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Governor's plans to cut school aid turn quiet parents into firebrands

Angry moms, dads e-mailing, speaking out on fears for kids' education

By Barbara Correa, Staff Writer

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Julie Davine, a mother of two in West Hills, has never considered herself politically active.

But she is hopping mad and drafting a letter to Arnold Schwarzenegger - her first letter to a California governor - over proposed state budget cuts that she considers theft from resources and funding for her kids' schools.

"When I first heard this, I thought, 'It's like robbing from the poor.' We already pay for the music teacher. We pay for a P.E. teacher.

"We have to buy pencils, markers, Kleenex, copy paper. Now the school is going to ask for more. It boggles my mind."

School districts across the state are bracing for potential cuts as lawmakers seek to close a projected \$8 billion budget gap.

In the Los Angeles Unified School District alone, state cuts could sap at least \$460 million next year.

Some districts have begun notifying hundreds of teachers that their jobs are at risk. But while nothing has been decided about exactly what will be cut at the LAUSD, Superintendent David Brewer III has said laying off permanent teachers is not on the table.

Still, letters were scheduled to be mailed to about 3,000 administrative staffers today informing them that they could lose their jobs, said Ellen Morgan, an LAUSD spokeswoman.

Some of the recipients are principals and assistant principals, but it doesn't include "permanent" teachers, she said.

Many parents and district workers fear that plenty of other things also are on the table.

Connie Lujan said she fears she might lose her part-time job as director of the parent center at Winnetka Elementary School, which runs classes in nutrition and English as a second language.

"Here we are, trying to encourage parent involvement. How are we going to get them involved without these classes?" asked Lujan, whose own children go to Balboa Elementary and Nobel Middle School in Northridge.

She is also worried about losing playground supervisors and Winnetka's safe-school program in which staff members stand outside the school every morning to make sure kids being dropped off get to their classes.

But amid growing concern by parents and

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educators, some legislators say the message is coming through loud and clear.

California State Senate President Don Perata's staff says he has indicated he will not agree to any cuts in education.

"We are not going to approve any cuts in education - not one penny," said Alicia Trost, a Perata spokeswoman. "We definitely think the message is getting heard. The 10 percent across-the-board is the easy way out, and we're not going to stand for it," she said about the governor's proposed cuts.

Instead, she said Perata is looking at new sources of revenue, such as a temporary sales tax increase.

But Schwarzenegger is committed to across-the-board cuts, and education is still very much on the table, spokeswoman Sabrina Lockhart said Friday.

"The governor understands that these budget cuts are difficult, but they are necessary. Right now we are putting schools on a roller-coaster ride. He wants a constitutional amendment to create a rainy-day fund as a stable source of funding."

She said public school spending in kindergarten through 12th grade has increased almost 34 percent since the governor took office.

One San Fernando Valley mother, who works as an instructional coach for district teachers, fears

that math and literacy coaching positions will be eliminated. Since coaches have a right-of-return clause in their union contract, jobs would have to be found for them, and they would replace teachers without much seniority, said the woman, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"We have return rights, so we would be bumping hundreds of teachers. They would be teachers who have been teaching for a year or two. So they're going to bump these young, dynamic teachers, and we've been out of the classroom for five to seven years."

Porter Ranch parent Alissa Haroush got a flier from her son's school recently saying there might not be summer school this year.

Her son, Adam, 6, goes to Beckford Elementary in Northridge and is speech-delayed. Summer school helps him catch up, she said.

Meanwhile, Tia Schneiderman, a film editor in Sherman Oaks, has a daughter with an extreme allergy to peanuts. She thinks her school, Kester Elementary, could lose its school nurse.

She said Kester's PTA pays for the nurse on its own, but she fears that if state budget cuts hit hard, the PTA might need to redirect its priorities.

"It's just not fair to our children," she said. "These kids are going to be running this country some day."

As West Hills mother Davine did, Schneiderman

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said the budget cuts have politicized her.

"I am no political activist. I'm more likely to know what's happening with Britney (Spears) and Lindsay (Lohan) than what's happening in our state government," she wrote in an e-mail to a group of parents last week.

"Maybe the 'Mr. Smith Goes To Washington' poster hanging in my family room is getting to me."

Her e-mail included a form letter that parents can easily download and send to state senators and Assembly members.

For now, writing elected officials is about all parents can do about the situation.

"I would be willing to pay more taxes if I knew it was going toward education," said Karen Pollack, a parent whose children go to Roscomare Road Elementary, a high-performing one in Bel-Air where parents are asked to pay \$600 a year for all the extras once taken for granted at every school.

"The root of everything is educating our children," said Neil Hassman, a personal manager and producer who has a son in kindergarten at Roscomare.

"Do we want to have a state populated by a bunch of morons?"