

# School Will Shut Doors in Response to Budget Cuts

## Magnet School Noted For Hands-on Approach

BY SVETLANA ZENKIN  
*Contribution Writer*  
Friday, March 22, 2002

After weeks of deliberation and attempts to find alternative solutions to its budget woes, the Berkeley Board of Education decided Wednesday to close the City of Franklin Microsociety Magnet School.

The closure will bring additional relief of \$326,000 to what was originally a \$6 million budget deficit. The shortfall has already been diminished by between \$3 million to \$4 million with faculty and staff layoffs.

"Given the current budget situation, I see no other choice but to close the school," said school board Vice President Joaquin Rivera.

In the next few weeks, parents of the approximately 200 students will need to choose one of the district's other 11 elementary schools, said Superintendent Michele Lawrence.

Students will be given their first or second choice, but they are required to make a decision by April 1.

To help parents and students through the process, the district is expected to give them a week to visit schools and pick the ones most suitable to their needs.

Although Berkeley Unified School District Officer Francisco Martinez has been working to accommodate the school's students, placements depend upon the availability of openings in other elementary schools.

Martinez expects to hold a meeting with the parents next week to help them understand the process.

Lawrence also plans to meet with students and parents from the school to discuss their concerns, said Marian Magid, the school district's spokesperson.

"We are going to make sure to go the extra mile to work with the parents and students who will be affected," Rivera said.

Board members, teachers, parents and students reacted emotionally to the decision.

"I was on the board when we decided to open the school. We were very excited, and I'm still on the board (now that) we have to close it," Rivera said.

Boardmember Terry Doran commented on the potential traumatic effect of uprooting the community.

"Just closing a school temporarily because it's not earthquake-safe is really disruptive, but these are difficult times, and decisions need to be made that are painful, but necessary," he said.

The closure of Franklin was originally included in the budget reduction package voted on by the board on Feb. 27, but was postponed so the district could find ways to avoid closing the school.

The microsociety model, which offers students a hands-on learning experience as they run a miniature city with agencies like a city council, a recycling center and a restaurant business, received districtwide commendation.

"City of Franklin is one of the best things I've seen happen in education," said Michiko H. Murillo, parent of a fourth-grader at Franklin.

Board President Shirley Issel added that the micro-society model engages students and that their test scores reflect their dedication.

"I just loved (it) every time I've been there. It's a vibrant community," Issel said.

But Lawrence cited reasons for closure that overwhelmed the benefits the school offers its students.

Enrollment numbers significantly lower than those of other elementary schools, the layoffs of six out of 12 teachers at the school, and the costs of moving students around campus during construction convinced the board that necessary budget cuts demanded the closure.

City of Franklin Principal Barbara Penny-James said teachers and students will go on, trying their best to run the micro-society until the end of this school year.

"It's not over till it's over, and the knowledge and skills gained by students will remain with them for a lifetime," she said.

The board is considering how it will use the school site and the infrastructure there. They may reopen a regular elementary school there if additional space is needed to accommodate the district's students.