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SMUSD's PACE Promise to go on without coordinator

By: NOELLE IBRAHIM - Staff Writer | Posted: Saturday, March 22, 2008 12:00 am

SAN MARCOS -- San Marcos Unified School District's guaranteed admissions partnership with Cal State San Marcos will continue even though it gave up the program's coordinator position to budget cuts, district officials said last week.

"The program itself is not going anywhere," said board President Sharon Jenkins. "We're just going to staff it in a different way."

District officials have been grappling with ways to reduce a projected \$9 million budget deficit for the school year starting July 1. The deficit is based on \$4.4 billion in cuts to education funding proposed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The coordinator position for district's Partners Advancing College Education (PACE) Promise program was among a list of 40 certificated employee positions trustees voted to eliminate last week in an attempt to trim next year's budget.

"I understand, with budget times being what they are, you have to make hard cuts," said Bill Singh, who was appointed coordinator of the partnership last May. "I would not feel good about being in this position if it meant cutting teachers or affecting kids in the classroom."

Eliminating the 40 positions saves the district about \$2.2 million, including \$120,000 by cutting the PACE coordinator position, according to district officials.

The partnership guarantees automatic admission to the university for all qualified graduating seniors in the district who meet basic college prep requirements, starting with the class of 2009. It also helps students with financial need attend the university through scholarships.

Singh is expected to return to a high school administrator position when classes resume in the fall, though he said he will continue to have a hand in PACE.

"Right now, I'm not sure what that role is going to be," he said.

To keep the program running, duties are expected to be divided up among staffers in the district's instructional services department, though specifics are still being worked out, Jenkins said.

Singh said it may be a challenge to not have one person overseeing the program, but that "with more people being involved comes more ideas."

Singh said he's concerned about fundraising.

"The economy is tough right now and everyone is being more thoughtful with how they spend their money," he said.

Since the beginning of the school year, the district has collected roughly \$340,000 in donations from employees, businesses and others in the community to support carrying out the program, which includes providing tutoring for college readiness, test preparation, campus field trips and communication efforts, he said. The cost of the program has not been determined yet, officials said.

Th \$340,000 includes a portion of money set aside for helping qualified students participating in PACE with financial need attend the university through scholarships. The amount of scholarship money students receive will depend on how many participate and what their financial needs are, Singh said.

In August, the district received a \$6 million endowment from the Rancho Santa Fe-based Leichtag Family Foundation to support the scholarships. The district will use a portion of the endowment each year to offset some of the costs of tuition and

books for eligible students once they graduate, said Singh.

In addition to exploring new avenues of raising donations for the program, the focus next year will be to continue to get a message out to all students and parents in the district about the importance of college and the opportunity PACE presents, he said.

"We want to make sure every student has an opportunity to go to college and we're going to help you get there," Singh said.

Throughout the school year, the aim has been to help students focus on college at an early age, while preparing them for the rigors of college work.

"The earlier you get kids and families thinking about college, the better the results," Singh said.

Elementary schools have jumped on board to create a college-going culture on campus by having each classroom "adopt" a university by learning about the college, decorating the classroom with the university's banners and wearing the university's colors each month.

San Marcos Elementary held a "Tigers Bound for College" winter camp at Cal State San Marcos in January, where students got a mini-lesson on the U.S. Constitution as well as a feel for a college learning environment. Their parents also got crash course on what it takes to support their children in their higher education goals.

Also, by last month, all seventh-graders in the district had toured the Cal State San Marcos campus and learned more about PACE Promise, the different types of universities in California and college admissions requirements. Most of them had never set foot on a college campus before, Singh said.

Sophomores who are on track for college toured the university as well, he said. In addition, all 10th- and 11th-graders in the district learned about what it takes to qualify for PACE during small assemblies. In May, the district will hold a "Breakfast of Champions" for high school juniors -- the first class that can take advantage of PACE -- that will include motivational speakers set to talk about hard work and get students excited about college.

School counselors, site administrators, teachers and some parent-teacher organizations have been prepped on the partnership as well.

While he couldn't estimate how many students might participate in the program, Singh said university officials have said they would guarantee admission to qualified students in the district, no matter how many.

"Cal State (San Marcos) wants to recruit students from North County," he said.

Eventually, the district would like to expand PACE to include partnerships with Palomar College and a University of California school, affording more options to San Marcos students, Singh said.

"This is a defining program for a (school) district," he said. "It's innovative. It's unique. It's an incentive for people to move to a city."