

FLORIDA DISTRICTS SLASH PROGRAMS, PERSONNEL IN WAKE OF BUDGET

WOES -- Reeling from unprecedented cuts to the state's K-12 funding in the just-concluded legislative session, Florida school districts are scrambling to slash an average of \$131 per student by eliminating teacher aides, consolidating bus routes and canceling before- and after-school programs. The reductions in state education aid -- coupled with cuts approved in two special sessions last year -- mean districts will receive about 5 percent less in 2008-09 than they did in the previous school year. "It was a disastrous session," said Wayne Blanton, the executive director of the Florida School Boards Association. Facing a massive projected deficit and a third consecutive year of declining tax revenues, lawmakers cut \$4 billion from the state budget, approving a \$66.2 billion fiscal 2009 spending plan that allocates [\\$18.4 billion for K-12 education](#). That's \$332 million, or 2 percent, less for schools than in the current fiscal year. Complicating matters is a constitutional requirement, passed in 2002, that requires districts to reduce class sizes. In addition, Florida voters in January approved a constitutional amendment that slashed their property taxes, which could further cut revenue to schools. Florida's three-year decline in state tax revenues is an "unprecedented event" for the state according to Corina Eckl, the fiscal-program director for the National Conference of State Legislatures, who identified the Sunshine State as one of the most financially troubled in the country at a recent conference on the health of state budgets. Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, a Republican, largely ignored the budget cuts during his [end-of-session remarks May 2](#). He praised state lawmakers for their "great work" in not raising taxes, while continuing to ensure a "quality education." Despite the budget crisis, the Legislature approved a \$30 million expansion of the [corporate-tax-credit-scholarship program](#), originally created in 2001. That program gives companies tax credits for donations to scholarship organizations that in turn grant voucher-style tuition aid to students to attend private schools.

OSCEOLA TEACHERS FUMING OVER BUDGET CUTS -- Osceola County teachers are fuming over massive cutbacks to educational programs by the legislature. The recently approved state budget calls for a record \$4 billion in cuts, with an estimated \$330 million of that amount coming from K-12 classroom spending. As a show of solidarity, hundreds of educators gathered in Kissimmee on Saturday to stage a protest. "I'm the sole supporter of my household," says **Tandy Braid** who is presently unemployed and worried she may soon be homeless. "I worked in Virginia for eight years, had tenure there, and left because Florida called. I've been here for two years and now I'm finding myself out of a job." Many teachers are also upset because important school programs are being cut as well -- namely, a number of courses in music and the fine arts.

SURVEY: LONGER DAYS DRAINING HILLSBOROUGH TEACHERS -- After being forced to teach a longer day this year, Hillsborough high school teachers are feeling pressed for time and are worried they are shortchanging students, a new survey shows. Two-thirds of the teachers surveyed said they have less time for students outside class. Most are staying later and arriving earlier to get their work done. Almost half thought the quality of their instruction had eroded. Officials heard a loud outcry last year after announcing the change, which affected teachers at high schools and magnet middle programs. They were required to teach an extra class period. The teachers union surveyed 4,000 teachers affected by the change, receiving responses from 57 percent that largely validated reports of exhaustion. "It has been really, really, really drastic," said **Celeste Sanchez**, who teaches anatomy and physiology at Riverview High School. The teachers union sees the survey as ammunition to take into contract negotiations. In a bleak budget year, school officials may not undo the change, which was expected to save as much as \$28-million. But they could take other steps to help teachers. "Let's look at some ways to make teachers' lives easier and make their jobs more doable," said **Yvonne Lyons**, executive director of the **Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association**. She suggested eliminating the two extra school days on the Hillsborough calendar and guaranteeing planning time for teachers. The union is waiting to see whether the scheduling change affected areas such as student test scores and teachers taking sick and personal days. The district helped administer the survey but didn't get involved in it. Testing director John Hilderbrand said he thought it was biased. "You're dealing with a group of people who have been asked to work an extra hour without pay," he said. "The answers are going to be somewhat negative."

LEE SCHOOL DISTRICT LOOKING TO CUT \$14.6 MILLION FROM BUDGET -- Gone are student field trips. Dismissed are dozens of administrators, bus drivers and secretaries. Reduced are funds for high school athletic events, musical instrument repair and marching band uniforms. But the Lee County school district still needs to cut \$14.6 million from its budget, and that money looks to come right from the salaries, raises or health insurance benefits of workers with the county's largest employer. Members of the **Teachers Association of Lee County** and the **Support Personnel Association of Lee County** -- two union-affiliated groups representing about 9,500 workers -- met with district officials Monday in their first contract bargaining session following the passage of the state's budget last week. That budget resulted in a \$7 million funding increase for the school district, far short of the \$35.7 million increase in salary, fuel and utility expenses the district expects for the next year. The result is a \$29 million hole, half of which the district filled over the past two months by cutting dozens of programs, projects and nearly 160 positions, many of them directorships. District Budget Director Ami Desamours said the remainder will come from the bargaining table. "We have done as much cutting as we can," Desamours said. The situation compounds itself by the fact that the state may not have enough money to cover the cost of the budget it passed. District Chief Business Officer Lee Legutko said last week that the state put off estimating its revenue, and will likely have to make cuts midway through next year, as it did this year. Also complicating the bargaining is an \$8 million increase in health insurance costs. Support Personnel Association President **Bob Rushlow** said it's the worst situation he has seen in years. "I've been in negotiations for many, many years, but this has got to be some of the toughest negotiations that I have ever experienced," Rushlow said after the four-hour meeting's completion. "And it's not over yet." Within the coming weeks, the groups hope to eventually reach an agreement with the district. The meetings held up to this point have allowed for brainstorming various options. One suggestion placed on the table was to cut the employees' \$20 million benefit package, which includes funding for raises and health benefits, by \$14.6 million and let the remaining \$5.4 million be distributed how the employee associations wished. Those in the meetings have also suggested cuts in salary, including cutting pay for holidays the district's employees do not work. "Any decision we're going to make is going to be unpopular," Rushlow said. "It's a shame that the Legislature and the governor won't tap into the renegade fund for this budget. The legislators won't step up to the plate on this one. I don't think they realize this is impacting kids lives and their futures."