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Pennies make groups' point

Coins represent school students

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A penny for your thoughts.

Pennies from heaven.

Either phrase applied Monday at the Lee County Education Center, where leaders of teachers and support personnel unions displayed about 100,000 pennies they had collected during the past two weeks to represent the 78,000 students in Lee County Public Schools.

By day's end, Teachers Associated of Lee County president Mark Castellano said another 20,000 pennies would be added to the local amount.

The money will be taken to Tallahassee and join collections from the state's 66 other counties for a Florida PTA rally on the steps of the State Capitol Building at 11 a.m. Wednesday.

The idea is to amass 2.6 million pennies (\$26,000) and represent every student in the state.

The effort is to support House Bill 731, which proposes a 1-cent, three-year sales tax increase that would raise an estimated \$3.5 billion per year to fund public education.

"We have asked, urged and pleaded with our state's leaders to diversify and stabilize funding for public education," Castellano said, noting the tax is to be temporary to give the Legislature time to find a permanent solution. "Each year has gone by with the same result: No changes and continued budget cuts.

"It has reached a point of being simply untenable."

Support Personnel Association of Lee County president Bob Rushlow also voiced support for the concept.

"This isn't about teachers and it's not about school districts," Rushlow said. "It's about children. Do we want to educate or children or don't we? Our Legislators need to step up and lead.

"It's time for them to fund education."

After the rally, the pennies will be donated to the Children's Home Society of Florida.