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## L.A. Unified cuts spark protests, finger-pointing

In an attempt to redirect the school district's budget ax, parent groups, unions and other organizations have rallied their members to make calls and write e-mails and letters to the board.

By Raja Abdulrahim  
 March 30, 2009

*Queen of Hearts: Who's been painting my roses red?*

*Card: Not me, your grace! The ace, the ace!*

» **LAUSD reaches tentative contract deal with teachers**

*Queen of Hearts: You?*

*Card: No, two!*

*Queen of Hearts: The two, you say?*

*Card: Not me! The three!*

As Los Angeles Unified Supt. Ramon Cortines and the Board of Education attempt to bridge a \$718-million budget deficit with widespread cuts and layoffs, supporters of each program, position and school at risk are pointing the finger elsewhere as they try to redirect the budget ax.

It is oddly reminiscent of a scene from "Alice in Wonderland" as all sides try to escape fiscal pain. The board could vote on the budget cuts on Tuesday.

Parent groups, unions and other organizations have launched campaigns for each potential fiscal victim and rallied their members to make calls and write e-mails and letters. They've flooded the offices of the board and the superintendent, who said he has received between 50 and 100 e-mails, calls and letters a day.

"Because that's the way we do business in L.A., you come and scream and yell and you usually get your way," Cortines said in an interview. "Well I'm a little different. I listen, but it has to be logical, it has to be reasonable, you have to bring me a plan that lives within the budgetary parameters."

At last week's school board meeting, and at previous sessions, supporters of special education, assistant principals, cafeteria workers and custodians, art programs and graduation advisors spoke about why their positions must be saved.

In early March, parent groups and the Associated Administrators of Los Angeles discovered that more than 400 assistant principals were slated to be cut and replaced with 200 special education specialists. Moms Unite, founded by two mothers from [Castle Heights Elementary School](#) in Cheviot Hills, began an e-mail campaign with more than 5,000 parents.

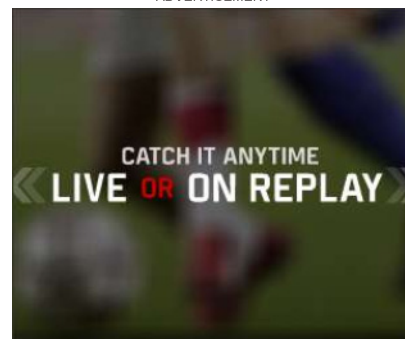
"We understand the state mandate, yet they need to make sense," said Moms Unite co-founder Ginger Bower, a Cheviot Hills stay-at-home mother.

"We're not naive, we understand that cuts need to be made," added fellow co-founder Victoria Rierdan Hurley, a Beverlywood mother who works in public relations. "But we will protest things that will impact the quality of education that the students are getting."

Meanwhile, the administrators group suggested a reduction in the number of assistant principals -- rather than replacing them with specialists. Cortines accepted that proposal; this was the only group that offered an alternative, he said.

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Moms Unite is now turning its attention to try to prevent cuts that would increase class sizes. Hurley said the group is different from others because they have no special interest.

"Our interest is to protect the entire school system."

Others who are trying to protect their jobs and special programs, however, consider their positions to be equally crucial to the functioning of the district.

At Tuesday's meeting, one group handed out fliers that read: "Why LAUSD schools need Diploma Project Advisors."

Another flier distributed by Service Employees International Union members stated that laying off more than 1,000 cafeteria workers, custodians and teachers aides would deal "another devastating blow to our children's education."

In late February, Cortines and board member Tamar Galatzen attended a meeting at [West Valley Special Education Center](#) in Van Nuys where teachers and parents had heard rumors about a possible closure for months.

Two days later, Cortines was at [C. Morley Sellery Special Education Center](#) in Gardena where parents and teachers had heard similar talk of closure. Both schools could be closed because of low enrollment, a savings for the district of \$1 million to \$2 million for each campus, officials said.

"This is a school that the teachers and parents and staff are passionate about, but there are dozens of other schools and programs that have its supporters," Galatzen said. "And everyone is 'No, no, not my program, this is the best thing the district's doing,' and we're hearing it from every angle."

Donnalynn Anton, associate superintendent of special education, said the finger-pointing campaigns are common during budget crises. "Given the budget and the state of the state and the state of the nation . . . everyone's going to hurt in this place, it's a pretty disastrous time."

Some who are at risk are trying to save their jobs and programs by insisting that their elimination won't save the district much money, or could even cost more.

"From a practical standpoint we were told passion is great, teaching is great, environment of the school is great, but all the school district cares about is dollars and cents," said Steve Rosen, a West Valley parent who spoke at the February meeting attended by Cortines. "We have to be practical."

At Sellery, parents told Cortines that savings from closing the school wouldn't be significant in light of the huge deficit, said Principal Karol McQueary.

"They say we're sort of a drop in the bucket," McQueary said. "Especially because of the cost of moving our students, they [the parents] feel that cuts should be made elsewhere."

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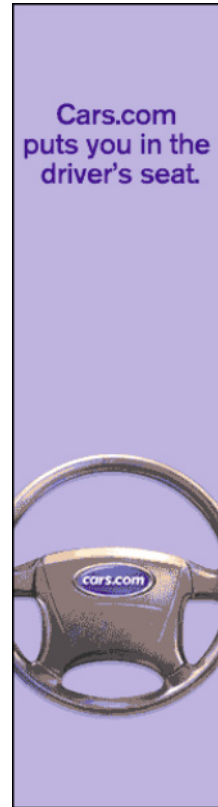
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