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6,000 rally to demand better education funding in Florida

School budget cuts spur protest

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They've starved themselves, launched letter-writing campaigns and even held a ["funeral" for public education](#) that turned up on YouTube. And Saturday, parents, educators and others gathered by the thousands in Orlando to rally against school-funding cuts in what was Florida's biggest statewide, education-related demonstration in 40 years.

Parents, horrified that their kids could lose their fine-arts and athletic programs and favorite teachers, have turned out to protest in recent months. They say their voices will only get louder as state legislators work on a new budget for the coming fiscal year in a session that begins Tuesday.

Latha Krishnaiyer, the Florida PTA's legislative director, said parents statewide have been calling to ask how they can get involved.

"It's totally amazing that so many people in the state are engaged in the fight against budget cuts," she said. "It's a very hopeful sign."

The rally Saturday at the University of Central Florida was clearly [aimed at Florida's lawmakers](#). And the message was blunt.

"Our state leaders need to get with the program," said Maureen Dinnen, chairwoman of the Broward County School Board, adding that the state constitution calls adequate funding of public education one of the state's paramount duties.

["We're here today to tell our governor and legislators ... do your job," Dinnen said. "How about making education a priority in the state?"](#)

"No more cuts!" chanted [the estimated 6,000 teachers, parents and students](#) gathered at UCF Arena after Dinnen and others spoke.

Lawmakers have a painful job ahead of them: chopping Florida's spending by billions of dollars. It's a cut so deep they say public schools will likely take a big hit, despite the possibility of billions of dollars coming in federal stimulus money.

But parents — many of them egged on by teachers' unions and school-district leaders — are crowding community meetings, showing up at the Capitol and cramming legislators' e-mail accounts with the same message: Back off education.

Some cause for hope

While it's too soon to say whether lawmakers will comply, there are signs the pressure is weighing on them.

Legislators are toying with the idea of a temporary sales-tax increase or a new cigarette tax — something many parents and teachers have been pushing for as a way to raise money.

In January, state Sen. Evelyn Lynn, R-Ormond Beach, introduced a bill that could let districts adopt a four-day school week. School boards note that could help save a ton on utility bills, fuel for buses and other costs.

Several lawmakers said they have heard the public's cry and acknowledge education is a priority. But dozens of programs are vying for the same pot of limited cash.

"Having 100 e-mails instead of 29 e-mails does not create more money," said state Sen. Don Gaetz, a Fort Walton Beach Republican who sits on the Senate's education committee.

State Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, said lawmakers will try to protect education "to the fullest extent" but can't make promises.

T. Wayne Bailey, a political-science professor at Stetson University in DeLand, said if parents can pull businesses into their fight — and in some areas of the state, they have — lawmakers will take the issue even more seriously.

"That could provide a wind in the sails that might turn the direction," he said. "But short of that, good-government [groups] and PTAs probably will encounter resistance and tone-deafness on the part of the Legislature."

Still, members of the House and Senate are having serious conversations about how to free up money, which gives hope to Bev Slough, president of the Florida School Boards Association.

"Just by watching — paying extreme attention to what's going on, the conversations that are happening in committees and the bills being filed ... you never heard those conversations before now," she said.

School districts and PTAs statewide are urging parents to express their frustration by calling and writing legislators. They've even distributed "talking points" and lawmakers' e-mail addresses and office phone numbers.

Students such as Danny Loecken, a senior at Deltona High School, have gotten involved, too. He has called lawmakers and given their phone numbers to friends.

One thing he wants to complain about is having to sit in the auditorium when his principal can't afford substitute teachers. If funding is slashed, kids could end up there more often.

"I honestly believe this budget cutting is so severe, it's costing us our education," he said.

But the most visible evidence of the public opposition to more cuts are the rallies breaking out statewide. As the legislative session has drawn closer, they have grown more frequent.

A January rally in Miami drew 200 people. Several thousand attended a town-hall meeting on education last week in Brevard County, while about 150 people joined a rally Friday in Broward County.

Most of the people at Saturday's Florida Education Association-sponsored rally at UCF were teachers, some carrying banners with slogans such as, "Stocks are down — invest in kids." The biggest delegation was Central Florida's, but dozens of teachers and parents came from South Florida and the northern reaches such as Jacksonville and the Panhandle.

'People are oblivious'

Speakers and teachers themselves acknowledged that as school budgets shrink, teachers are reaching deeper into their own pockets to provide students with supplies.

"I think lots of people are oblivious about what's going on in the schools," said Marge Garland, a teacher in Martin County, about the effect of budget cuts.

"I hope more people wake up and notice something is wrong and start asking questions."

The Florida PTA is one of the organizers of a March 18 rally in Tallahassee expected to draw thousands. Parent groups and community and business leaders are planning to attend and, in many cases, have chartered buses for the trip.

The state's teachers' union hopes to further make an impression that day by covering the steps of the Capitol with more than 2million pennies — one for every public-school student.

South Florida Realtor Malexys Morales, who made national headlines in January when she helped stage a hunger strike outside her son's school to protest cuts, said she will be there.

Some parents, including Stephanie Keime, a Miami mother of nine who helped organize a mock funeral for education funding, will drive to Tallahassee next month to push the issue.

Keime said she tried to reach out to legislators but felt brushed off. So she made a video. It features several children dressed in black who drop ballet slippers, art supplies, a soccer ball and other items into a casket in front of a headstone that reads: "Here lies our dreams."