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## School superintendents uneasy as they wait for news on school budgets

*By TaMaryn Waters  
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Gadsden County Schools Superintendent Reginald James said the Legislature has created a “chaotic situation” because administrators don’t know how much money they’ll need to cut for the 2009-2010 school year. But they know cuts will be forthcoming.

James is not alone in sharing that frustration.

And while more cuts are the last thing superintendents want, parents and teachers are fearful of more job losses and more programs being slashed, which they feel will lead to the erosion of quality education in the state.

Earlier this year, districts were told to prepare for 5 percent in cuts but that number grew to 16 percent a couple of weeks ago when Florida Education Commissioner Eric Smith gave superintendents a heads up on what could come. The 16 percent could be accurate if more state revenue isn’t generated and if federal stimulus money doesn’t come through.

And that’s unsettling, James said.

His finance committee, made up of union representatives and staff identified \$6 million in cuts. It represents the “worst-case scenario.” It includes closing the Carter Parramore Academy and the loss of art and music classes in its seven elementary schools.

“I believe art and music programs are needed to provide a well-rounded education,” James said. “However, under these budget constraints, that may not be possible.”

All districts in the state are combing their budgets in search of cuts, said Wayne Blanton, executive director of the Florida School Boards Association.

He said some have already eliminated crossing guards, school-resource officers and after-school programs. Now, he said, more districts are considering cuts to music and art classes, athletics, teachers and assistant principals.

With roughly 85 percent of a district’s budget tied to salaries, Blanton said it’s increasingly difficult for superintendents to avoid the inevitable if relief isn’t given to public education.

Even if districts can avoid 16-percent cuts, Blanton said double-digit cuts are an “absolute” likelihood.

Part of Florida’s problem, Blanton said, is that the state has failed to generate sustainable revenue for public education.

“The Legislature has taken a position that says it’s cheap and proud of it,” Blanton said.

And that attitude, according to teachers and union representatives, is getting old. Rallies are popping up throughout the state with the hopes of bolstering some attention.

David Worrell, president of the Leon Classroom Teachers Association, said more than 50 teachers and instructional aides went to Orlando last Saturday for a rally. The thousands gathered there wanted to send a message to policy makers — make our schools a priority.

That would be a prayer answered for teachers like Jennifer Womble, who teaches advanced psychology at Chiles High School.

Womble, a national board certified teacher, is frustrated because her salary will be cut by \$12,000. Last year, the state took away the \$4,000 bonus given to board-certified teachers for mentoring beginning teachers. And the Leon County School Board recently voted to eliminate its seven-period day in an effort to reach \$12 million in cuts. So she's going to lose \$7,500 there.

Womble feels this is a huge blow to her household.

"We're sitting down now trying to figure out how we're going to cut \$1,000 a month from our budget," Womble said, referring to her husband and two children. "We've never had to work backwards before."

Womble understands the district's position and blames the state for not adequately funding public education. But she's concerned teachers are more frequently hit by cuts, especially those who could lose their jobs since they don't have tenure.

She believes Leon County should also consider salary cuts to principals and assistant principals.

"If one person is going to take a cut," Womble said, "we should all take it."

Taylor County Superintendent Paul Dyal said he and School Board members have agreed to take a 5-percent cut in salary since that's what they are want employees to do.

"I wouldn't ask employees to do something that I wouldn't do myself," Dyal said. Taylor County, which is one of eight districts under scrutiny by the state for having little to no money in its reserve fund, serves 2,700 students and about 240 teachers.

When asked what was the salary for School Board members and himself, Dyal said, "I don't know."

But according to the Florida Department of Education, Dyal's salary is \$94,236 and Taylor County School Board members make \$24,942.

During a recent meeting, Leon County School Board Chairwoman was solemn.

She was bothered by the cuts she and her colleagues were pushed to make because of budget cuts.

"These are the worst of times," Bowen said. "I don't know when the best of times are coming."

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