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By HOWARD BLUME
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L.A. schools chief Austin Beutner says no major restructuring is in the works



L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti, left, and schools Supt. Austin Beutner both support a parcel tax for local education that is on the ballot in June. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

Los Angeles has been anticipating a shock wave from schools Supt. Austin Beutner, who worked for months on a plan to “reimagine” the nation’s second-largest school system and confront its staggering challenges.

Now Beutner says that he has settled on a significantly less radical shift than many expected. The emerging L.A. school district plan, he said, is to follow a model already in practice in the west San Fernando Valley. There, schools are grouped into units based on geography and feeder patterns. One group, for example, is Taft High School and the middle and elementary schools that feed into it. Other parts of the Los Angeles Unified School District organize schools by grade level. Under Beutner’s plan, the entire district would transition to the feeder structure. Each school group also would have a handful of new employees to coordinate academic and maintenance work.

These hires would be offset by reducing employees in the central office. Some who lose jobs there might transfer to the new positions. Overall, the effort should be “cost-neutral,” Beutner said, while bringing decisions as close as possible to the school level.

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“We went through an exhaustive exercise,” he said in an interview with The Times. “We listened to suggestions and ideas, and we dismissed many of them that might have been tried elsewhere in the country. We wanted all the different ideas, as provocative as possible, on the table.”

The changes he envisions may appear to be more subtle, Beutner said, but they deserve to attract broad agreement from factions that often disagree. Best of all, he said, they will benefit students. His reorganization proposal, which has yet to be released, comes at a crucial moment for the district — three months after a divisive teachers’ strike and as L.A. Unified faces projected budget deficits, declining enrollment and increasing competition from charter schools. The growth of charters, which take students away from traditional schools, is exacerbating the district’s financial problems. Some observers expressed surprise that Beutner’s reorganization plan is not more extensive. Internal documents had suggested that he wanted to break up the district into semi-independent networks, enforce high-aiming performance targets on schools and close down campuses or networks that failed to meet them.

UCLA education professor Tyrone Howard said he was encouraged that was not the case. “School districts have to learn how to stay the course on some of what they know is working, and not just start from scratch every two to four years,” Howard said. “That does not help students. Consistent leadership that is moving in the right direction does.”

As far as the regrouping of schools, Howard said, “the devil is in the details.”

Beutner did say that the feeder system would give teachers a direct role in coordinating instructional efforts across grade levels. And local managers, familiar with the campuses, would take care of such needs as maintaining air conditioners, fixing roofs and providing appropriate security. Going forward, officials are hoping groups that had been fractured during the strike will unite behind a June parcel tax to support schools. There is an emerging consensus that the money is needed to close a gaping budget deficit and pay for the contract settlement reached with teachers. Losing the parcel tax also would be a political setback for Beutner, who faces challenges on other fronts.

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During the strike, picketing teachers painted the superintendent as the enemy and won broad public support in their calls for smaller class sizes and better conditions at schools. The union's post-strike detente with Beutner is tenuous.

Meanwhile, the front-runner to win a pivotal school board seat in a May 14 election is Jackie Goldberg, who is backed by the teachers union. She says she would not have hired Beutner, a businessman, because he lacks management experience in education. But Goldberg also says she would prefer to find a way to work with Beutner over the disruption of immediately replacing him. Goldberg's opponent, Heather Repenning, said she supports the goal of decentralization, "but we need a lot more information about how this plan will impact our kids. I encourage the superintendent to share his plans with our community."

Beutner's current tack makes sense strategically, said UCLA education professor John Rogers. "Leading up to the teachers' strike, Mr. Beutner often took on an assertive and sometimes combative tone and articulated a broad and disruptive agenda for the future," Rogers said. "In the wake of the strike, and experiencing declining power and public support, Mr. Beutner seems to have adopted a more cautious, conciliatory and collaborative approach. Moving forward over the next few weeks, the district's messaging must shift to focus the public's attention on the imperative need for the new parcel tax."

Beutner talked about his plans this week after the release of documents to The Times and Chalkbeat, an online education publication. [Chalkbeat posted the documents](#) online. The documents consist of advice and analysis that consultants provided to L.A. Unified. Without context, Beutner said, the material could be misleading.

Many of the documents reviewed by The Times described a district divided into 32 networks — and that number still could apply to how many school groupings would be assembled. But the documents go further, suggesting in places that these networks could be led by outside groups. In other school systems, such networks have been used to spur the growth of charter schools or to set high-reaching achievement goals, along with job consequences for those who don't achieve them.

"It never was that," Beutner said. "It's not going to be that."

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That assertion was greeted Wednesday with skepticism by Beutner critics, who asked to remain anonymous out of concern over sowing divisiveness during the parcel-tax campaign. But they expressed apprehension that Beutner would pursue more radical measures after this politically sensitive period — noting that his hiring was applauded by philanthropists, including Eli Broad, who have funded the expansion of charter schools, which are privately operated and mostly nonunion. Charters have proved popular with many families and serve about 1 in 5 district students. Teachers union President Alex Caputo-Pearl, who strongly supports the parcel tax, said the union would be tracking Beutner's actions carefully.

“The district has stated that the ‘reimagine’ program isn’t around anymore,” Caputo-Pearl said. “That’s a good thing.”

School board member Nick Melvoin, a Beutner supporter, said, “There were some unfounded fears about what were in these plans.” He said Beutner's plans reflected a developing understanding about “how we bring along our partners in this work, especially the partners who are going to be critical to this success — teachers and school leaders.”

Even in a tamer-than-expected form, the reorganization, if approved by the school board, will roll out gradually. Perhaps a third of the district will try it out in the fall, Beutner said. Employees and unions should embrace the effort, he added, because a key goal is to cut through bureaucratic logjams. Beutner said he's moving forward on other fronts as well, including a new online portal that allows parents to evaluate schools. But the parcel tax, called Measure EE, is the immediate priority. The tax, which L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti endorses, would assess structures on properties at an annual rate of 16 cents per square foot. A home of 1,500 square feet would generate an additional tax bill of \$240. The tax would apply to residential and business owners alike.

The tax would have to be approved by two-thirds of voters. That's an especially tall order in a low-turnout election, which usually brings out a higher proportion of voters resistant to tax increases. An exemption for senior citizens could diminish some opposition.

Some business leaders have launched a “No on Measure EE” committee and are looking to raise about \$4 million to campaign against it.

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Groups including BizFed, the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce and the Valley Industry and Commerce Assn. argue that the ballot measure doesn't include reforms to address the district's long-term financial problems. They also criticize it for not guaranteeing that money raised would be restricted to use in classrooms.

Beutner countered that the district already is taking steps to trim costs, including some anticipated layoffs within the central office.

"Money alone doesn't solve the issue, but many other districts have local funding," he said. "This is an effort to catch up. Public education is foundation of our community and we need more funding."

Times staff writer Dakota Smith contributed to this report.