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My Word: Ronald Blocker

No excuses — fund our kids' schools, he says

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Florida has historically educated on the cheap. Though the Legislature says it has increased funding through the years, we still rank far below most states in per-pupil spending. Less notable but equally significant is that, during the past 20 years, the burden of funding education has shifted locally. Since 1999, the percentage of school funding from the state's general fund has dropped from 62 percent to less than 48 percent.

Years ago, Florida's citizens decided it was the responsibility of the Legislature to fund public education of children, not the public warehousing of them. Unfortunately, it took a constitutional amendment to require class size be funded at reasonable levels.

This is not to minimize the challenge before the Legislature. The dismal economy has disintegrated the state's traditional sources of revenue, and each examination shows a weaker and weaker pulse. Legislators have a tough job but, clearly, children must be a priority.

Putting aside past rhetoric about school districts being more "accountable and efficient," legislators should recognize this is a challenge that requires total commitment and careful thought by everybody. For the record, Orange County Public Schools, by the state's own metric, is the seventh-leanest district when considering administrative costs. We are recognized by others for how we use technology to improve efficiencies; for revamping our food services; streamlining the transportation system (even before the school-schedule flip); and building schools on time and within budget, with help from a citizens-oversight group. Even with the flip, we transport 1,900 more students with 1,100 fewer gallons per day.

The point many lawmakers miss is that Florida's school budgets are about 85 percent personnel. You cannot avoid laying off large numbers of people regardless of how efficient you are.

Orange County, as well as all school districts, could make ends meet better if we were not subject to so many underfunded mandates imposed by our legislators. The law requires the state to cover our \$60 million transportation budget. When only 52 percent of it is funded, that's a lot of money not reaching the classroom. School transportation is an underfunded mandate.

OCPS' conservative budget has helped us survive two — and soon to be three — state revenue cuts this fiscal year. A projected \$102 million cut — or more — next year cannot happen without affecting our core business: successful student achievement. To help students learn in the least disruptive manner, we need classroom teachers, guidance counselors, media specialists, social

workers, school psychologists, speech therapists and reading coaches. We also value a child's participation in the arts and athletics, and access to helpful career and technical education. In other words, we want to do our jobs, and we want the Legislature to remove the obstacles.

The parents of Florida would like the comfort of knowing there will be a reliable source of school funding every year so catastrophes like this can be avoided in the future. My request, simply put, is that legislators comply with the constitution to fully fund education, remove the constraints and grant school districts the flexibility to stretch their dollars.

Let's stop the finger-pointing and work together. These are your children, too.

Ronald Blocker is superintendent of Orange County Public Schools.