

School budget pleases officials

• Plan would repay funds from Prop 98 and provide grants for arts, other programs.

By Michael Miller, Daily Pilot

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Leaders of the Newport-Mesa Unified School District expressed support for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's recently adopted state budget, which uses a \$7.5-billion windfall to help boost school spending.

Last Tuesday, the state legislature approved a \$131-billion spending plan that would repay the funds borrowed from Proposition 98 and also provide block grants for art, music, physical education and other programs. Three days later, Schwarzenegger signed the bill with some vetoes, but the education programs remained intact.

Newport-Mesa officials faulted the governor's budget in some areas, including what they considered a lack of adequate funding for special education, but said overall that the plan would put the district on the right track.

"In general, it looks pretty good," said Jeffrey Hubbard, Newport-Mesa's new superintendent, who took office the day after Schwarzenegger signed the budget. "We still have concerns about reimbursements for special education. They continue to concern us, and that was one component of the budget that was not fulfilled in terms of our hopes."

Overall, though, Hubbard said, "It's a good budget for education. There seems to be a little bit in it for everybody."

The Proposition 98 funding has been a contentious issue since 2003, when Schwarzenegger borrowed \$2 billion in education funds to combat a budget crisis. When the governor failed to reinstate the funds the following year, many educators accused him of backsliding on his promise.

Judy Franco, a longtime Newport-Mesa school board member, said the new budget had restored some of her faith.

"It is a big improvement over the last several years of budgets for K-12 [public] education," she said. "There was finally a recognition that the schools were owed the money, that there had been a commitment to repay the money that was taken. That process has begun and, I'm sure, will continue."

Schwarzenegger's budget also allots education funds to more specific areas, including \$105 million for arts and music, \$40 million for physical education and \$200 million for counselors to help students struggling to pass the California High School Exit Exam. This year's graduating class was the first that had to pass the exam to earn diplomas, something that a handful of Newport-Mesa seniors were not able to do.

Newport-Mesa spokeswoman Jane Garland noted that many of Schwarzenegger's objectives mirrored those of the district's strategic plan, which was first adopted in 1999 and updated two years ago.

"All that has to be positive for Newport-Mesa," Garland said. "Since art, music and physical education are all parts of our strategic plan -- areas we have certainly labeled as needing an infusion of money -- it has to be good for us."