on Aug. 10. But the funds must now pass through the state legislature's hands. And that, as the district knows too well, could mean trouble.

The legislature, attempting to meet a \$19 billion budget gap, is nearly two months past the state's legal deadline to adopt a budget. The legislature has passed drastic cuts to educational funding each of the last three years, forcing the district to trim nearly \$9 million from what was once a \$65 million budget.

RBUSD chief business official Janet Redella said the state legislature had yet to determine what formula it would use to distribute the funds – either "revenue limit" distribution, which essentially distributes fund equally among districts, or a "Title One" formula that gives more to economically disadvantaged districts.

Redella was cautiously optimistic that the funds might be used to partially offset class-size increases.

"It's huge," said Redella. "And it could be even better news if we all – I'm talking about districts statewide – knew how much we were going to get so we could bring back the maximum number of teachers. Our goal is to maximize the learning experience of our kids, and the way you do that is to reduce the ratio of students to teachers in a lot of ways. That is why it is frustrating knowing they are allocating this money and we can't get them to tell us how much."

As a cost-saving measure, the district has planned to increase class sizes from an average of 22.7 students to 26.5 at the K-3 level and from 27 students per teacher to 32 students in ninth grade math and English classes.

Keller estimated that the district could receive between \$1 million and \$1.3 million. With the state's budget in perpetual turmoil, he said the district must realize this is essentially "one-time" money and be wary of what is known as a "funding cliff" – that is, federal funds will not supplement school budgets next year. He said he hoped the district could use the money to slightly lower class sizes but said that some increase from last year is inevitable at this point. "Class sizes are evolving," Keller said. "Anyone who knows our school district knows our board, our administrators, and our parents love smaller class sizes. We are looking at every option to be creative with this money. But we have to be mindful and not just spend this money as it arrives, because it would be putting a band-aid on an issue for one year and having to take off that band-aid and fix what was never addressed next year."

The first round of federal stimulus dollars last year helped offset cuts, delivering \$3.6 million to the district. The new stimulus package was unexpected and greatly welcomed by administrators. "You know what – yes, it is one-time money, and I don't care when it arrives," Keller said. "We'll take it."

The district's overall outlook has indeed brightened considerably in recent months. All 16 layoff notices issued to teachers in the spring have been rescinded, due both to leave-of-absence requests by other teachers and nearly \$220,000 in contributions from the Redondo Beach Education Foundation. This week, the district learned that – unlike many school districts – its enrollment numbers had not declined. Asst. Superintendent Nancy Billinger said the district is seeking to hire at least three elementary school teachers this week.

"We anticipate hundreds of applications for those positions, if not over a thousand," Billinger said.

Still, the district is likely to have as many as 20 fewer teaching positions, overall, this coming school year. And there is some lingering disappointment that some of those positions were not retained. Many districts in the state were able to stave off reductions by implementing a shorter school year and giving teachers and other employees unpaid furlough days.

The district reportedly proposed one or two furlough days. Each day represented \$220,000 in savings, or roughly four teaching positions and a half a percent of the district's overall budget. The district's classified employees offered to accept furloughs if the teachers associations also did so, and district administrators presented a check to the RBEF that represented a day's salary for each.

But the Redondo Beach Teachers Association refused to take any furlough days. Keller said the RBTA routinely asked for its share of revenue in past years when the state increased so-called COLA (cost of living adjustment) funding. He said funding cuts this year represented a five to six percent cut to the district budget.

"That is how badly we took a hit, but we never asked for five percent back from our teachers," he said. "We asked for a fraction of that, a small fraction."

El Segundo, Hermosa Beach, and Torrance all took the maximum allowed, five days, while Palos Verdes took four.

RBTA president Amy Santa Cruz said the decision was difficult for the association because members recognized it would cost jobs and increase class sizes. But she said teachers had already effectively taken pay cuts because living costs had increased in recent years without corresponding COLA increases. She said that teachers felt the district had enough in its economic reserves to help meet this year's budget gaps, and in any case, the federal stimulus funds are now intended to rollback many of the layoffs and furlough days implemented in other school districts.

Santa Cruz also said that shortening the school year would negatively impact students. "I think any time you reduce a school year for any reason, it affects kids," she said. "And taking furloughs certainly would do that if they were student days."

School board president Drew Gamet – who accepted a two day furlough and another three percent salary cut as a teacher in Inglewood Unified this year – said he understood the difficult position teachers have been put in.

"It would have been great if there could have been that recognition, just that little bit," Gamet said. "But it's not a little bit for some people, I get that. And it is water under the bridge at this point. We've got next year's negotiations to worry about." ER