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**COLLIER** -- The Collier County School District released a new budget cutting plan that eliminates more than 130 positions. It's not what teachers who are fighting for more money wanted to hear. "It's very discouraging whenever you see cuts, obviously. Anytime you take things out of the classroom, it's going to impact the students," said Lyle Farmer, who works for the Collier County Education Association -- which is the teacher's union. Farmer thinks it will cause more problems for students and teachers. But district leaders say they have no choice. The state is cutting the money it gives to schools, which means schools have to cut what they spend. But teachers worry they will be swamped by the extra work. "That's all going to fall on the plate of the teachers now, who don't have that training and that background," said Farmer.

**BREVARD** -- The Legislature and Gov. Charlie Crist pledged to "hold schools harmless" in the proposed property tax referendum. However, Brevard Public Schools could lose more than \$31.7 million during the next five years if Amendment 1 is adopted, state researchers have estimated. Statewide, schools could lose about \$1.56 billion by 2012, according to the state Legislature's Office of Economic and Demographic Research. The Brevard Federation of Teachers is against the measure, arguing that it provides minimal tax relief while putting public schools at risk. "This is a quick fix," BFT President Anne Spencer said. "In the long run people would end up paying more taxes than they are now."

**COLLIER** -- Collier schools Chief Instructional Officer Martha Hayes is looking to solve a puzzle. She needs to do what is best for all students, ensuring that those who are struggling succeed while challenging those who want more work. And, admittedly, she needs to save a little money. Hayes is asking the Collier County School Board to vote for a change to the high school schedule that would take students from the four-period, 86-minute classes they now attend to a six-period day with each class lasting 55 minutes. Students who wanted to, or needed to because of remediation, would be allowed to take an optional seventh period. Hayes dismissed claims from Jonathan Tuttle, executive director of the Collier County Education Association union, which represents 80 percent of teachers, that Santa Rosa County changed from a traditional schedule to a block schedule to save money.

### **Tom Lyons -- Teacher not guilty, and not employed**

Mary Cropsey wonders if her career as an elementary school teacher will ever recover from the bogus allegation that she altered FCAT answer sheets.

So far, it seems that being innocent just doesn't matter.

"I'm tainted," she told me.

You might recall that she was found not guilty last summer by the Manatee County School Board. Her teaching certificate is secure because, in November, the state Department of Education decided, quite correctly, that there was no evidence even worthy of a hearing.

I said as much long ago.

But though she has been about as cleared as it is possible to get, that's not going to result in Cropsey getting another teaching job with the Manatee County School District.

That's because Superintendent Roger Dearing and the Manatee School Board decided Cropsey is guilty of "gross insubordination."

That's why she was removed from her job at Mills Elementary last year.

She was a third-grade teacher when she refused to answer questions about an FCAT cheating allegation. Her refusal was the alleged insubordination.

But she refused because her lawyer advised her to do so. The letter requesting her presence for questioning told her she could bring "representation," but the school district wouldn't let her lawyer attend because he wasn't hired by the teacher's union.

Cropsey, aghast at the suspicion that she had cheated, and fearing that she was being retaliated against for making a complaint against her principal, had hired her own lawyer. After all, FCAT cheating can result in loss of a teaching certificate and even criminal charges.

The school district does not allow a teacher to have a private lawyer during questioning by a district investigator, no matter what the subject matter. Allowing it would violate the district's contract with the union, Dearing says.

The School Board backed Dearing, and decided Cropsey was guilty of insubordination even though Cropsey had later answered every question about the FCAT matter, at length, in detail and under oath, at a public hearing.

It is hard for me to figure how anyone could fault Cropsey for following her lawyer's advice.

And last month, a hearing officer who handles unemployment benefits decided Cropsey was right.

Cropsey had filed for unemployment benefits that the district opposed, claiming she had been fired for proper cause. A hearing officer ruled otherwise, deciding the district violated state law and "deliberately denied the claimant's most basic due process rights."

The school district's lawyer, John Bowen, says that ruling is just wrong. He insists that other pending cases now on appeal will soon show that.

Bowen also said if Cropsey had just talked that first day, the whole matter likely would have ended.

I imagine so. But Bowen and Dearing should still be getting the picture. When Cropsey and her lawyer balked about that interview, it was a reasonable decision at the least, not a slap in the face to the school district or a sign of bad character.

Cropsey says job hunting has been all but futile. So far this school year, she's done a little substituting at a private school in Sarasota County. But with her record in Manatee still showing she was fired for insubordination, human resources staffs in neighboring school districts balk.

And when they learn it had something to do with an FCAT cheating allegation, that's that. Being innocent doesn't matter.

"They think you're trash," Cropsey said.

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