

Superintendents warn budget cuts hurt, but still have hope

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Central Florida's superintendents sounded a dire warning Friday mixed with hope:

The state's budget woes have cut classrooms to the quick. Things will get worse. But if lawmakers create a stable source of education funding now, then schools across Florida might not have to face this crisis again.

"I think this is an opportunity to create ways to create an stable educational [funding] system that is not at the whim of the economy," said Osceola Superintendent Michael Grego.

The state, he added supports its budget – and schools -- largely though sales taxes, which is vulnerable to the tanking economy.

But while he stopped short of calling for another tax structure, Grego said: "We must have things like athletics... this is not and should not be negotiable."

Grego addressed questions about the severe budget cuts public school districts are facing as part of a panel moderated by Orlando Sentinel columnist Mike Thomas at a Tiger Bay Club luncheon in Orlando Friday. He was joined by superintendents from Orange and Seminole counties, Ronald Blocker and Bill Vogel.

(picture from left to right: Greg, Blocker, Vogel.)

Together, they laid the problems of a chronically underfunded school system on Legislators' shoulders.

Schools educate every child that comes through the doors equally, against increasing accountability standards and without adequate funding, Blocker said.

And because lawmakers didn't put their money where their mouths are, he added, "because of the sins of the past, we'll be facing payment of it year after year after year."

Blocker was referring to the jobs and programs losses Orange and other districts have been forced to undergo during the state's fiscal crisis. Orange alone has cut \$93 million from its budget and expects to slice as much as \$125 million more beginning in July.

Florida's education funding ranks among the lowest in the nation.

In 2007, the state spent about \$7,200 per child. Officials now expect that figure to drop to below \$6,400 by July.

If it continues, he said, "blood will be on the table."

The means hundreds of more jobs lost and core programs cuts across the three districts alone, the leaders said.

While the federal stimulus money might help -- if Florida gets it -- it will cover only about one-third of districts' expected cuts, said Vogel of Seminole. And if districts rely on that cash infusion to pay for staff, they'll be in trouble two years from now, when the money runs out.

"It'll be worse than now," he said.

They urged the public to write legislators to push for a stable source of funding, saying they were encouraged so far by the unprecedented outpouring of support schools have received so far.

"The public needs to be heard," Grego said after the luncheon. "It can't be 67 superintendents speaking alone."