

## CUTS IN SCHOOL BUDGET HIT HOME IN CLAY

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BETH REESE CRAVEY/My Clay Sun

Riley Bragg, 11, a Shadowlawn Elementary student, protests budget cuts with a sign at Monday's School Board meeting.

The Clay County School Board meeting room was packed with 300 or so angry people ready to storm Tallahassee.

At a four-hour special budget session, the audience included teachers, school support workers, principals, parents and students, upset at the likely loss of 450 school district jobs. The layoffs stem largely from state education fund cutbacks expected this year and next.

At the opposite end of the room sat five board members, just as upset. They faced a \$43 million shortfall for 2009-10 and said they had no other apparent recourse but to eliminate jobs, including 270 teachers and other instructional positions, and otherwise slash the district budget.

The audience begged the School Board to find another way.

They said such deep job cuts will negatively affect students, particularly those who thrive in elementary music and arts programs run by teachers facing layoffs next year, and those who thrive in extracurricular athletic programs threatened by supplemental pay reductions for coaches.

"It's just heart-breaking," said Linda Bowers, a volunteer at Paterson Elementary School, which is losing music and art teachers. "I beg you not to approve this. It's wrong."

Board members, in turn, begged the audience to write, call, e-mail and visit their legislators. Ask them to make education a funding priority - despite the \$6 billion state revenue shortfall - and give districts more spending flexibility, board members said.

Time for an 'uprising'

"It's time to have an uprising," board member Carol Studdard said.

Rob Taylor, a Fleming Island High science teacher, agreed.

"We need parent outrage. It is time to hear your voices," he said.

Unanimously but reluctantly, the board approved the 450 jobs cuts from the district's payroll of about 5,000. Superintendent Ben Wortham and board members said they hope federal economic stimulus funding will allow them to rehire some of those employees, but they made no promises.

They said they agonized over the layoffs, unavoidable in a district budget that is about 86 percent personnel costs.

"These look like numbers, but those numbers end up being human beings ... they're teachers, they're bus drivers, they're secretaries, they're administrators," Wortham said. "We ask you to understand that these recommendations have been carefully thought through."

The resulting staff levels are "bare bones" and could cause the district to temporarily violate state class-size rules, Deputy Superintendent Denise Adams said.

The job cuts, which also include about 180 support and administrative positions, save about \$20 million. Even with those job eliminations and other 2009-10 budget cuts tentatively approved by the board, the district still has about \$8 million more in cuts to make, Adams said.

Are cuts premature?

Elizabeth Crane, president of the Clay County Education Association, which represents the county's teachers, said the job cutting was "extremely premature" because district officials don't yet know how much state funding schools will receive for 2009-10. The Legislature began its 2009 session Tuesday.

"You are making this decision [and] teachers have already been told they are being surplusd ... at the most crucial time of the year, FCAT time," she said. The 2009 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test got under way in Clay schools this week.

Wortham recommended the 2009-10 cuts be made now to give employees time to look for other jobs and principals time to rearrange staff duties.

Other budget cuts being considered by the board - but not yet voted on - include eliminating or cutting back on athletic programs and/or supplemental pay for teachers who perform additional duties such as coaching and student club sponsorship.

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Contacting officials For Clay County Legislative Delegation contact information, go to [www.clay.k12.fl.us](http://www.clay.k12.fl.us) and click on the "Education Budget Crisis" link. For contact information for other legislators, go to [www.flsenate.gov](http://www.flsenate.gov) or [www.flhouse.gov](http://www.flhouse.gov). District officials recommend asking them to increase the state sales tax and dedicate a portion to education; eliminate or reduce sales tax exemptions; allow the special property tax to be levied with a super majority vote of the School Board; find additional revenue sources for education; amend or appeal the property tax reform constitutional amendment; and collect sales tax from Internet sales in Florida. Gov. Charlie Crist's e-mail address is [charlie.crist@myflorida.com](mailto:charlie.crist@myflorida.com). ~ ~ ~ **Budget protest** Clay County teachers and concerned parents will publicly protest state education funding cuts from 10 a.m.-noon today. They are asking supporters to join them with signs in the Kmart parking lot at Kingsley Avenue and Blanding Boulevard to create a human chain of signs. "Wear red to show your support (because our budget is in the red)," says a flier. Also, they are asking supporters to sign an online petition at [www.50thnomore.org](http://www.50thnomore.org), a nonpartisan grassroots organization rallying support for Florida's public schools. ~ ~ ~ **INSIDE Reinstated?** After parent outrage, the elementary music position held by Evan Gould goes before the board for reconsideration.