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School district's perks face review

By JAMES HAUG
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On top of \$77.5 million in state funding reductions, the Clark County School District got a homework assignment from the Nevada Legislature: Justify new perks and benefits to its top staff and examine whether such benefits can be reduced.

Lawmakers required all Nevada school districts and the university system's Board of Regents to prepare reports by Sept. 1 on improving financial efficiency and accountability. But controversy over the Clark County School Board's decision to award its top staff more than \$100,000 in new benefits was likely part of the motivation behind the mandate, said Stephen Augspurger, executive director of the Clark County Association of School Administrators and Professional-technical Employees.

The union, whose membership includes district principals and central administrative staff, sent a lobbyist to Carson City for the special session, which was called to close an \$887 million gap in the state budget.

Augspurger said the district's new contracts for executive staff expose the "disingenuous" plea from Superintendent Walt Rulffes for "shared sacrifice" on behalf of all district employees.

Rulffes, however, did not interpret the legislative resolution as something specifically targeted at the district.

"This is more global than that," said Rulffes, noting there has also been controversy over how staff at state universities are compensated.

The superintendent said School Board President Terri Janison is preparing an open letter to Augspurger to set the record straight over the controversy regarding two-year contract extensions for Charlene Green, deputy superintendent of support services; Bill Hoffman, general counsel; Lauren Kohut-Rost, deputy superintendent for instruction; Martha Tittle, chief human resources officer; and Jeff Weiler, chief financial officer.

School Board member Linda Young said she is willing to discuss postponing some of the new benefits to the executive staff, which were approved Oct. 7 during a midday workshop. Questions about whether the workshop was properly noticed prompted parent Kevinn Donovan to ask the state attorney general's office to investigate a possible open meeting law violation.

"At the very least, they should be reviewed," Young said of the executive staff contracts. "I'm all for transparency and accountability. ... I think the Legislature is telling us that we need to pull together and step up to the plate. Let's look at the big picture and not just my little piece of it."

Rulffes said the district will comply with the legislative resolution. To help settle the controversy,

the district has already committed to putting all information about district employee salaries and benefits on its Web site, ccsd.net.

"We have nothing to hide," he said.

State Assemblyman Mo Denis, D-Las Vegas, said there were multiple reasons for the resolution. It originated out of the Democrats' special session compromise with Republicans, who wanted to make changes to the state's collective bargaining law, he said.

Because of the hard economic times, the legislative resolution asks for the K-12 system and higher education to examine all programs for efficiency, check whether benefits to high-level staff can be reduced or temporarily reduced, review the ratios of administrators to staff and students, post organizational structures and budget information on district Web sites, examine overhead costs for efficiency, ensure adjustments to salaries and benefits are "made in a fair and equitable manner," and consider "shared sacrifice" to prevent "massive layoffs."

The Legislature is cutting state support for the district's operations by \$77.5 million as part of its 6.9 percent state funding reduction to education. That figure does not include the state's appropriation of another \$25 million from a district fund for small capital improvements.

District officials also anticipate that revenue from local property taxes will be down by \$45 million.

Under the best-case scenario, the Clark County School District might have to cut as many as 700 jobs before the new fiscal year starts on July 1, Rulffes said.

He anticipates increasing class sizes in first, second and third grades to eliminate about 540 teaching jobs. He is also committed to cutting central office staff and administration by 10 percent, or another 120 jobs.

Rulffes projected the district might also save as much as \$32 million by cutting four noninstructional days from the school year.

Overall, the superintendent believes he has found ways to save \$91 million of the \$122.5 million in reductions that the district now has to make. If additional savings are not found, the district may have no choice but to cut a total of up to 1,300 jobs, he said.

Rulffes said the controversy with administrators' union officials is rooted in their refusal to take a furlough day in exchange for the district covering a half-percent increase in contributions for each administrator to the Public Employees Retirement System.

"It was a wonderful option, but I guess they wanted it all," Rulffes said.

The administrators' union has argued that the district covered the same PERS cost for teachers. Rulffes said principals and administrators get much better benefits than teachers.

As part of his personal sacrifice, Rulffes said he could be earning \$42,000 more this year if he had not refused salary increases since 2007.

This year, he took a 10 percent pay cut, a reduction of \$30,700 based on a salary of \$307,000.

The administrators' union, however, points out that the district in 2006 and 2007 agreed to pay for two additional years of PERS credit for Rulffes, which cost about \$150,000. Rulffes can also redeem as many as 20 days of vacation for cash, which would mitigate his pay cut to less than \$5,000 annually.

Contact reporter James Haug at jhaug@reviewjournal.com or 702-374-7917.

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