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Brevard teachers rally for education

Hundreds join national group to push funding

*BY MEGAN DOWNS
FLORIDA TODAY*

ORLANDO -- Brevard's momentum in the fight for education funding continued Saturday as hundreds of Brevard teachers headed to a state rally in Orlando.

Brevard's teachers joined thousands of educators who gathered from around the state in a public outcry, asking lawmakers to prevent \$3.9 billion in cuts to classrooms.

The legislative session begins Tuesday.

"I really wish I didn't have to state something so simple: That it's time to make our schools a priority," said Andy Ford, president of the Florida Education Association, the state affiliate of the national teacher's union. FEA sponsored the rally.

"I'm sorry students in the state may not be able to live up to their potential because political brokers in Tallahassee have turned their backs on kids," Ford said.

Counties from around the state are buzzing about Brevard's showing Monday, when as many as 10,000 community members came to address Brevard's legislative delegation.

The crowd was hoping to prevent as much as \$80 million in cuts to Brevard Public Schools, slices that could mean more than 900 employees losing jobs and a reversal of the voter approved class-size amendment.

Saturday, the fight pressed on. Educators filled the floor and first tier of the University of Central Florida arena.

Brevard teachers took many of the seats in the front rows. They chanted "save our schools" and "no more cuts." and they held signs that read "Make our schools a priority or "What is a Haridopolos?"

Some teachers wore Band-Aids on their faces, proclaiming that cuts to education will never end.

"Florida will be in the same rankings as a third-world country if the cuts persist," said Ann Roberts, an exceptional education teacher at Merritt Island High School. She has taught in the Middle East and England.

"The Legislature and the public has to understand that if it collapses, we have nothing," she said.

Union leaders are asking legislators to implement a three-year trial of the penny sales tax, which would be devoted to education.

Brevard legislators told the crowd last Monday that they would look at all possible revenue sources, but they likely wouldn't support any tax hike.

Orange County Public Schools Superintendent Ronald Blocker also addressed the crowd, telling them that now all educators are united in the fight for schools.

"School boards, superintendents and teachers are speaking with one voice, one powerful voice, and we want to be heard," Blocker said. "A teacher's job is to teach, and your job (lawmakers) is to find the money."