

Montebello school staff facing layoffs

By ANNE ARTLEY

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MONTEBELLO — Imagine going to work in the morning knowing more than 300 people will receive a pink slip that day, and not sure if you are one of them.

That was the fate that awaited new teachers and other employees from the Montebello Unified School District March 15, as the school board voted the night before to remove 333 positions, which also include janitors, secretaries and electricians.

The district said the cuts are the result of a demand by the Los Angeles County Office of Education to slash \$17 million from the district's budget for next year.

The school board has stated that it would try to find the funds to keep some of the employees, and that the layoffs will not begin until the end of the school year.

"Even though members of the board are indicating that many of these layoffs will actually be rescinded before they'll be carried out, employees are still panicking," said Andy Shinn, who teaches sixth grade at Bell Gardens Intermediate School.

"[Employees are] still worried for their futures. They're wondering how they're going to make mortgage payments. The worst thing about this is that they're being laid off for something that isn't their fault."

Shinn himself said he was not worried about his job, since the layoffs are based on seniority, according to the district.

Linda Nicklas, the co-founder of Montebello Activists to Clean House 90640, a watchdog group that aims to promote government transparency and accessibility, said the school board did not have to resort to layoffs and could solve the budget problem by "thinking out of the box."

"I suggested that they ask every employee if they would be willing to take a day or two off per month and save that salary to keep everybody's job," Nicklas said. "Make it a combined effort so that everybody's in it together. Everybody suffers, but nobody loses their livelihood."

The number of layoffs is lower than the original district estimate of 468 positions, a projection that led students from multiple high schools to walk out of class in protest March 2.

The students demanded financial transparency and the firing of Ruben Rojas, the district's chief business officer.

Earlier this year, former dis-

trict employees starting coming forward claiming the district bypassed the normal hiring process to get Rojas on staff. The district's deputy superintendent and assistant superintendent of human resources were told not to become involved in his background check, according to an investigation by the Whittier Daily News.

The investigation further revealed that Rojas provided inaccurate information about five out of six positions he claimed to have previously held, and the superintendent of a school district whose name was on a letter of recommendation Rojas provided said he did not write the letter.

"I don't see why Mr. Rojas is still sitting up there," Nicklas said. "He's a fraud. He doesn't have credentials. ... This board underestimated these kids. The walkout showed their intelligence and they will continue to be a thorn in its side until the board does what's right."

The district's personnel commissioner, Charles Pell, along with another Montebello resident served school board member Benjamin Cardenas and President Lani Cupchoy with recall petitions, blaming them for supporting Rojas and claiming that they used school funds to pay family members and political interests.

But the district said the financial problems predate the current school board and the hiring of Ruben Rojas in 2015.

Robert Alaniz, a senior partner at Milagro Strategy Group, a public relations firm representing the district, said that the current board was "dealt a bad hand through no fault of their own," and is taking the fall for cuts that should have been made a few years ago.

Ninety-three percent of the district's budget is dedicated to salary and benefits, according to district officials, compared to 87 percent in other school districts of comparable size.

In order to sustain the monthly payroll of about \$22 million, the district has drawn funds from its emergency reserves, which has drained reserves from \$44 million in the 2010-11 school year to \$11 million in 2014-15, according to the district. If the reserves dip below three percent of the annual budget, the current level, a state administrator will be appointed to oversee the district.

In response to the allegations of mismanaged funds, board member Cardenas called for a full forensic audit last December, which the state will conduct. The process will take about nine months to one year.