Plan to shift adult education classes to colleges concerns officials

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WATSONVILLE — When Gov. Jerry Brown presented his budget plan in January, he proposed several changes to school funding that many educators have described as bold and ambitious.

Among these are proposals to fund schools based on their numbers of English learners and low-income students. But adult education officials are far less excited about Brown’s plan to shift control of their programs from K-12 school districts to community colleges.

Brown proposes $300 million for the transition, which would occur over seven years, and $15.7 million for occupational programs. Funding would be allocated from a block grant based on the number of students served.

Leaders from Watsonville/Aptos Adult Education and Cabrillo College say the plan, called the “Adult Education and Apprenticeship Realignment,” is unrealistic and would place the burden for adult education in a system not equipped to handle it.

In his proposal, Brown said the adult education services currently provided by both K-12 districts and community colleges are neither coordinated nor regulated, resulting in an “inefficient and redundant system that is not always structured in the best interest of adult learners.”

The proposal states that community colleges, which were created to serve adults, are better positioned to provide adult education services at regional and statewide levels.

Cabrillo College interim president John Hendrickson disagreed.

“I do not believe that Cabrillo or any community college in California will be able to pick up or provide adult education services that will offer the breadth of the services that adult education schools provide,” he said.

“That won’t happen. We don’t have the funding.”

Hendrickson said the money proposed for the shift is “inadequate,” and while the state’s 112 community college partners with school districts, they would still need additional state and federal funding to run adult education.

The problem is aggravated by education cuts that have forced school districts to sweep flexible adult education funds to backfill their K-12 core instruction programs, he said.

Hendrickson said Cabrillo would also have to reduce the variety of classes it offered to its adult learners, limiting them to basic skills classes geared to helping prepare students for colleges, ESL programs and vocational programs.

“To go beyond those I think would be a disservice for the public,” Hendrickson said.

The Association of California School Administrators — the state’s umbrella organization for school leaders — has also stated its opposition to the plan.

In a prepared statement, the organization expressed concern that such sweeping statewide regulations could result in the elimination of programs customized for small communities.

“The services that are provided locally do not fit nicely into boxes easily understood at the state policy or fiscal level,” the statement said.

While Hendrickson said that low-income students can apply for admission fee waivers and other financial assistance, he added that community colleges would be unable to offer the low-cost classes offered by adult education schools.

Cabrillo currently charges $45 per unit, compared to the $25 per semester charge for the ESL classes at Watsonville/Aptos Adult Education.

In addition to vocational classes, the school offers language and music, in addition to a wide range computer classes, with flat fees ranging from $25 to $300.

WAAE director Nancy Bilich said that students attending adult education schools are doing so to learn English and get their GED diploma.

“We believe we have a different level of student than a community college,” she said.

“These are things they need before they get to the community colleges. Once they finish our (English learner program) they move to Cabrillo, and we encourage them to go to Cabrillo.”

Bilich said the proposed transition comes at a time when adult education programs across the state are aligning to state mandates to be more accountable, and increasing their numbers of high school students looking to make up credits for graduation.

In addition, WAAE has also branched out to provide technical medical programs such as certified nursing assistant and pharmacy technician.

“We’re going to continue and try to get stronger and better,” she said. “Adult education is constantly changing to meet the needs of the community.”