Modesto Bee

Modesto school board eyes cutting librarian positions, focusing on tech instruction

By Nan Austin

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Third grader Joseph Godinez looks up a book using a computer catalog at the Rose Avenue Elementary School library in Modesto on Thursday March 6, 2014. Modesto City Schools is poised to cut 29 full-time teaching positions for next year, including most elementary school librarians.

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MODESTO — Modesto City Schools is poised to cut 29 full-time teaching positions for next year, including most elementary school librarians. The long-standing program that taught students the Dewey Decimal System and how to find reference books may be replaced by teaching computer skills and online data searches.

The cuts proposed in Monday’s school board agenda would be 11.5 teacher-librarian jobs, 12.5 instructional coach positions and 2.5 bilingual language specialists now working in elementary schools. High schools would lose 2.1 counselors for English learners and a half-time teacher in the nurse precertification program.

“As I understand it, we’re not eliminating people, necessarily. We’re eliminating positions,” MCS board President Cindy Marks said Thursday. “We’ve done this every year to create flexibility to add positions where they’re needed.” Marks noted the district has up to 60 teachers leave each year, opening spaces for librarians and others to return to classrooms. Fifteen retirements are listed in Monday’s agenda.

“We will still have school libraries, and students will still have access to books and materials,” board Vice President Amy Neumann said by phone Thursday.

“What I support, and we are proposing, is to eliminate library instruction time. As an elementary school mom and board member, I believe that this is a better use of precious instruction time. If approved by our unions, library skills time will be replaced with computer technical instruction from a credentialed teacher. This kind of instruction is crucial to student success on the Common Core Smarter Balance tests that will be implemented next year,” Neumann added in an email.

At Rose Avenue Elementary School on Thursday, a class of third-graders checked out books from librarian assistant Samantha Castillo. Principal Diane Scott said at Modesto elementary schools, classes have two half-hour spots each week in the library. During one, they read and check out books with an assistant such as Castillo. For the other, they get a library lesson and check out books with a credentialed teacher.
The proposed cut would eliminate the lesson and, if the plan suggested by board members moves forward, replace it with a minicourse in the computer lab.

The community’s input on what it would like to see in schools next year makes flexibility a high priority this year, said board member Sue Zwahlen. “There does seem to be a feeling of excitement regarding all this,” she said.

“We’re going with evidence-based practices, which we see in medicine a lot,” added Zwahlen, a nurse. “Go with what’s effective.”

The district faces “a multitude of timelines,” said Superintendent Pam Able, including the March 15 teacher notification rule, community input deadlines to build next year’s budget and negotiation schedules on contracts with both its unions.

“We know this is a stressful situation, so we are making every effort to keep employees informed as information becomes available to us,” Able said via email Thursday. “The elementary librarian and the elementary instructional coach positions are affected by this layoff. The district will be hiring coaches that will be assigned school sites. We are looking at providing prep time to elementary teachers in a different manner (than librarian time).”

The cuts to English learner support positions also will be changes in job duties, not less help for students, Able said. “Enhancing programs for English learners is the plan, not cutting programs.”

The agenda gives no expected savings as a result of the elimination of 29 positions. Able said the cuts were not made to save money. “The district’s financial standing has not been compromised, nor is it at risk. (This) is a change in programming, rather than a need to cut positions.”

The Modesto Teachers Association did not respond to The Modesto Bee’s requests for comment.

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