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30 students. Natomas Superintendent Chris Evans wants to add a week of school. And Washington Unified leaders will give raises to teachers in West Sacramento.

Jun. 13, 2013

School leaders in Woodland, California, want to shrink kindergarten class rosters now jammed with 30 students. Natomas Superintendent Chris Evans wants to add a week of school. And Washington Unified leaders will give raises to teachers in West Sacramento.

After Gov. Jerry Brown and legislative leaders struck a deal this week to increase education funding for years to come, local districts are eager to expand programs for the first time since a recessionary wave of budget cuts hit schools in 2009.

The state budget deal gives K-12 leaders confidence that they will have more money to spend next school year, and it charts a course to increase funding through 2020-21. It directs even more dollars to districts with high concentrations of poor students or English learners.

“We’re very excited to hear it,” said Deborah DeVoi, superintendent of Woodland Joint Unified. “It has been a lot of years of doing with less and then less again. It is a quite wonderful thing that we aren’t looking at cutting things again this year.”

Woodland Joint Unified, projected to get a 5.3 percent funding increase next school year, is considering reducing class sizes in kindergarten through third grade below 30 students, hiring more teachers in the process. Before the recession, 20 students per early elementary classroom was standard in California.

Folsom Cordova Unified and Davis Joint Unified are also considering the possibility of trimming class sizes with their additional money.

Natomas Unified Superintendent Chris Evans asked his school board Wednesday to

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can dig its way out of its structural deficit and consider spending money on new programs.

The district has been spending more than it brings in for years, said Ken Forrest, chief business officer. He blames the district's fiscal woes on declining enrollment and the increased costs of programs and compensation.

"We need to bring expenditures in line with revenue," Forrest said. "Every penny we receive we plan to use to build the fund balance, so reductions will be less next year."

Officials at Elk Grove Unified, the region's largest school district, are still reviewing the state budget and were unsure whether they could add programs next year. The district expects to receive less money than it needs for the next three years, according to district spokeswoman Elizabeth Graswich.

Folsom Cordova can't afford to add any programs or personnel next school year, said Debbie Bettencourt, superintendent of Folsom Cordova Unified. But it may reduce class sizes the following school year.

"It took us seven years to get to this low spot," she said. "It will take eight years to get out of the hole."

California Teachers Association President Dean E. Vogel applauded the state budget deal, though he said Brown's new formula is such a "huge shift" that it would probably undergo tinkering in future Capitol negotiations.

Teachers faced layoffs, furloughs and benefit cuts as districts searched for ways to save money. Vogel said they deserve to benefit from more funding.

"I think it's perfectly appropriate for teachers to say, 'C'mon, we've been sacrificing just like you, now let's start trying to equalize things,'" he said. "And we'll see how it

plays out.”

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At Twin Rivers Unified, which stands to gain additional dollars under Brown's formula because it serves a predominantly low-income population, teachers union leader John Ennis said the district may seek to reduce kindergarten class sizes from 25 to 20 and add popular academic programs such as International Baccalaureate.

Though most districts have yet to make final budget decisions, school officials say that programs cut in recent years are candidates for restoration: art and music classes, after-school programs, custodians and school nurses, maintenance projects and sports programs.

David Walrath, deputy executive director of the Small School Districts' Association, said districts remain cautious, however.

“A lot can happen in between,” he said, noting that economic projections can sour. “People are nervous. They went through deep, deep cuts. They don't want their children and staff to go through that again.”

Though the new budget deal generally provides more money for suburban districts than Brown originally proposed, grumbling continues over a formula that still tilts toward Los Angeles and other large urban districts.

“I think most of the suburban districts in the state would probably define themselves as losers,” said Jeff Frost, a lobbyist for the California Association of Suburban School Districts. “It's been a concern from the beginning — and it's that way now.”

Suburban school districts in the Sacramento region were happy that the final deal raised base funding for all districts, but they were guarded in comments about whether it was enough — and they tended to be noncommittal about how new money will be spent, according to a sampling of school officials.

“We aren’t displeased with this ‘local control funding formula’ — we’ll be receiving

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whether or not that’s been achieved.”

The final deal recognizes the practical reality that large urban districts have special needs in serving disadvantaged youth, and the political reality that massive districts such as Los Angeles Unified — with more than 650,000 students — wield tremendous clout in the Capitol, said education lobbyist Kevin Gordon.

“From the outset, there could not be a proposal where major urban districts, including Los Angeles, would lose,” Gordon said. “That was a non-starter.”

Lawmakers also were wary of angering suburban districts, partly because most legislators represent at least one and because votes in suburban areas could be key in 2014 to Democrats maintaining narrow supermajorities in both legislative houses, Gordon said.

“They had to deal with both those issues,” Gordon said of officials crafting the final deal. “And they did so very artfully.”

The Legislature is expected to pass the school funding compromise at the end of the week as part of a state budget. The fiscal year begins July 1.

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