

# Schools drain reserves to make up for state cuts

## **FINANCES: School Boards chief calls situation the worst in 30-plus years**

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*TALLAHASSEE* - The state's public schools have laid off lunchroom workers and bus drivers, slashed administration, put maintenance on hold and soon will exhaust their reserve funds.

Any more budget cuts, though, would reach into the classroom, said Wayne Blanton, executive director of the Florida Association of School Boards.

School districts will be at the bottom of their reserves after the latest round of cuts announced last week, Blanton said Friday.

"There is no more saved money to make any further cuts," said Blanton, fresh from a meeting with school finance officials. He said it is the worst financial situation he has seen in his 33 years with the association.

School districts began the year with almost 2 percent fewer dollars per student. The Department of Education, in a Nov. 10 memo to school superintendents, served notice they will also be getting a 2 percent mid-year cut -- \$355 million statewide -- because of a spending holdback ordered by Gov. Charlie Crist.

Additional reductions are possible before the budget year ends June 30 and more are almost certain in 2009-10 because state tax revenues are continuing to fall amid the national economic slump.

Mark Pudlow, spokesman for the Florida Education Association, the statewide teachers union, agreed the situation is dire.

"We're just getting to the point of what more are we going to cut?" Pudlow said. "The easy cuts already have been made."

The schools rely on the state for about half of their budgets, and Crist has ordered all state agencies to hold back 4 percent of their spending. State economists will meet next Friday to make a new general revenue estimate, and it is expected to be down again.

The first things to go if cuts reach the classroom will be noncore subjects such as art, music and band, Blanton said. He said some school officials also are thinking about reducing athletic programs and going to a four-day work week.

"You can forget about meeting the class-size amendment," Blanton said.

Voters in 2002 passed an amendment to the Florida Constitution that requires no more than 18 students per class in kindergarten through third grade, 22 in fourth through eighth and 25 in high school as of the 2010-11 school year.

State law, though, requires those limits to be met a year sooner as part of a phase-in scheme. The law requires they be met on a school average basis this year.

Attempts to make the limits more flexible failed during this year's legislative session, but the issue is likely to emerge again when lawmakers return in March. Some legislators insist nothing can be done without amending the constitution but others disagree. The teachers union, school boards and superintendents also have argued that changes can be made without passing another amendment.

The budget crunch also has stalled contract negotiations between most county school districts and their local teachers unions. One of the 67 districts does not have a union. By this time of year most contracts usually are signed, but only 18 districts have settled so far in 2008, Blanton said.

"We are at impasse all over the place," he said.

In most cases those contracts that have been settled give teachers pay raises of only 1 or 2 percent, Pudlow said.

Blanton said school boards again will push for class-size flexibility during the 2009 legislative session. They will also ask lawmakers to look at increasing lottery income by expanding games, and increasing taxes on cigarettes and liquor.

On Election Day, voters in Alachua and Collier counties approved local property tax increases for their schools. Other districts may try that, too, if the state keeps cutting its funding.

The teachers union is advocating a temporary rise in the state sales tax, Pudlow said.