

### **CRIST PROMISED TO 'HOLD SCHOOLS HARMLESS' BUT CUTS CONTINUE TO DEEPEN --**

In January, Gov. Charlie Crist broke with tradition and gave the press a sneak peek at his eye-popping proposal to increase public school spending by \$1 billion. The move was timed to help Crist sell a \$9.3 billion property-tax cut to voters and answer critics who warned about the cost to education. A very different reality comes crashing down this week when the House and Senate begin negotiating a \$65 billion-plus budget that could slash education next year by as much as \$298 million. "The Legislature has to look at a different reality four months later and the hard truth is that the budget has slipped further," said Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Niceville and a former Okaloosa schools superintendent. "We don't have the luxury of looking through the mirror, we have to look ahead. And as I tell my friends in the education community, you ain't seen nothing yet. The economy is going to get worse before it gets better." Crist could promise to "hold schools harmless" because he based his proposal on a November forecast that overestimated tax collections by \$2 billion. The revenue picture has been growing darker ever since. Critics at the [Florida Education Association](#) are hardly surprised. "This is kind of an interesting definition of holding schools harmless," quipped spokesman [Mark Pudlow](#). "We're going to see layoffs, and that's in the classroom, not just support personnel."

### **PROPERTY TAX PLAN MAY LEAD TO HIKES --**

Despite promises to avoid raising property taxes that pay for schools, a plan from state House Republicans would hit property owners in Palm Beach, Miami-Dade, Hillsborough and 17 other counties with tax increases, according to a Palm Beach Post analysis. The House education budget calls for a total of \$8 billion in property taxes to be collected from Florida's 67 counties. That's the same amount as this year, which is how Republican leaders explain their pledge to hold property taxes steady. But the analysis shows that because lawmakers give little consideration to individual counties when setting the budget and do not have to take into account the same factors as cities and counties when setting their tax rates, property owners in 20 counties would pay more taxes next year under the House plan. Those hikes would be offset by lower tax bills for 47 other counties. Property owners, however, might find the House plan more palatable than proposals from the Senate and Republican Gov. Charlie Crist. Both Crist and the Senate have suggested increasing school property taxes.

### **MANATEE SCHOOLS TALKING LAYOFFS --**

For the first time since talk of serious school district budget cuts began, school administrators have started to use the word "layoffs." "We started using it this week," Tim McGonegal, Manatee schools' assistant superintendent of finances, said Friday. The picture of the impending budget cuts may be even grimmer than what McGonegal and other administrators projected. Local schools may lose more than the 172 positions that were initially estimated due to statewide sales tax shortfalls, he said. "I think I am way low," McGonegal said. "I wouldn't give you a guess." The financial pressures can be felt already. Some teachers on annual contracts have been notified they won't be renewed. And top schools officials may be getting a larger pay cut and the entire district may be facing a reorganization, McGonegal said. Superintendent Roger Dearing is scheduled to announce the plans at a school board meeting today. The district is looking at eliminating 47 administration positions, McGonegal said. The district's special education programs are also facing a big hit as they received federal funding under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. McGonegal said the grants from IDEA have gone down in the past three years and special ed administrators are looking to eliminate aides, administrative staff and reading coaches. Altogether, 35 positions may be cut next year. On Friday, the district was not able to say how many teachers are affected, but said they are in the process of informing them and making plans. Teachers who have less than three years of experience in Manatee are on annual contracts, said [Art Fazio](#), business manager of the [Manatee Education Association](#). They can either go on tenure or on another yearly contract at the fourth year. He said he didn't know the number of teachers who are affected, but the union is getting a lot of calls about the non-renewed contracts.

### **OKALOOSA SCHOOLS BRACE FOR JOB CUTS --**

Principals are making agonizing decisions as the Okaloosa County School District braces for employee cutbacks next year. At the same time, School Board members are delaying the renewal of the district's contract for school nurses until Florida's proposed budget cuts are finalized. Teacher's union [President Sheila Olsen](#)

estimates that as many as 300 positions could be eliminated by next week. "That's just what we fear out there. We're certainly hoping it's not," Olsen said. Support personnel such as guidance counselors, custodians and teachers' aides will likely be hit the hardest, officials say. But nothing is certain until April 15, the deadline for principals to send out pink slips. "As far as I know, I don't see the number being that high," Okaloosa County Superintendent of Schools Alexis Tibbetts said of Olsen's estimate. Mike Foxworthy, the school district's chief officer of human resources, said the number would be higher than in the past. However, he said the final count will probably be closer to 100 positions, with a significant impact for educational support staffers and teachers, he said. Olsen is hoping for the best, but is preparing for the worst. "If they handed me a blank piece of paper next week, I'd be very happy," she said. "I don't expect that paper." **Greg Butler**, executive director of the teachers' union says, "I feel sorry for the principals because I mean they've got a really tough job. It's not fun to tell somebody I can't hire you back right now" Butler's job is a little tough this time of year too. He's the first point of contact for teachers who are laid off. Butler says, "A music teacher that's taught for 34 years ... the principal has unfortunately decided there's no room in the budget for her position -- that's hard to swallow." Butler estimates that 25 percent of the layoffs will be teaching positions. The rest are educational support, like classroom assistants. One mother says their importance shouldn't be underestimated. Valparaiso mother Teresa Roberts says, "More capabilities to learn more, and spend more time, and have more time for the children, spend more time with them, because if you don't spend enough time with them, it shows." Butler says, "They're a very important part of the whole process and taking them out of the classroom and not having them, I don't know what will happen."

**CUTS IN MONROE SCHOOLS BUDGET MIGHT COST DOZENS OF JOBS** -- The Monroe County School District could cut as many as 38 positions from 12 schools because of a dwindling budget and less state funding. Superintendent Randy Acevedo has proposed eliminating 38 positions and cutting discretionary spending by 15 percent to meet a board-imposed \$88 million cap on the 2008-2009 budget. The cap, approved by the board last month, is about \$6 million less than the \$94 million spent by the school district in 2007-2008. On the chopping block are almost 38 full-time and part-time positions, including 13 curriculum resource teachers, about eight office workers, seven teachers aides, three athletic trainers and seven assistant principals.

**PAY HELD 'HOSTAGE,' TEACHERS PROTEST** -- More than three-quarters into the school year, Martin County teachers are getting a raise. The school board Friday formally ratified a contract that many teachers said they reluctantly approved the day before. Had the teachers not ratified the contract, state law requires that it be imposed on them, in which case their raises would have gone back only to March 19, the day the school board sided with district staff at an impasse hearing. Instead, 93 percent of voting teachers opted to ratify the contract, meaning teachers will receive back pay to July 1. Many teachers Friday accused the school board of holding the back pay "hostage," saying the state law could have been bypassed by a memorandum of understanding between the two sides. "I'm angry, hurt, disappointed and just sick to my stomach by the way the teachers in Martin County have been treated this year," Crystal Lake Elementary teacher Mary Slavin said. "If this was collaborative, it really wasn't too collaborative," said Martin County School Board Vice Chairwoman Nancy Kline. "I'm very sorry that we've had to end up with a contract this way." On Thursday, the teachers held a contract ratification vote and while the majority voted in favor of it, they did so in protest, teachers union **President Jeanette Phillips** said. "Before you start patting yourselves on the back because you got everything that you wanted, we want there to be no mistake. Those teachers who voted yes ... only voted yes because they had no choice," said Phillips, a fourth-grade teacher at Bessey Creek Elementary. "With gas prices increasing and the cost of living climbing, no one can afford to turn down extra income, least of all teachers. This is not a happy occasion. Instead of celebrating our contract settlement, we are mourning the demise of any pretense of collaborative bargaining in Martin County."