

<http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/california/la-me-laUSD25may25,1,6484960.story?coll=la-headlines-pe-california&ctrack=1&cset=true>
From the Los Angeles Times

Schools could use funds better, study says

On the same day critical report is released, Supt. Brewer unveils plans to pare 500 positions.

By Howard Blume

Times Staff Writer

May 25, 2007

The Los Angeles school district gets more of its money into the classroom than most urban school systems, but doesn't use those funds nearly as well as it could, according to a study commissioned by the district and the teachers union.

The results were released on the same day that Los Angeles Unified School District Supt. David L. Brewer unveiled broad plans to eliminate 500 positions, while refashioning the very bureaucracy that may be less bloated than widely believed.

Brewer and his staff are identifying about \$95 million in overall reductions to a \$6.35-billion budget. The main reason for the cuts is this spring's contract settlements with employees.

But Brewer also insisted that any harm would be more than offset by advantages from a concurrent reorganization. Brewer is moving some services closer to schools while also setting aside \$11 million for his evolving reform strategy, part of which, he said, he will present in more detail next week.

Some of Brewer's budget priorities line up with conclusions of the research team from Education Resource Strategies, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit that was hired as part of a prior contract settlement between the district and teachers.

Teachers union leaders have long insisted that L.A. Unified is top-heavy with bureaucracy. An initial Education Resource Strategies study in November did find some growth in the central office, but not at the expense of average class sizes. That earlier study also concluded that teacher salaries had lost ground to inflation, largely because of the rising price of health benefits.

In this more extensive review, researchers concluded that L.A. Unified receives less money than most other urban school districts, while putting 59% of its budget into the classroom. That is more than Washington, D.C.; Rochester, N.Y.; Baltimore; Boston; St. Paul, Minn.; and New York City but somewhat less than Chicago. The study is unlikely to settle the debate over how much truly goes into the classroom, or whether, for example, independent charter or private

schools operate more efficiently. The researchers offered no judgment on which urban school system is getting the best value for its dollars, but Los Angeles, they said, clearly could do better.

The district spends "more on professional development of teachers than just about anybody, but it's not a coherent strategy," said Stephen Frank, the study's principal coauthor.

In response, Brewer, who took the district's top job about six months ago, said he wanted to give teachers time to plan and work with coaches in small teams. He also favors moving to block scheduling, which keeps students with teachers for longer sessions. Block scheduling also can reduce the number of total students that teachers must handle in high-priority subjects, such as English and math.

Block scheduling requires faculty approval; other proposed reforms probably will require alterations or waivers to the union contract.

"I personally like block schedules," union President A.J. Duffy said. "But there are upsides and downsides. Every decision should be made on a school-by-school basis. If you have a model for reform and your teachers are not on board, the reform won't work."

Brewer also intends to move some staff from the downtown headquarters to regional offices. Those "mini-districts" also will take charge of more professional training funds. Over time, more authority over those resources will go directly to schools, Brewer said.

Duffy responded that schools — and their teachers — should get the authority right away: "If Supt. Brewer thinks he's going to get efficiency from the mini-districts, then he's crazy."

The researchers said that restrictions in the local union contract typically exist for good reasons and that L.A.'s contract is not out of line with the norm. "The critical step will be for both parties to cooperate with each other to ensure that the recommended changes actually happen," Frank said. "The district cannot transform its schools without the active support of UTLA and, in some cases, without a significant renegotiation of the UTLA contract."

That's hardly the only hurdle. Echoing other research, the Education Resource Strategies team said state and federal rules hamstringing local reform, while adding costs and bureaucratic layers.

So does the district's settlement of a lawsuit over services for disabled students. The district's own rules often contribute to the problem. Taken together, schools have virtually no discretion, for example, on how to spend funds to help English learners.