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San Diego Unified pandemic costs could reach \$71 million



At Central Elementary School in San Diego's City Heights, kindergarten teacher Michelle Icenhower worked on a word lesson with her class. San Diego Unified says it will pay for summer school to make up for learning losses from COVID-19 school closures. (Nelvin C. Cepeda/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

The estimate includes technology, Chromebook distribution and up to \$52 million for summer school

By KRISTEN TAKETA

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The COVID-19 pandemic could cost San Diego Unified School District \$71 million — \$19 million for the rest of this school year and up to \$52 million for summer school, to make up for learning lost during school closures, according to new district estimates.

“What we’re concerned about is the number of students who are gonna be falling behind as a result of the distance learning,” said San Diego Unified Board Vice President Richard Barrera.

The \$52 million assumes every district student would take summer school, which would not be universally required so the actual cost likely won't be as much.

These costs are beyond what the district was anticipating prior to the pandemic. Back then the district was planning to make \$84 million in budget cuts to make ends meet over the next school year.

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Barrera has warned that budget woes are likely ahead for school districts, as governments are expected to see steep revenue declines due to the pandemic. Many California school districts already were struggling financially going into the pandemic.

Several districts, including San Diego Unified, are expecting learning losses on top of financial losses.

San Diego Unified students will have lost five weeks of formal, graded instruction by April 27, which is when the district officially launches its distance learning. Students with disabilities also will have gone five weeks without receiving special education services from the district.

Many teachers have been providing learning activities to students, but not every student has been learning or receiving instruction during this time.

A recent statewide poll of parents by the Education Trust-West found that 46 percent of San Diego parents surveyed had not been contacted by their teacher since schools physically closed, and 71 percent lack the resources they need to keep their children academically on track.

About 86 percent said they are concerned that their children will fall behind academically.

District officials also have said that online learning won't be able to replace in-person instruction in terms of quality.

The district will spend \$19 million on:

- Chromebook distribution, including cleaning of computers and staffing of distribution sites
- Technology, including computers, adapters, headphones and internet hot spots for students, as well as computers for staff to work from home
- Staff training
- Substitutes for teachers unable to work
- Licensing and software
- Education kits for homeless and hospitalized students
- Sanitizing school facilities
- Translation services for remote parent-teacher interaction
- Technology support

The \$19 million represents net costs. It factors in \$3 million in savings from reduced utilities and bus fuel, Barrera said. It also does not include things for which the district expects to get reimbursed, such as some food distribution costs.

It includes \$1 million in lost facilities rental income.

Over the next two weeks, San Diego Unified will continue distributing some 40,000 Chromebook laptops to students who need them.

The district also is distributing 20,000 free meals to children at 19 school sites every weekday.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture pays for the meals, but the school district is paying overtime and hazard pay to school employees and school police working at food and laptop distribution sites, Barrera said. The hazard pay, which is one and a half times regular pay, is to compensate for the added risk of interacting with many people.

Police officers at distribution sites ensure that people follow social distancing protocol, Barrera added.

The district also anticipates shelling out money for a few thousand WiFi hotspots for families who, for one reason or another, are unable to get internet access through Cox or Spectrum, Barrera said.

“We were trying to purchase as many WiFi devices as we can, and it’s a hard thing to do because there’s just not a lot available on the market because everyone’s trying to buy them,” Barrera said. “It’s like our version of ventilators.”

Cox and Spectrum are offering free internet for two months to families who qualify and for \$10 a month afterward, which the district plans to cover, Barrera said.



to restrict what students are exposed to on the internet when using district-owned Chromebooks. For example, the district is purchasing a district-wide Zoom licensing agreement that will allow the district to set safety controls for teachers.

The district anticipates losing money on Chromebooks because not all the computers will get returned at the end of the school year; some will be lost or damaged, Barrera said.

San Diego Unified will not penalize students or hold them financially responsible for the Chromebooks.

Finally, the district expects higher staffing costs to pay for distance learning training and substitutes for teachers who take family or sick leave. It's not just teachers who will get training; substitute teachers and aides who work with students with disabilities will, too, Barrera said.

Summer school would last five to six weeks and would ideally take place in person at schools, Barrera said. But that will depend on whether it is safe enough to return to school by summer.

If not, the district would still want to do summer school online, he said.

The district won't be able to force students to take summer school, but it would be open to all students and strongly encouraged for students who teachers believe are falling behind, Barrera said.

Kisha Borden, president of the San Diego teachers union, said the union hasn't been told about any plans to expand summer school.

She doubts that teachers or students would want to participate in more school.

"I don't know how many people would be up for that. Even families I'm hearing from, families that are just overwhelmed that I don't know if that would be anything people would take advantage of," Borden said.

San Diego Unified and Los Angeles Unified previously asked state legislators for \$500 per student to pay for pandemic costs, which amounts to about \$51.5 million for San Diego Unified.

The district has been allocated about \$1.7 million in emergency state funding under Senate Bill 117.

At least \$1.7 billion of federal coronavirus aid eventually will be distributed to K-12 schools statewide, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

San Diego Unified is tracking student logons to measure distance learning participation rates, similar to what Los Angeles Unified has publicized, Barrera said.

But the district likely won't publish student participation rates until April 27, because that will be the first week all students who need a Chromebook will have one from the district, he said.

Updates:

11:08 AM, Apr. 10, 2020: *This article has been updated with comments from the San Diego teachers union president.*

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