

'No more cuts'! is cry from teachers

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ORLANDO — Cut billions of dollars from Florida schools, and the view from Kathy Thompson's classroom looks like the edge of a cliff.

Thompson, one of thousands of teachers who rallied in Orlando Saturday, teaches developmentally delayed 4-year-olds at Robles Elementary in Tampa..

In the past, she had eight to 10 students. In the face of Florida's worst school funding crisis in decades, she has 16.

"They pretty much get out of control is what happens," said Thompson, 57, a 35-year veteran. "They end up doing all kinds of things. Like throwing chairs across the room. Like running out the door and running away."

She and the other school employees who caravanned to the University of Central Florida Arena had a simple message for lawmakers: Find the money.

The Legislature, which begins its annual session Tuesday, has cut core K-12 spending by \$1.4 billion since October 2007, forcing school districts to eliminate positions, freeze pay and bump up thermostats. But many fear the worst is yet to come.

Depending on how far state revenue continues to drop, Florida schools, already among the most poorly funded in the country, could face an additional \$2 billion cut when the Legislature crafts next year's budget this spring. For many districts, that will mean layoffs and pay cuts and countless nicks to classrooms like Thompson's.

"We cannot let our public school system be starved out of business," Maureen Dinnen, chairwoman of the Broward County School Board, told a cheering, booing, sign-waving crowd.

Orchestrated by the Florida Education Association, the 140,000-member state teachers union, Saturday's rally was the biggest by educators since the early 1990s, when another recession ripped into the state's sales-tax-dependent budget. Organizers estimated turnout at 6,000.

Before speakers took the stage, the crowd waved pompoms, slapped at beach balls and broke into spontaneous chants of "No more cuts!" But behind the festive atmosphere, there were real stories of Florida schools on the verge of being crippled — and just as some academic indicators show its students are finally gaining ground on their peers in other states.

Rally participants repeated what pro-accountability lawmakers have been telling struggling schools for years: no excuses. Find a way.

"Why do I as a teacher always have to suck it up?" said Cheryl Ann Tish, a science teacher at Meadowlawn Middle School in Pinellas who got up at 5:45 a.m. to board a rally-bound bus from St. Petersburg High. "The whole community needs to suck it up. I want everyone to do their part."

"Time and again, voters have gone to the polls to say they want education to be a priority. And (lawmakers) continue to ignore the will of the people," state union president Andy Ford said, pointing to the constitutional amendments for smaller class sizes and voluntary prekindergarten. "It's time to tell them, 'No more delays. Just do it.' "

In Tallahassee, key members of the Republican-led Legislature say they're willing to consider some tax increases. But to date, they haven't tagged any of them as likely. And they appear especially cold to the teacher union's pitch for a three-year, 1-cent hike in the sales tax.

"We know that Floridians are hurting. Is this the time to go in and ask them to pay more?" said Anitere Flores, R-Miami, who chairs the K-12 appropriations committee in the House. "When I go around and talk to people, they say there's still money there, we need to be better about how we spend it."

The Legislature also appears resistant to using the federal stimulus money to offset further cuts to schools.

Gov. Charlie Crist wants to use nearly \$900 million of that money to partially plug the anticipated hole in next year's K-12 budget. But with some economic forecasters suggesting Florida's funk could last several years, many lawmakers say it's not a good idea to use one-time money for recurring expenses like teacher pay.

"It delays the inevitable," said Sen. Stephen Wise, R-Jacksonville, Flores' counterpart in the Senate. "We don't want to give anybody false hopes."

The frustration that led to Saturday's rally had been building for months. In the past few weeks alone, 3,000 parents and teachers rallied in Fort Pierce, hundreds of school employees rallied in Fort Myers, and thousands of parents grilled state lawmakers at a town hall meeting in Melbourne.

There have been no rallies in the Tampa Bay area. But Pinellas parents recently turned out in force in an unsuccessful attempt to stave off school closings. And school employees throughout the region are increasingly anxious about the possibility of pay cuts and furloughs.

"We've been tightening our belts for too long," said Don Manly, 66, a special education teacher at Richard L. Sanders School in Pinellas Park.

Some of Saturday's participants said they hoped the rally would make parents more aware of what's happening in their schools. Lawmakers might not listen to teachers, they said, but worked-up parents would be hard to ignore.

Another big rally, this one organized by the Florida PTA, is planned for Tallahassee on March 18.

"Our legislators have actually said they haven't heard from our parents," Florida PTA president Karin Brown told the crowd. "We want our roar to be so loud, they'll hear us all the way down to Key West."

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Spending

by the numbers

\$1.4-billion The amount in core state K-12 spending that the Legislature has cut since October 2007.

\$2-billion The additional amount that the Legislature may have to cut in core K-12 spending for next year's budget.

\$881-million The amount from the federal stimulus package that Gov. Charlie Crist has proposed using to offset next year's core cuts in K-12.

\$3.5-billion The amount that a 1-cent sales tax hike could raise annually, according to the Florida Education Association.