

# Budgeting Education

By BILL ROGERS

Highlands Today

Published: March 8, 2009

Stephanie Bowyer, who has two children in Highlands County public schools, has a suggestion for the school board: Don't do any budget cuts.

"It is bad enough as it is," Bowyer said. "Kids are struggling and don't have the appropriate resources."

While school board members probably wish they could follow Bowyer's suggestion, it is unlikely that will happen.

According to Mike Averyt, assistant superintendent of business operations, the district at this point has to trim \$4 million from the 2009-10 budget. However, that number could change based on what the state Legislature does and how much federal stimulus money the district receives.

"The best solution would be if the state Legislature steps up to find more revenue and give us as much flexibility because we're going to need it," Averyt said. "This is not the time to put out unfunded mandates."

Due to a drop in student enrollment and expected cuts in funding, Superintendent Wally Cox has recommended cutting 45.5 full-time instructional and administrative positions in the 2009-10 budget including 43 school-level teaching positions.

The secondary school teaching position cuts would primarily come from the implementation of a "seven out of seven" period schedule where every teacher would teach all seven periods.

"We are going to be faced with some issues that we are not going to end up 'business as usual' in my opinion," Cox told teachers and administrators during a recent budget workshop.

Implementing the seven-period schedule would save \$2.4 million, Averyt said. That

is an option that has not been decided yet.

Averyt noted there are several options. He has to have a balanced budget for next year for the final budget hearing in September.

"It's tough when 86 percent of the budget is salary and benefits," he said. "It's people. At some point, you can't cut anymore because you have got to educate kids."

The 2008-09 budget is \$164,347,902.16.

Steve Picklesimer, the president of the Highlands County Education Association, said he would like to

see the numbers after the legislative session, which began last week and ends in May.

"They are putting the cart before the horse," Picklesimer said.

If the district has to cut the budget by as much as it claims, Picklesimer suggested putting together a budget that is, say, 2 percent less than last year.

Roberta Peck, a teacher at Hill-Gustat Middle School in Sebring, believes all areas of the budget need to be looked at.

"With our total economy, including our educational budget, in a dire state, we can consider this an opportunity to truly scrutinize every area of spending with the highest priority in mind, that is our children's education," Peck said in a statement.

#### Taking A Pay Cut

Currently, there are 1,630 contracted employees, Averyt said. If each took a 1 percent cut in pay, the district would save \$642,769.

Bowyer, the parent, said there have to be other areas that can be cut.

"Education is not where it is needed to be done," she said. "Teachers are underpaid as it is."

Picklesimer, the union president, said he has a hard time with the pay cut option, describing it as "too easy a fix."

The Sebring High School chemistry teacher said the district should look at cutting programs first. For example, Picklesimer said there is a software package for testing called Kaplan that costs \$250,000.

"I want a good accounting of the numbers," Picklesimer said. "We need to make sure if the pay doesn't need to be cut it won't be."

Peck, a classroom teacher for 35 years, said expecting everyone in the system to accept a pay cut is a reasonable option considering the situation.

"However, an across the board pay cut is really far from equitable when the present gap between support people and professional teachers in the classroom is so high," she said. "When one uses imagination and common sense, they clearly understand a professional teacher with a salary in the 30s is going to have a much harder time with basic essentials than someone with a salary of \$100,000-plus. Therefore the pay cut scale needs to be a bit logarithmic to really be equitable."

Brittany Hay, who has children in fifth and seventh grades, said a pay cut would be more palatable. She noted there is precedent for that.

"I'd rather see people tighten their belts than lose their jobs," Hay said. "Jobs affect the community."

Hay added there are some places where money is being wasted that could be cut and would be "less painful."

Dan Johnson, principal at Avon Park Middle School, said it will be difficult to make decisions until the legislative session ends and the district knows how much it will receive in stimulus money.

"We want to try to keep as many teachers employed as we can to keep the class sizes lower," he said.

Johnson said teachers at his school voted last month to adopt an eight-period day. The school day would start and end at the same time, but each period would be a little shorter and there would be fewer students in each class. The eight-period day would include a planning period for teachers.

The faculty voted by secret ballot and Johnson believes about 75 percent supported the eight-period day.

### Voluntary Board

The state sets salaries for school board members. In Highlands County, board members make \$30,612 plus benefits, according to Averyt. Members can donate their salary to the school district.

According to Florida Statutes 1001.395, each member of the district school board shall receive a base salary, the amounts indicated in this section, based on the population of the county the district school board member serves. The adjusted base salaries of district school board members shall be increased annually as provided for in Statute 145.9.

Al Kromholz asked in a letter to the editor of Highlands Today why can't the school board act as a voluntary body.

There are many states where people volunteer to serve on the school board or receive a minimal stipend. However, in some states there are hundreds of school districts and a board might be responsible for only a couple of schools.

In Florida, there are 67 school districts with one school board for each county.

"We all should be biting the bullet," said Kromholz, who grew up in Wisconsin.

He said those who would volunteer for the school board would do so "solely with the intent to address the issues."

"It puts you in a position not to be beholden even to yourself," Kromholz said.

Kromholz also suggested that the board could ask state Rep. Denise Grimsley, R-Lake Placid, to begin the process of rescinding the law and introduce legislation to create voluntary school boards.

### 'Everything Is On the Table'

Highlands School Board Chairman Andy Tuck said he will have an open mind during the budget process and added "everything is on the table."

Tuck declined to comment on the various options. He did say that Cox can implement the seven-period

schedule without board approval.

"The main purpose of the school board is to provide the highest quality education possible for the taxpayers of this county," he said. "We can't sacrifice quality regardless of budget issues."

If cuts are made, the board will have to make decisions by the end of June.

Tuck said he would like to receive input from the community. He added there are some "top-notch" business people who might have some ideas.

"This is too serious a subject not to have everybody get involved," he said.

He noted that at the Feb. 24 budget workshop the only people who were not school personnel were two newspaper reporters.

#### Shorter Week

Reducing the school week to four days could be an option. However, the Legislature will have to take action before districts around the state could do that.

Bills have been filed in both the House and the Senate on the cost-saving measure.