



## YOUR ACTION NOW IS URGENTLY NEEDED! by Steve Courter

It has often been said that in education, every decision is a political one. That is truer now than at any time I can recall. The state of Arizona is facing a deficit of up to \$1 billion, and that is just to close out the current fiscal year. The next two budget years are expected to be even more trying. To put the current deficit in some perspective, it is almost 10% of the state budget.

Why does this concern you, as an educator? Because our local governing board sets a budget for TUSD, and our contract negotiations are conducted locally, it is easy to forget that the bulk of our district's funding comes from the state, which also sets limits for district spending. Local negotiations are still critically important, as they reflect priorities of the governing board and address many issues of working conditions and employee rights not contained in state statute. Nonetheless, a local governing board must stay within state-determined spending constraints, and those constraints could get a lot tighter given Arizona's budget situation.

Recent news reports point out the folly of Arizona's failure to invest in our K-12 public education system. *Education Week's* report "Quality Counts 2008" rates Arizona second to last (behind only Utah) in education funding, and when certain variables are factored in, we even beat out Utah for the last spot. The one-two punch came in the same report with the finding that Arizona teacher salaries are 40th out of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, about \$4800 below the national average. Now that we are faced with this fiscal crisis, an already-inadequate education budget is threatened with cuts.

If state legislative leaders and committee chairs have their way, severe cuts could occur to the education budget, not only to close this fiscal year's deficit but to tackle the looming deficits through 2011. Briefly stated, their proposal includes cutting state spending by well over \$600 million dollars, and funding most of the rest of the deficit by dipping into the "rainy day" fund. Construction of new schools would have to be paid for on a "cash-as-you-go" basis. Governor Napolitano is proposing to protect education funding by using more of the rainy day fund and financing through bonds the construction of new schools, as well as affecting savings in state departments and agencies.

It does not always happen this way, but on this issue we are in common cause with TUSD in protecting the education budget from the meat ax that some key legislators will be proposing to use (there is even a proposal to eliminate for the remainder of this fiscal year the \$46 million that was added in last year's budget for non-administrative pay raises, even though that money is contractually obligated!) So how can you help?

### Contact your state legislators immediately by:

- **Calling 1(800) 352-8404, and urge protection for K-12 funding.** You may find your legislative district on your voter registration card. If you do not know who your state legislators are, operators at that number can help you. You may also go to <http://capwiz.com/nea/az/state/main/?state=AZ&view=myofficials#0>
- **Writing a letter to your legislators.** The address is available at [azleg.state.az.us](http://azleg.state.az.us).
- **Going to [arizonaea.org](http://arizonaea.org).** This is the Arizona Education Association website. You may sign up to be a "cyberlobbyist." AEA will send you legislative alerts, including an easy way to construct a letter to your legislators. I would appreciate your sending me a copy of your letter and replies you receive from state legislators. This will help in our lobbying efforts.
- **Marking March 5, Education Day at the state capitol, on your calendar.** TEA will help arrange transportation, and coordinate with TUSD for released time. A large turnout will send a message to the legislators that we are watching them, and expect them to protect education funding.

What is the cost of inaction to you and our families and students? Our upcoming contract negotiations will take place against the backdrop of an extremely gloomy TUSD budget situation, which will be very tight even under the Governor's proposals. Supplies and funding for other necessities will be even tighter than is presently the case. An increasing number of our newer colleagues may decide that teaching, particularly in Arizona, is just not for them, worsening the growing teacher shortage, as well as shortages in vital education support professional positions.

As Arizonans, we face difficult times. The unemployment rate is rising nationally. The tragedy of families losing their homes to foreclosure is at an unimaginable level, and economists fear recession. We will have to brace ourselves for a difficult reality, but at least economists and government authorities foresee that this economic downturn will probably be fairly short-lived, and Arizona will continue to grow. Please act now so that when better times return, it is not too late to prevent devastation to our already under-funded education system.

If you have comments, suggestions, or questions, please contact TEA President Steve Courter at [steve.courter@arizonaea.org](mailto:steve.courter@arizonaea.org) or call 795-8870.