

## OTHER VOICES

# Failure to fund education will cost state, children

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Special to the Star-Banner*

*Published: Sunday, March 15, 2009 at 7:59 a.m.*



*FILE*

Members of the West Port High School Jazz Band play on Ocala's downtown square. With the severe cuts to education, programs like music, art, dance and sports are threatened.

Over the past month or so, School Superintendent of Schools Jim Yancey has been holding a series of town hall meetings to lay out his recommendations to the Marion County School Board for a series of budget cuts to education. The plan is severe, calling for the end of public education as we know it.

Gone are half the units for art, music and dance. Gone are stipends for extracurricular activities such as sports, band, dance, cheerleading and the like. Most devastating is the plan to lay off more than 500 teachers. The layoff will hit all first- and second-year teachers, the ones with the young families, student loans and the futures.

There are those who say public education is bloated with waste, and these cuts are not only necessary but good. Of course, no one can say where the waste is or the bloat. For the simple truth is that Florida is 50th nationally in funding for public education. Fiftieth! Out of ... 50. You do not need to know

another fact to know we are not overfunding education now.

Our public schools have been under budget pressures for years as our state indulges itself with tax and budget cuts. There is no waste, there is no bloat. We have been riding the dedication and professionalism of our teachers for years. We have imposed additional responsibilities on them year after year, while we blame them for every shortcoming.

Our teachers have been at the forefront of enormous social change they, in large part, facilitated. They racially integrated our society, they mainstreamed our children with special needs; they assimilated and served our immigrants; they learned new teaching methods to adapt and deal with technology changes unparalleled in human history; they held our society together while it migrated from North to South; they guided us through an understanding of War, Justice, Equality, Religion, Science, and our place in the Universe. We only hired them to teach. Everything else they accomplished was the bonus they gave us.

The job of a modern teacher is far more demanding than the public realizes. Lesson planning, report writing, data compilation, continuing education, disciplinary issues, classroom design and management, peer review and involvement are just some of the responsibilities the modern teacher shoulders everyday. Talk with school teachers away from their campuses, and hear from them what is involved. They are doing all we can ask of them.

What is missing from the debate is the simple fact that taxes — revenues — need to be raised. As it turns out, Amendment 1 was a mistake. Each property owner received a property tax cut that was hardly noticed. Then, with the declining real estate values, we received another cut that did nothing to change our lives for the better. What we lost was 500 teachers for our children.

Just by giving back some of the tax cuts received in the past 24 months we can avert the loss of these teachers. If no one else will say it aloud, I will. It is time to raise taxes for education. I hope our political leaders can summon the courage to do the same. We have become so radicalized over increased taxes as a people, our politicians cannot even talk about it without fear.

We cannot have quality education without paying for it. Each of us benefited from the sacrifices of our parents who instituted a system of free, universal, public education. The reward they received for their sacrifice is the most advanced, freest, most prosperous, influential, fascinating civilization the world has ever known.

Every country with free public education prospers; those without it fail. Each of us who benefit from free public education entered into a covenant to secure its advantages for those who come after us. It is now our turn and our duty to oblige.

According to the Marion County Property Appraiser, there were 283,154 total parcels of land in Marion County on the 2007 final roll. A tax of \$100 on each parcel raises \$28 million, which would go a long way toward offsetting projected budget shortfall Mr. Yancey is describing. On average, each parcel of land pays \$1,372 in ad valorem taxes. By raising the tax burden to \$1,472 per parcel we save 500-plus well-paying jobs and educate our children with professionals who know how to do it.

We can also talk about sales tax increases, user fees, transportation charges, any number of intelligent ways to enhance revenues. We should consider whether students' families should be required to pay some form of tuition. Cuts to programs that do not meet a cost/benefit analysis are proper and should be made, too.

Education of our children is an investment, not an expense. It makes no sense to skimp on that investment. Public education has been a wonderful investment for this society and has paid off richly for all of us. For even if your child is not a consumer of public education, your doctor was, your builder, your engineer, your business leader, all were. And most of your political leaders were. We take public education horribly for granted because it has always been here.

The one thing we cannot do is cover our eyes, mouths and ears and refuse to look at, speak of, or hear about tax increases for education.

Let the discussion begin now.

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