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Public unleashes backlash against classroom cuts

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COMMENTARY

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On Friday, kids trooped off to school sporting red. *See Dick and Jane run off to protest the bloodletting that has become annual ritual with the state's school budgets.*

This morning, 5,000 or so teachers, parents, and school-board members will rally at the University of Central Florida. Fed up with monstrous budget slashing, sleepy villagers finally are taking up pitchforks, torches and laptops to [defy classroom cuts](#) already on the books and in the offing.

You go, villagers!

Finally.

Classroom cuts ought to have been an issue when the school-nurse program was slashed, when art and physical-education programs were married into alternating day "specials," and when it became almost a cliché that underpaid teachers smashed their piggy banks to provide supply-starved students the tools for even a shot at success.

Now, the deafening hue and cry comes (in some circles) because some districts have threatened to boot football and other sports programs (something that we overemphasize and actually could weather losing).

However we got here, we now are in a full-on, pitchfork-waving crisis.

The evidence overwhelms:

Orange County schools face \$102 million in cuts next year -- penance for the \$900 million state schools hemorrhaged this year. At least that much in losses is forecast next year. Seminole schools, which stripped \$40 million in budget reductions during the past two years, brace for a further potential \$8.5 million in cuts this school year. That in advance of an additional \$64 million in districtwide losses anticipated next school year.

Let's take it out of the realm of Monopoly money for a sec: the Seminole cuts last year meant 328 eliminated positions, of which 211 formerly taught FCAT and the three R's. More swings of the budget ax will likely mean even fewer teachers standing around the chalk lines of fallen comrades.

That's bad -- even if legislators don't seem to see it. They approach the budget quagmire like a soggy-brained captain of a sinking ship who takes a knife to the life preservers: slashing the solitary thing that can spare the crew, elevate their circumstances and lift them up.

We ought to be banging our heads to bubble up ways to preserve -- not slash -- education. We need innovative, reasonable ideas to properly fund and manage our schools and leverage additional efficiencies with private-sector groups. We don't need myopic penny-pinching that disregards devastating consequences.

Consider the latest numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics for clues of the potential coming fallout:

Across racial lines, higher educational attainment translates into thinner unemployment rates. But the outcome is most pronounced among African-Americans. Black men ages 20 to 24 who lack a high-school diploma are plagued with a 55percent unemployment rate; that rate jumps to 91percent for 18- and 19-year-olds without a sheepskin.

Last year, 14 percent of blacks 25 and older without a high-school diploma or GED were unemployed. That rate evaporated to 4 percent for black college grads.

Cutbacks in staffing and resources statewide are sure to downgrade school quality, teacher attentiveness and creativity. Going forward, it seems reasonable this will affect the dropout rate, and not in a good way. Jails and prisons are bursting with disengaged high-school dropouts, who, once locked out of good jobs, eventually were locked up for their criminal pursuits.

As poet Eliza Cook put it: "Better build schoolrooms for 'the boy' [t]han cells and gibbets for 'the man.' "

Without a doubt, Central Florida schools can and should operate more efficiently with current funding. And we must hold school officials accountable for that.

But there are great shades of difference between efficiency and effectiveness.

Rationing students to a sheet of printer paper for a book report, as a South Seminole Middle schooler recently told the *Orlando Sentinel*, might be efficient, but we can certainly argue whether our goal in educating kids should be inculcating miserly thrift or illuminating Faulkner.

I think British academic Sir Claus Moser nailed it:

"Education costs money, but then so does ignorance."

Central Florida schools need more -- not less -- money, but more efficiently managed. Whether that means outside management, sin taxes, sales-tax hikes, hemming up tax loopholes or pursuing public-private partnerships, the Legislature must consider and implement reasonable alternatives to shore up, not cripple, education. It's time to cut the budget blarney, leaving no

stone unturned.

Otherwise, one day soon that unturned stone might come crashing through our front doors.

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