

Valley School Districts Differ On How To Use Money Earmarked For Disadvantaged Kids

By Jeffrey
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A whiteboard in Tami Townsend's office

School districts across the valley are trying to figure out what to do with new money intended to help their most vulnerable students. But a letter from the State Department of Education raises questions about whether some of their spending on things like teacher raises is allowed. The interpretations of the new funding formula vary, based on who you ask.

The special funding, known as supplemental and concentration funds, is a big funding boost for schools to help the neediest kids, such as poor students, non-English speakers, and foster kids.

It is part of the Local Control Funding Formula intended to enable schools to provide new services to help them succeed in school.

But there's a catch. Because the formula is so new the state has not issued a set of guidelines about what it can and cannot be used for.

[You can find a detailed breakdown of Fresno Unified's plan here.](#)

Paul Warren with the Public Policy Institute of California says the ambiguity in the law is intentional, designed to free schools up to be creative with the needs of their students.

"Because they don't want to get out there with a lot of rules right off the bat. They want to, as much as they can, give district flexibility. But there are limits to that and that is what we are exploring," Warren said.

And that ambiguity has left districts in the valley in an interesting spot of justifying their spending without hitting hidden speed bumps.

The second page of the letter from the state

However, Warren says there is one rule that the state made clear in a recent letter to districts...the services must be new and specific, not just paying more for existing resources.

"Those supplemental concentration funds really are supposed to be targeted for services for those funds. So you could spend more money for more teachers for those kids. But you couldn't give the superintendent a raise," Warren said.

But how that districts interpret what they can do with the funding varies from place to place.

In her second-floor office of Fresno Unified's downtown headquarters, Tami Townsend's walls are covered floor to ceiling with charts and large sheets of paper laying out how they plan to help the most disadvantaged kids in their district.

Fresno Unified is in line for 126-million dollars in supplemental and concentration funds, on top of their base funding.

Townsend says that is because so many of their students...87-percent...fall into the three special categories.

"students get two extra years of instruction before they enter middle school"-Tami Townsend, Fresno Unified School District

"Almost all of our kids are either foster youth, English learners, or living below the federal poverty level. With the vast, vast majority living below the federal poverty level," Townsend said.

From that perspective Townsend says nearly everything they do will lead to improved educational outcomes for their student including lower class sizes and longer schools days.

Townsend says something as small as making the elementary school day 30 minutes longer can have a big impact.

"That along with other changes we made to pre-school means students get two extra years of instruction before they enter middle school," Townsend explains

The district also wants to give teachers raises and benefits increase in addition to hiring more janitors and doubling library funding.

"If you have 100-percent, or close to 100-percent concentration district, pretty much anything you do for the whole district is going to help those students"-Richard Marting, Fresno County Office of Education

But despite the letter from the state department of Education warns districts them that the funds cannot be used for across the board raises and benefits unless those raises are tied to specific new programs.

Townsend says they understand where the state is coming from but that improving teacher pay and benefits is crucial to finding and keeping the best teachers...so helping adults does in fact help the kids.

Part of Fresno Unified's spending plan

"And we recognize that with extreme poverty that we have in Fresno, there comes additional challenges for all of the adults in our system. So we want to be competitive. We want to be a place where people want to come and work," Townsend said.

The district is expected to negotiate wages and benefits with the teacher's union over the summer and raises are likely to be part of the conversation.

The state department of education declined to comment saying the letter speaks for itself.

But also points out that it is hard to tell districts what is and isn't OK...until districts ask, which hasn't happened yet as this is the first year they must submit their plans.

Richard Martin with the Fresno County Office of Education says they understand across the board raises may be contrary to the goal of the law but in some cases may be the only way to improve education for poor and underserved youths.

"If you have 100-percent, or close to 100-percent concentration district, pretty much anything you do for the whole district is going to help those students," Martin said.

Martin says it's not hard to see how higher wages, or other supplements, can help those students especially in rural areas.

"One of the justifications would be say a small rural school district is losing its most highly qualified experienced teachers because they don't have the resources to give raises. So they are losing those teachers," Martin said.

Part of Fresno Unified's plan involves spending money on janitors, bus drivers, and crossing guards as well as longer school days, smaller classes, and more training for teachers.

But not all districts in the valley are considering using the concentration funds to increase teacher pay or benefits.

Christian Shannon with the Kern County Office of Education says they don't think concentration funds can be used in that way and that districts are instead focusing on outreach, and extra tutoring and translation for parents.

"Mentoring and counseling opportunities. Help with applications for financial aid which would cover decision made by them for college or career. Campus walks on college campuses. Leadership training," Shannon said.

[You can find a couple of Kern County Office of Education's plan here.](#)

And there is a bigger long-term budgetary concern that could come into play...pension obligations.

Tami Townsend with Fresno Unified says some districts could become so overwhelmed by retiree benefits that they will have no choice but to spend concentration funds pay pension.

It's not clear how the state department of education would react to that plan, let alone teacher wage hikes that appear to be in the works.