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School leaders point out funding problems to state legislators

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TALLAHASSEE -- When Volusia County Superintendent Margaret Smith went before the state Board of Education on Monday, she touted programs and academic achievements in the county's schools.

But for the past two years, Smith and other Volusia leaders have been forced to cut tens of millions of dollars from the district's budget, lay off hundreds of employees and close schools.

And now, faced with the likelihood of even deeper cuts next year, Smith told the board she is concerned about what that could mean for the district's schools and students.

"The bottom line for Volusia is that progress and student achievement that has been taking place could be in jeopardy without some additional funding," Smith said.

With tax dollars dwindling and lawmakers getting ready to write a 2009-10 budget, the state board met for more than four hours Monday to listen to presentations about school-funding issues from Smith, other superintendents, college presidents and outside experts.

The budget numbers worsened Friday, when state economists shrank general-revenue tax estimates for this year and 2009-10 by a combined \$3.44 billion.

Even with an infusion of federal-stimulus money, a top budget chairman said last week he expects lawmakers to have a \$3 billion budget hole for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

And that could make education a target for more cuts.

"The challenge for us, in spite of what's going on, we have to figure out a way to sustain progress," said T. Willard Fair, chairman of the Board of Education.

Education funding is one of the biggest issues of this year's legislative session, as parents and educators pressure lawmakers to prevent more cuts. The Florida PTA is leading a rally Wednesday at the Capitol that is expected to draw busloads of people from across the state.

But the problems are not limited to public schools. Community colleges and the former community colleges now known as "state colleges" are seeing dramatic enrollment increases while also facing budget cuts.

That could threaten the community college system's tradition of open access to students.

"There's no elasticity left in the system," said Sanford Shugart, president of Valencia Community College in Orlando.

It is too early to know how lawmakers will deal with the budget shortfall, but a major question centers on whether they will raise taxes or close tax exemptions to bring in more revenue.

Also, lawmakers will have to determine how to use money from a recently passed federal-stimulus package.

But top lawmakers and Education Commissioner Eric Smith acknowledge more education cuts could be coming.

"I think cuts are still a very strong possibility, along with revenue enhancements," said Eric Smith, a former Volusia administrator.

Margaret Smith and Andrew Spar, president of the Volusia Teachers Organization, said Volusia could face cuts of as much as \$60 million next year.

That might be a worst-case scenario, depending on factors such as how much federal-stimulus money is available. But Spar, who also was at the Capitol on Monday, said he has never been "so scared about what the future holds" if changes aren't made.

"Our system has been holding on by a thread," Spar said. "Any more cuts are going to cut that thread."

Margaret Smith and other school superintendents are asking the Legislature to give districts more flexibility in the ways they can spend money, as a way to help plug budget holes.

For example, districts might be allowed to use money ordinarily earmarked for building projects, transportation or textbooks to cover other expenses. But that likely will not solve the overall budget problems.

Margaret Smith and Spar said they want lawmakers to look at ways to bring in additional money.

That could include closing some of the state's myriad sales-tax exemptions, reaching a deal with the Seminole Indian tribe to receive gambling revenues or trying to collect more sales taxes from purchases made over the Internet.

Also, the Florida Education Association teachers union is floating the idea of a one-penny increase in the sales tax for three years.

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