

TEACHER LAYOFFS BEGIN -- Uncertainty continues in Monroe County schools as teachers this week learn whether their contracts will be renewed for the next school year. Though teachers learn every year at this time whether they'll be offered contracts for the next school year, cuts to the county education budget makes this year's wait harder. Schools Superintendent Randy Acevedo announced a few weeks ago that more than 30 positions will not be funded in the fall. At least six teachers at Marathon High School, including a special education teacher, have been told in recent days that their contracts won't be renewed next year. As for teachers worried about their jobs, Acevedo said: "I sympathize with the position they're in with all the uncertainty. They are valued, and I want them to know I appreciate what they do for our students. We're going to work hard to minimize job cuts." **United Teachers of Monroe President Leon Fowler** uses care when talking about upcoming negotiations between the teachers he represents and the school district. An early retirement package is being offered to longer-serving teachers to see if positions can be freed up that way rather than cut teachers. "In times like this, all employees are fearful depending on their contract status and financial situation," Fowler said. "We are still trying to finalize an agreement on an early retirement package, the results of which will impact contract negotiations - - depending on whether employees take advantage of it."

IDEA OF PAY CUTS HITS RESISTANCE -- A proposal by Pinellas school officials to impose wage cuts on 16,000 employees met with strong opposition Wednesday as union leaders and some School Board members suggested there may be other ways out of the district's budget crisis. "As long as it's taken us to get our salaries up to where they are now, to talk about reducing salaries is just shameful," said **Kim Black**, president of the **Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association**. Black criticized a proposal announced Tuesday by superintendent Clayton Wilcox to cut pay for all employees by 2 percent, saying it was too radical. "That's not going to happen," she said. "This is clearly all going to be worked out in bargaining." The district will meet with union heads Friday, and board members will discuss the proposed cuts in a workshop today. Wilcox predicted stiff opposition Tuesday, saying union members were not likely to ratify a salary cut and that the School Board could be forced into the uncomfortable posture of having to impose one. But he insisted there were few other options with \$43-million to cut from a budget that is 85 percent salaries and benefits. "Quite honestly, we are up against a proverbial rock and a hard place," he told district employees. "We honestly believe that we've cut well into the muscle and well into the bone, and there's no place left to turn." He also invited people to come forward with their own ideas, saying, "If you go home this evening and you have that eureka moment, please don't sit on it." Many are ready to take him up on it. Black, the union president, said teachers expressed shock that a proposal to cut salaries would come on the heels of a January referendum in which Pinellas voters renewed a special property tax used primarily to enhance teacher salaries.

SCHOOL CUTS SPUR SHOWDOWN -- The Escambia County School Board and Superintendent Jim Paul may be headed toward a costly legal showdown over budget cuts. The issue came to a head at a Tuesday night meeting after the board rejected Paul's recommendation to cut \$1.7 million in non-teaching positions across district departments. Board members objected to Paul's failure to include any top administrative positions in the cuts, and they are considering a vote to eliminate positions themselves. Paul maintains that only he has the constitutional authority to recommend staff reductions, and the board can only vote his proposals up or down. "The last thing we need, particularly during a financial crisis, is to get involved in a legal dispute between the superintendent and the School Board," Paul said. "That could be very costly." School Board member Jeff Bergosh argued, however, that more cuts are needed at the top and fewer at the bottom. "We've got to find a way to lessen the impacts on students," he said. School Board attorney Donna Waters said no one wants a protracted legal fight. "It could run into tens of thousands — if not hundred of thousands of dollars — and would be counterproductive," she said. Money for a legal battle would come from funds used to run the school district. Board members on Tuesday approved Paul's recommendation to cut 115 teachers and 40 elementary administrative clerks to save \$6.2 million next year. In return, they want Paul to bring a

recommendation to reduce top administrative staff. The Escambia Education Association, which is the teachers' union, has recommended cutting 24 administrative positions for a \$1.6 million savings. The administrative staff includes 41 department heads and assistant superintendents, supervising such areas as transportation, food, maintenance, human resources and finance. About 100 principals and vice principals also are considered administrators. Paul, who is not seeking re-election this fall, said there are no positions to eliminate.

TAX CUTS COSTLY FOR MANATEE SCHOOLS -- At a time when the school district is warning of pay cuts and job losses, property tax rates for schools are set to fall by just over 5 percent, district officials announced Wednesday. The rollbacks are being pushed by the state, which caps the property tax rates -- known as millage rates -- that schools can charge. Legislators announced Tuesday that they plan to cut school funding statewide, which means a cut in district tax rates. For the owner of a Manatee home valued at \$250,000 and with a homestead exemption, the property tax bill from the School Board would decrease to \$1,635, a savings of roughly \$90 from the previous year. But the state's plan, coupled with rising fuel and utility costs, means the district must cut about \$22 million from its annual budget, school officials said Wednesday. The shortfall has left district officials insisting that every proposal to save money, including job losses and pay cuts for employees, be on the table. The state's funding plan, expected to be approved Friday, will also cut the district's construction funds by \$8.2 million, district officials said. The reduction comes on top of a cut of \$8.7 million from this year's school budget. With state sales tax revenues projected to fall further, district officials fear more cuts will follow. "We're not sure the state can fund the budget it will approve," said Tim McGonegal, assistant superintendent for business services. The district has already eliminated 47 administrative positions and given termination notices to almost 200 contract employees, most of whom were teachers. Across-the-board pay cuts for administrators, teachers and other employees have also been proposed as a way to avoid up to 400 job losses at schools.