

Fresno Unified leader Michael Hanson unveils first budget proposals

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By Hannah Furfaro

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Fresno Unified's superintendent hopes to spend an extra \$3.5 million on school safety measures next year under an early budget plan unveiled Tuesday. The proposal would also add cash to schools' discretionary funds and reduce class sizes to 24 students in certain grades.

Superintendent Michael Hanson said at a news conference that he'd like to add more lighting and more infrared and high-definition security cameras at middle and high schools to combat petty crimes -- and more serious ones, like the shooting of an Edison High School teacher in December.

Hanson said he wants campuses to be seen as safe zones.

"Criminals, go somewhere else," he added.

Hanson was clear that the enhancements are not solely motivated by the shooting of teacher Steven Guerrero, who was injured last year when a group of teens attempted to rob computers from his classroom one evening as he readied to go home.

Instead, Hanson said, the measures would prevent a whole host of crimes that the district faces. Cameras could help spot thieves, he said, like the ones who recently stole copper wire at six Fresno schools. Cameras would also help identify vandals who graffiti school buildings after hours.

Trustee Carol Mills said she hasn't noticed any more crime than usual, but agrees school cameras could use an upgrade.

"It gives a level of comfort to parents and staff and students that we are keeping up with safety measures on our campuses," she said.

The security measures are one of three major proposals Hanson announced Tuesday. The items will be presented to the school board on Wednesday, kicking off annual budget discussions that usually wrap up around June.

The district is expecting around \$58 million extra from the state this year under the new education funding model, called the Local Control Funding Formula. In addition to security, Hanson said he wants the money spent on lowering class sizes and school-specific programs. Ruth Quinto, the district's chief financial officer, said some of those dollars also will go toward teacher salaries.

Online learning, counseling services and professional development were the big winners last school year, with each getting millions of dollars under the district's \$646 million budget.

Hanson said this year's plan would spend about \$2.5 million to hire 39 new teachers to lower kindergarten-through-third-grade classes to 24 students. Under the Local Control formula, districts are required to lower some class sizes to 24 by 2021. Hanson said he'd like to speed up the process.

Trustee Luis Chavez said he'll support the plan, as long as it targets schools with high numbers of disadvantaged students.

"If you look at the intent of the Local Control formula, it was specifically designed to help English learners, low-income and foster youth," he said. "My priority is to make sure we're spending the dollars in the way it was intended."

Also on Hanson's agenda: direct an extra \$2 million to school councils -- which are composed of teachers, parents and others -- to spend how they please. That money could be used to bring in speakers, plan field trips or add special science labs, among other things. Hanson's plan also would add \$700,000 to after-school and athletics programs.

Teachers union leader Eva Ruiz said she's pleased the district is lowering class sizes and restoring money for school councils after seeing cuts to those groups in recent years.

"We're encouraged that the students will be getting some money to get resources," said Ruiz, president of the Fresno Teachers Association. "Is it everything they need? No."

Hanson also hinted at boosting funding for career education classes, a popular topic among the district's school board members. The board voted to direct an extra \$500,000 to career technical education last year. But that left some wanting more, including board members and career education advocates who say high school programs could use additional dollars.

The superintendent offered few details, but said the investment will be "significant."

"Our board expects it, I think our community expects it, and I'm here to say it will be coming," Hanson said.

Trustee Michelle Asadoorian said she'd like to see more money spent on a community day school for students with criminal records. She also said she hopes the public can be more involved in the budget-setting process this year.

"I always like the budget to be more of a public process, and I think it's important our public feels the priorities are for our children," she said.

Calls to the other four trustees were not returned Tuesday.

If you go

-- Fresno Unified School District headquarters, 2309 Tulare St., board room, second floor

-- Wednesday: Closed session, 3:30 p.m.; public meeting, 5:30 p.m.

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