



March 1, 2009

## Community Conversations: Educators, legislators differ on school funds

*David Plazas*  
*dplazas@news-press.com*

Fear over layoffs, losing arts and sports programs, and seeing quality drop created an unusual alliance this year of educators, union leaders, administrators and school board members who are telling state legislators to get the "politics out of education."

Lawmakers respond that education quality has improved and more money won't necessarily mean better results.

Terms such as "full funding" and "hold harmless," however, are often heard in the education spending debate. I heard these words when I attended a 1,500-person rally at the Lee County Public Education Center on Feb. 21

The vast majority of people wore blue T-shirts with the words "Make our Schools a Priority," children held up signs calling for tax reform and union officials announced a campaign to collect 2.6 million pennies statewide to present to the Legislature. Each cent represents one Florida public school student.

Five-year-old Michael Francisco Cherbini gave one of those pennies.

His parents Michael and Eileen Cherbini of Estero are both Lehigh Middle School educators. He's a science teacher and she's a counselor and Golden Apple finalist. "I'm from a two-teacher family," Michael said. "I gave at the office."

Brenda Gorman, a reading teacher at Treeline Elementary School, told me she has 14 years of experience, but only one year in Lee County making all that experience moot. Seniority will play a big part if teachers are let go.

On a live news-press.com broadcast of six Southwest Florida legislators last Wednesday, they rejected the notion they are harming education.

Rep. Paige Kreegel, R-Punta Gorda, said despite how much money is spent on education, "at no amount of time would we ever agree that it's fully funded." He added that all levels of government can be trimmed. "Tightening up can be done without sacrificing quality of education," he said.

Sen. Garrett Richter, R-Naples, pointed to the January Education Week magazine report ranking Florida No. 10 in the nation in overall education measures. That's up from No. 14 in the previous year and No. 31 in the year before.

"It's a misnomer that education falls victim to legislators' budget process," Richter said.

He said he's interested in results. "What are we getting for the money we're spending?"

The Education Week report ranked Florida No. 41 in per-pupil funding.

Sen. Dave Aronberg, D-Greenacres, said state has reduced education funding over two years.

"We should take education, hold it harmless and build around it," he said.

Proposals for plugging budget holes caused by decreasing tax revenues include giving school districts spending flexibility, reviewing sales tax exemptions, using federal stimulus dollars, and instituting pay reductions.

What do you think?

You can watch the interviews with legislators and Lee County Superintendent James Browder on [news-press.com/opinion](http://news-press.com/opinion).

---