

## School system needs your help



*Deborah Gianoulis Heald talks about the plan to help funding for Duval County Public Schools.*

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by Mike Sharkey

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The 2008-09 school year isn't over, but public school officials are already looking ahead to 2009-10. And, what they see isn't pretty.

There's almost no getting around a \$150 million shortfall for next year alone thanks to a combination of a drop in sales tax and lottery revenues that have resulted in budget cuts and unfunded mandates and school programs. The Duval County Public School System has done its part by trimming its staff and expenses, limiting training and seminars and establishing a non-teaching hiring freeze.

Now, the system is asking for your help through a new Web site: [www.saveduvalschools.org](http://www.saveduvalschools.org). Led by former and longtime Ch. 4 news anchor Deborah Gianoulis Heald, the Web site resembles a Facebook page and is designed to allow anyone and everyone to contribute to the effort. Whether your kids are in public or private schools, organizers believe a properly funded, well-rounded school system benefits the entire community. While the core classes taught at the K-12 level aren't in jeopardy due to funding issues, other classes such as the arts and physical education and many after school sports and activities are potentially on the chopping block.

Heald is the voluntary spokesperson for what's been dubbed a "grassroots" effort at saving the public schools in Duval County and

eventually the state.

"I am not being paid. I am doing this because it's what I believe in," she said, adding she has been a school advisor for a long time.

Heald isn't sure the effort will raise the needed \$150 million before the next school year begins, but she's not convinced it's impossible either.

"The people behind this think they can raise that much," said Heald. "That remains to be seen. This effort is viral, which means it's low cost. We are not buying commercial time or print ads."

The budget problems facing Duval County Public Schools are indicative of the entire state. According to Heald, Florida ranks at the very bottom of funding for public schools among all 50 states.

"We can't lose another generation," she said. "Florida is dead last in public education funding."

In addition to talk of scaling back on after school sports and other activities by either dropping some or eliminating supplemental pay for coaches and other after school supervisors, in-school programs such as music and the arts may come to an end. One of the main partners in the system's arts program is the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens.

"We provide art education in schools for students and training for teachers," said Katrina Brocato, sponsorship manager for the Cummer.

Brocato said the Cummer currently works with eight inner-city schools and provides teacher training countywide.

"We incorporate art into science, math and literature and work with children with disabilities," said Brocato, adding the education and training are provided free through donations from area corporations and foundations.

It's the ability to provide a well-rounded education that saveduvalschools.org is determined to preserve. Heald said Duval County overall received a "B" grade from the state last year and has seen a rise in graduation rates and a decrease in the dropout rate. The plan is to add to the system's International Baccalaureate program and expand the technical academies.

"Duval County is on the right track," said Heald. "We can't afford to reverse course now."

None of that can happen, however, if the current fund trend continues.

"Our intent is to draw a line on the sand. We will not accept another cut," said Heald. "Our primary message to Tallahassee is: give us back local control of the schools."