



SANTA MONICA - MALIBU UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

March 20, 2020

## **Superintendent's Message: Layoffs, Project-Based Learning, and FAQ**

Dear Parents, Guardians and Staff,

I want to thank you for your patience and cooperation during this unprecedented time. As we face the COVID-19 virus throughout our increasingly globalized world, we are more connected and dependent on each other than we sometimes understand.

Our interconnectedness has given us prolific access to information. Managing and interpreting the various information and information sources available is a challenge for all of us -- public and private institutions, groups and individuals, alike. I believe the only way to address this complex state of affairs is for institutions to be as transparent and communicative as possible, while taking great care to reduce the prospects that information will be misinterpreted or misunderstood.

District staff and I will do our best to continue to communicate as transparently as possible and "set the record straight," when there is information circulating in the community that may be confusing and misleading. The focus of this message is to *set the record straight* regarding why the recent layoff notices have taken place in SMMUSD.

The following are questions that have surfaced in the community regarding the recent layoff notices that went out to specific staff recently.

### **Why were layoff notices given to some teachers?**

Layoff notices were given to some teachers while the district ensures that its enrollment projections and programmatic objectives are accurate and that the district's programmatic needs are being met while also providing legally required notice to those who may be laid off for the 2020-21 school year.

Every year, our district must project the enrollment of students for the upcoming school year, which we use to determine staffing levels. This process of balancing enrollment with staffing occurs in every district and is part of a district's duty to exercise fiduciary responsibility. If a school district projects a significant increase in student enrollment, then there is an adjustment to hire more teachers and staff. When student enrollment decreases substantially, layoffs will occur, when natural attrition and retirements do not occur.

While enrollment projections are analyzed, there are legal requirements that must be adhered to in order to lay off teachers or other certificated staff. Those requirements are meant to give teachers sufficient notice that they might be laid off, pending final information gathering, projections and decisions.



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In general, individuals given a layoff notice were identified based on their seniority in the district and their current teaching assignment.

In terms of timing, the procedural layoff notification process requirements make it necessary to provide layoff notices before enrollment projections can be finalized. Our district is required to issue layoff notices in order to give legally required notice to those who may be affected and to make sure the district has time to be confident in projecting enrollment needs. While it is a less than ideal process, the fact that a teacher receives a layoff notice does not mean that a teacher will actually be laid off.

Layoff notices are often given, but later rescinded once final enrollment and other information is finalized. While we recognize this process is stressful, it is one we must follow in order to comply with the law, be fiducially responsible, and to give teachers reasonable notice of what may occur.

**Will there be an increase to the staffing ratio of the district, in other words, will there be more students per teacher?**

While in typical circumstances, an individual teacher may find himself or herself with an additional student(s), student-to-teacher staffing ratios will not change.

The district sets the student-to-teacher ratio in agreement with the Santa Monica-Malibu Classroom Teachers Association (SMMCTA), and thus budgets for expenditures on teachers accordingly. (See table 1 below). Staff, including teachers, comprise 83% of our entire district budget. The district staff has the fiduciary responsibility to align staffing of teachers to the staffing ratios as closely as possible for each school site.

Schools	Ratio	Ratio Title I	Contractual Guideline
TK-3	24:1 grade span average	24:1 grade span average	24:1 grade span average as part of LCFF
4-5	30:1	27:1	30:1
Middle Schools	Ratio (LMS, MMS)	Ratio (JAMS)	Contractual Guideline
6-8	34:1	33:1	34:1 (various)
High Schools	Ratio (MHS, Samohi)		Contractual Guideline
9-12	35:1		35:1 (various)

Table 1 – Teacher-to-student ratios



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Aligning staffing to enrollment and staffing ratios happens annually. The alignment process can take place through natural attrition and retirements, as has been the case the past several years. When attrition does not take place, the only way to address the decline in enrollment is through a layoff process. This year, natural attrition and retirements are not expected to meet our need for reductions. (See table 2 enrollment)

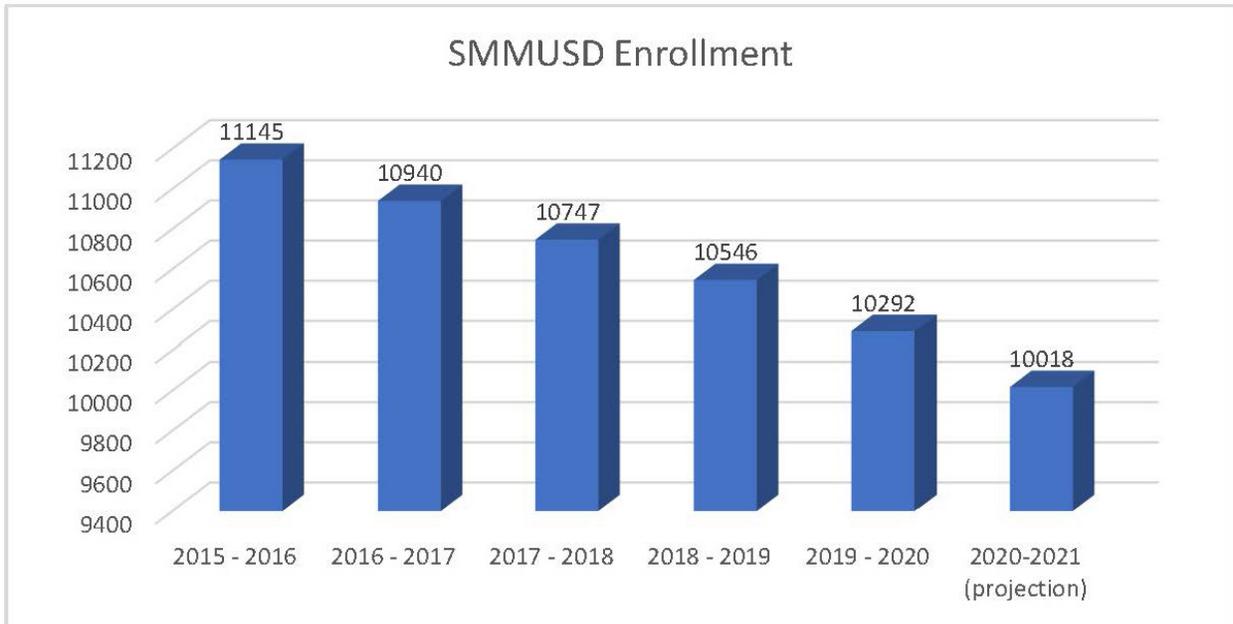


Table 2: SMMUSD enrollment decline past six years: 1,127

**Why did the board approve 46 full-time equivalencies (FTEs) of certificated reductions at the February 20, 2020 school board meeting?**

Although the board approved the ability for the release of 46 full-time equivalent (FTE) teaching positions, that will not be the number of teachers who will be released. At present, we believe the number of teachers who will actually be released to be less.

From the outset, we knew that several layoff notices would be rescinded. The district is re-purposing our literacy coach classification to a new classification of instructional coach. However, in order to make this transition, we had to provide notice to a group of teachers who would be “bumped” by more senior teachers who are currently literacy coaches, and who may not accept our offer to become instructional coaches. This transition could result in as many as 11 notices to be rescinded. As of the writing of this communication, this transition process is happening.

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**It appears that more money is being spend to start a new high school program at the Obama Center than other sites. Why?**

The personalized project-based learning (PPBL) program is a Santa Monica High School pathway (housed at the Obama Center) in its infancy and has the potential to serve as a catalyst for more project-based learning programs in future years. Linked is a more detailed description of the pathway, and unique opportunities for rising ninth and tenth graders. [www.smmusd.org/](http://www.smmusd.org/) PPBL. Please view this [video](#) about the program.

The current pathway is in its first year serving ninth graders who would have attended Samohi. Although we did not meet our first year's goal of enrolling 100 ninth grade students, we are confident that we will meet our goal in future years. If for some unforeseen reason, we do not reach our enrollment goals, we will reconsider this program. The pathway is structured to serve 100 students in each grade level with an eventual total of 400 students. The staffing will come from what would have been allocated to Samohi to serve the 400 students if they had remained at Samohi. This means that the program is cost neutral. Teachers who work in the PPBL pathway will perform all teaching, counseling and internship-coordination functions. For that reason, the current expected staffing ratio when the program is in full maturity will be 25 to 1. This will leave the remaining Samohi students on the main campus with a lower (improved) student/counselor ratio than what is in place currently.

The PPBL program is part of our commitment to provide high school experiences that strengthen student engagement and serve our community. It is both a free-standing program, as well as one among several, laboratories for testing and developing innovative instruction in our district. For the most part, staffing that would have been allocated to serve students who would have attended Samohi will simply follow those students to the PPBL pathway. As would have been the case if the program had been located on the main Samohi campus, there is an initial investment that has been made. We believe the PPBL pathway will provide more opportunities for students to reach their learning potential and open doors for our system to explore learning through more authentic, relevant approaches appropriate to the 21st-century.

**Why are you not keeping cuts away from the classroom?**

We are doing our best, but the fiscal reality is this: In the past five years SMMUSD has sustained a drastic drop of enrollment, while staffing has increased. (See declining enrollment chart above.) Additionally, Retirement benefit rates have increased dramatically and special education is a woefully underfunded mandate resulting in the district's structural deficit spending cycle. Without significant reductions to the budget, SMMUSD will experience a deficit of \$10,757,534 in 2020-21 and a deficit of \$8,664,736 in the year 2021-22. This will cause our ending fund balance in 2021-22 to be negative by more than \$4 million.

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To address the structural deficit, district staff will spend the next two years reviewing all expenditures and developing suggestions for changes. This includes, but is not limited to, supplies, consultants, professional learning, legal costs, programs we operate (ie immersion, project-based learning, technology) staffing costs at the district and school sites, and our permit policy. Staff will work with the Superintendent's Budget Advisory Committee (SBAC) to evaluate opportunities for realignment of resources. The SBAC committee will provide feedback to staff suggestions and may suggest and consider alternatives for reducing expenditures.

We will be keeping cuts away from the classroom as much as possible. So far, we have made approximately \$1.5 million worth of reductions from district office staff and functions in the last two years. Example of reductions include reductions in management and classified support positions from education, business support services and maintenance and operations.

As explained above, one area we must always consider on an annual basis is the alignment of enrollment to staffing. This is a necessary practice as the district is structured fiscally-based on a specific ratio of students to adults, including in the area of teachers. Deviation from that ratio has huge implications on the services we are able to deliver students as 83% of the expenditures in the district are tied to staffing.

We fully understand the emotional reaction to what is our annual procedure for realigning staff to enrollment. We can assure families that our students will continue to receive an outstanding education and the equitable opportunities that our district is known for throughout the region. I hope this information provides a helpful explanation to some questions that are surfacing in the community regarding SMMUSD's layoff process.

Be safe out in the community and take care of one another.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ben Drati, Superintendent