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Politicians want federal grants handed to schools immediately

By Shirley Dang
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RICHMOND - King Elementary School teacher Phyllis Graham paced in front of the brown chalkboard.

"How many parts of speech are there?" Graham said to her after-school class.

"Eight!" came a chorus of yells.

Graham nodded, writing "nouns" on the board. Then she explained verbs, and how their job is to show action or a state of being.

"You get so many words thrown at you all day, I want you to know the difference," Graham said.

Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia looked on with a small team of activists. One verb they'd like the Legislature to learn - rush.

The state counts a surplus of up to \$100 million for federal after-school grants, a portion of which must be spent before September 2006 or it will return to federal coffers. Bay Area politicians and activists want to give the cash to schools immediately and to speed up the process the state Department of Education uses to disburse the money.

"To have \$100 million of that money unspent is just unacceptable," said Gioia at a news conference Monday at King.

About 3,300 students in Contra Costa County take part in 21st Century programs, including 1,360 in West Contra Costa.

For years, the state Department of Education has had trouble making efficient use of grants from the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, according to a February Legislative Analyst Office report.

In 2002-03, the state appropriated nearly \$41 million but so far has spent less than half that, the report says.

Gioia and other activists say the state should follow the legislative analyst's recommendations for reform. The report suggests giving money up front rather than reimbursing schools, increasing the amount per child from \$5 a day to \$7.50 a day and

raising the cap for schoolwide funding.

Elementary schools with 600 or fewer students can receive up to \$75,000 through 21st Century. The state grants middle schools of 900 or fewer students \$100,000; high schools, \$250,000.

"It's simply unfair to our children that outdated bureaucratic formulas are keeping millions from our schools," said Ted Lempert, president of Children Now in Oakland.

Part of the problem lies in notifying schools that they will receive grants.

In 2002-03, schools did not learn of their grants until April, according to the report. Last school year, districts found out in July after the school year, and fiscal year, ended, the report says.

The delay backs up planning and can rob an after-school program of the higher enrollment that comes with starting in the beginning of the school year.

"You've got to hire staff. You have to let parents know," said Megan McTiernan, who manages all the West Contra Costa's after-school programs.

For 2004-05, the state Department of Education alerted some grant winners, including Highland and Wilson elementary schools, as late as November, McTiernan said.

The district pulled together classes for January, but missed out on offering children extras the first half of the year.

"By then, the whole fall is gone," McTiernan said.

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