

Thousands protest diminishing school resources

by Shannon Barry, Milpitas Post

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Thousands of people, young and old from differing cultures and walks of life, rallied together in an effort to amplify the same universal message to legislators last week: "No more cuts to education."

Last Thursday's effort, called "Start the Day for Students," was an urgent statewide day of action to fight for the diminishing resources for students, and California's future. It was organized at the University of California at Berkeley but expanded nationally with similar rallies held in other states that have seen the economic downturn stress its budgets and trigger education cuts.

According to the Stand Up For Schools Web site, the 106 initial events registered early last week grew to 218 by Thursday. Although most of the events were peaceful, protests in Oakland, Santa Cruz and Davis were raucous, garnering more attention from media outlets and police forces.

During rush hour traffic more than 150 people were taken to jail for blocking interstates 980 and 880, Oakland police said. At Davis, protestors clashed with police, who fired beanbags, tear gas and pepper spray, as protestors locked arms in an attempt to block Interstate 80. And students, faculty and workers used their bodies to block all campus entrances of the University of California at Santa Cruz, causing the school to be shut down for the day.

Local efforts were more peaceful.

Milpitas Unified School District was doing a leafleting campaign at all 13 school sites with teachers, administrators, parents and board members handing out informational fliers to parents as they dropped their kids off that morning, said Michael Vieyra, secretary of Milpitas Teachers Association and California Teachers Association representative for Milpitas teachers.

He said the flier contained basic but vital information about how the \$17 billion in cuts to education in the last two years have impacted public schools and colleges. Such impacts include the elimination of entire art, music and physical education programs and more

than 16,000 educators being laid off. At state universities, student fees have grown almost 50 percent since 2007 while thousands fewer classes are being offered, according to the California Faculty Association.

The flier advises those who receive it to call legislators at 1 (888) 268-4334 and tell them to stop the cuts to public schools, colleges and other essential services.

"It will not fix the educational funding problems here in Milpitas, or California for that matter, but it is a step in the right direction in educating our parents and public that there is a problem and we need their help to get the problem fixed, to send a message to our legislators that the state budget cuts must stop (and) that our schools and other essential services cannot take more drastic hits," Vieyra said.

That same day, Fremont Unified District Teachers Association organized a rally from 3:30 to 5 p.m. on Mowry Avenue and Fremont Boulevard to stand up for education. According to FUDTA President Brannin Dorsey, 300 people including school board members, parents, students and people running for city council took to the streets to stand up for public schools.

"It really was a community event and I would say everyone was really supportive," she said.

There were multiple picket signs but Dorsey said her favorite one was: "Educate now or incarcerate later."

Dorsey added the event was a good way to raise awareness and get the ball rolling on making people aware of the state budget crisis and how it affects education.

"We need to take charge and let Sacramento know it's not acceptable to not fully fund education," she said.

Dorsey also talked about public education's longstanding importance.

"Public education was established before our nation was a nation and that is what has made our nation so great," she said.

In San Jose, approximately 125 people filled Independence High School's gymnasium to hear Assemblyman Joe Coto, D-San Jose, and other local leaders speak up against the problems.

Prior to the 4 p.m. event a group of 15 students from the grassroots organization Californians for Justice were seen walking around the campus holding picket signs while chanting short alternating protest cries including "Ain't no power like the power of the youth because the power of the youth don't stop" and "Educate don't terminate." The organization works for racial justice by organizing youth, immigrants, low-income people and communities of color in order to improve their social, economic and political conditions.

As the students walked around campus, they encouraged passersby to join them for a rally being held in the school's gymnasium, where they eventually filed in and found a seat.

In addition to the students, representatives from the California Teachers Association, East Side Union High School District, East Side Teachers Association, Alum Rock Educators Association and Save Our Schools chapters came holding signs and banners along with wearing stickers and shirts to help people identify them.

Before the event began, Gemma Landeza, a Spanish teacher from Evergreen Valley High School in East San Jose, talked about the changes she has seen since beginning work there five years ago.

There are no libraries or librarians, she said. The district first lost its librarians three years ago and library hours are limited to one hour a day for students.

With this as one of many changes students are being forced to endure "the morale is gone," Landeza said of students' attitudes. To help counter their beliefs, she responds to negative statements by saying, "If you don't care, no one cares for you."

Before Coto took the floor, he gave several members from East Side's Board of Trustees and interim Superintendent Dan Moser the chance to talk about the crises everyone in the community is facing.

East Side board President Eddie Garcia asked students with picket signs to hold them up to display their outrage with the current education system.

"We need to tell the people in Sacramento ... you can't come to our communities and take from our schools," he said. "We're going to fight back ..."

Coto said this is a feeling educators are sharing around the state.

"When I left the Capitol after a morning session there were over 7,000 teachers and students and parents and classified staff ... and they were sending a very powerful message," he said. "...No more cuts to education."

Applause rang out from the audience before a chant stating "No more budget cuts" began echoing throughout the gymnasium.

Rather than focus his talk on what government officials are doing wrong, Coto continued by sharing ways he is working on changing the situation.

He is supporting an initiative to overhaul the two-thirds majority requirement needed to approve the state budget, petitioning tax loopholes for major corporations and trying to put a stop to the increases in college tuitions.

"We are the eighth largest economy in the world," Coto said of California. "What hope are our youngsters going to have of going to a university and affording it if we are increasing tuition?"

Coto also shared some solutions he has been working on proposing in an effort to help bring California back to No. 1 in the country for schools. Such things included seeking more new taxes on oil, increasing tax to 11 percent for top wage earners, implementing a vehicle license fee, increasing tobacco and alcohol by 10 cents per drink or smoke, and taxing one cent to every teaspoon of sugar added in drinks like soda.

Coto's assembly ended on the same note it had begun, with support from those he was speaking up for. He tied up his thoughts as San Jose City College students representing Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan came marching in support of the cause that day.

The daylong efforts continued later that evening, as students were seen walking down North Jackson Avenue and Mabury Road to continue protesting.

Dorsey said the event helped raise awareness for an issue that is ongoing. She explained that there are steps for change in education continuing to accelerate because of the day.

"I think that all of us have the responsibility to talk to our friends and family who are throughout the state of California," she said.

Sen. Ellen Corbett, D-San Leandro, shared similar feelings about the day of action.

"I welcome the fact that students are rallying in Sacramento and across the state today," she said. "This should be the beginning of their advocacy throughout the budget process. More legislators and the governor need to heed their call. ... In Sacramento right now we are talking a lot about protecting and creating jobs. California's investment in education is directly tied to the economy and the availability of good jobs. Cuts to education rob our students of the tools they need to enter this state's highly skilled workforce and as a state we must renew our promise to California's students."

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