

School Board axes 270 teaching jobs

Greg Walsh | March 4, 2009

By Greg Walsh,

Managing Editor

FLEMING ISLAND – Less than 24 hours after the Clay County School Board cut more than 450 jobs -- including 270 teaching positions -- for next school year, parents and teachers began planning a rally to raise public awareness about the situation.

One group announced it wants to line the corner of Kingsley Avenue and Blanding Boulevard for two hours Saturday, March 7, while the Clay County Education Association said it wants to hold a rally later to bring out thousands of supporters.

And School Board members continued their call for an "uprising" to contest state funding cuts that are driving most of the staff cutbacks.

"We need to have a rally," School Board member Carol Studdard said at the end of Monday's four-hour board workshop and special meeting where the board approved the staff cuts. "We need to say enough is enough. It's time for us to have an uprising in Clay County."

Nearly two dozen people pleaded with the School Board to avoid – or at least delay the cuts – until the state Legislature finalized its 2009-10 budget. But Superintendent Ben Wortham said waiting longer wouldn't change the \$43 million shortfall anticipated for next year.

Cutting the jobs – known as allocations – will save about \$20 million. Another \$6 million in non-staff costs also have been agreed on by the board but not formally approved.

Further cutbacks are expected when the board meets at 7 p.m. Monday, March 23, at the Teacher Training Center. But just where the School Board will come up with the remaining cuts is undetermined. Van Zant's proposal going to a four-day school week has been met with lukewarm response from other board members who say it needs a long-term study.

A majority of the board also nixed closing two unnamed schools in the short term. But Van Zant said Monday the district has to "reshape this thing from the ground up," including consolidating some schools in order to operate more efficiently.

"We have got to come up with some ideas we can all live with," he said. "We haven't done that yet."

Cutting allocations doesn't mean that many teachers will lose their jobs. That will depend on how many teachers voluntarily leave due to retirement or moving out of the area. School officials were initially hoping that would equal more than 100, however, Crane said the number would be lower because many teachers will stay in their current positions due to the nation's poor economy.

Out of the approximately 2,800 teachers now employed, about 1,900 are on professional contracts, or tenured. The remainder is on annual contracts that involve each building principals

Crane said the professional contract teachers would be placed in teaching positions first, followed by the annual contract employees.

"They have to wait until all professional service contract teachers are placed, then they will begin to offer annual contract teachers," Crane said. "You have to wait until everything shakes out. And it's based by seniority."

Further affecting the number of teachers will be contract negotiations between the district and CCEA. Those figures will affect how many teachers the district can place as well, she said.

Now that the district has set its allocations, it must negotiate contracts for those positions with the two unions representing teachers and support personnel. Van Zant was reluctant to talk Monday about items that fall under the collective bargaining agreement, but the School Board has previously said one potential saving is rolling back a 3 percent teacher raise that went into effect this school year.

Van Zant agreed there was uncertainty on how much state funding legislators would approve.

But waiting to consider the staff cuts only worsened district personnel's anxiety and encouraged unfounded rumors.

"We have a whole school system full of people who are very anxious," he said. "With this vote tonight 90 percent of the workforce will calm down a little bit and focus on the students."

In January, Wortham projected the district should cut \$23 million when it appeared state funding would drop 5 percent and the district's student enrollment continued to decline.

But the 2009-10 shortfall jumped last month to 11 percent when revised state sales tax figures meant further cuts to education in the coming fiscal year.

Wortham said the expanded staff cuts are "across the board" to the district's 5,000 employees.

Deputy Superintendent Denise Adams, who put together the allocation list, said the decisions "were not made in isolation. There has been lots of input into this."

Reducing teachers to the proposed levels will increase class sizes, Adams said, but they should stay within state guidelines especially if enrollment declines.

While the first round of cuts mostly reflected the falling enrollment at each school, the second was more "arbitrary," Adams said, and resulted in each elementary school losing two instructional teachers and one art, music or physical education instructor. At the high school level, Orange Park, Ridgeview, Middleburg and Fleming Island lost two teaching positions while Clay and Keystone Heights had one position cut in the second round.

Some staff cuts would be necessary for next year anyway, Wortham said because of falling enrollment. The district over-hired personnel this year anticipating a continuing rise in student enrollments; instead there are 750 fewer students than last year, bringing enrollment down to slightly over 35,000.

Also discussed were:

- Wortham's plan calls for reducing assistant principals from 12 month to 11 month contracts, which will reduce each one's salary more than \$10,000.

"It's something I agonized over," said Wortham, adding that other Florida school districts have already made similar moves with assistant principals.

But Studdard said the percentage drop in their salary still doesn't equal the amount cut from exceptional student education (ESE) aides, who will lose 20 percent of their \$13,000 annual salary under the plan that cuts two hours of aides' pay each day.

"These (assistant principals) will still be making, 60, 70, \$80,000 a year and they will still be able to put food on the table (even after the cut)," she said. "This is like if you have a son or daughter, which one are you going to throw overboard. It's horrible."

- Funding for substitutes is not being totally eliminated. Each school will receive limited money; once that's gone they can ask the district for additional funds if all other avenues are exhausted.
- No sports are being eliminated. But athletic directors and coaches at all levels are being asked to find ways to cut costs. Some games will be played during the day to save on energy costs and schedules and travel may be reduced to further cut costs.

"The School Board has not voted in any way to eliminate athletics," board member Carol Vallencourt said. "We may have to decrease costs some but we will still keep the program."

- 74 transportation personnel are among the 206 allocations cut in support personnel.
- Eight of the 14 administrative positions cut actually won't result in job loss, Adams said. Instead the district is shifting the salaries out of the general fund and into other state or federal funding sources for those positions.
- Federal stimulus dollars are not guaranteed and will require a Congressional vote to exempt Florida. Currently the stimulus legislation allows only states increasing education funding in the past three years to receive it.
- The \$43 million is based on a 3 percent reserve balance of about \$7 million. But Monday the board indicated it may want a 4 percent fund balance, which would require another \$3 million in funding cuts.
- Supplements – the funds that pay coaches and department head salaries – will not be eliminated, the board said. "We are not here to pit athletics and academics against each other," Graham said. "I could not support eliminating all supplements."

* School lunches will rise 10 percent next school year for adults and may also increase for students, although how much is not determined yet, said George Copeland, district budget director.

* The board discussed some local funding options that would need voter approval. A half-cent sales tax, which voters turned down six years, would generate \$7.5 million, Copeland said. Another method is raising the local property tax rate by 1 mill, producing about \$12 million. However, any referendum would require the district to specify how long the increase would last and for what purpose the money would spent, Copeland said. Both also would require the Clay County Commission's approval as well as the state Department of Revenue before they could appear on the ballot.

In a non-primary year, the district could spend up to \$100,000 paying for the question to appear before voters -- and ultimately that money could be lost if the question failed, Copeland said.

Board attorney Bruce Bickner will research the referendum process and report his findings at the March 23 meeting.