

Leaders

A Newsletter for Florida School Board Members

Teachers rally for 'no more cuts'

School board members and superintendents stood with teachers the last day of February to show their support for a message teachers want to deliver to legislators: "No more cuts."

More than 6,000 teachers and other educators packed the basketball arena at the University of Central Florida in Orlando for a rally sponsored by the statewide teachers union, the Florida Education Association. Its theme was simple: "Make our schools a priority."

"Education cannot afford more budget cuts," commented FSBA Executive Director Wayne Blanton, who attended the rally along with FSBA President Beverly Slough, St. Johns County School Board.

"We need to present a united front as we work to ensure that Florida's children have the resources they need for a quality education," said Ms. Slough.



Sign of the times at the rally was the back of this shirt worn by a teacher.

Broward County School Board Chair Maureen Dinnen echoed those sentiments. "Our intent with this rally is to send a message to our legislators that they need to make our schools a priority. Last week, the Broward School Board reviewed a series of horrible cuts. There are no good choices."

Andy Ford, FEA president, said of the rally: "We're hoping to engage the community in helping them understand what the issues



FSBA President Beverly Slough, left, greets another board member, Maureen Dinnen, Broward County, during the teacher rally.

are and to capture the attention of legislators so they also understand."

Orange County School Superintendent Ron Blocker told teachers "there is a silver lining to all this. It has united us, school boards, teachers, superintendents. We're now speaking with one powerful voice."

He added: "We want to stop the bleeding and remind legislators that it's the teacher's job to teach and your job to find the money."

He mentioned the popularity of the state's Bright Futures scholarship program, but added, "If they (legislators) don't adequately fund K-12, these kids won't have a bright future."

"We're here for one reason, to fight for the children of Florida," Karin Brown, Florida PTA president, told the teachers. Echoing some of the language from Florida's Constitution, she said the PTA "stands ready to help our policy makers meet their paramount duty" of adequately funding education. "It's vital for the state's future and its economic growth."

Rep. Dwight Bullard, D-Miami, an 11th grade American history teacher, was the only legislator to attend the rally. He compared the gathering to a pep rally held before a big game.

"Game time begins Tuesday when the Legislature convenes. Start calling and e-mailing your legislators," he said. "We need to ensure that this state Legislature does no more damage to public education."

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Leadership Calling

Four superintendents, school board members honored by foundation

Four Florida superintendents and school board members have been recognized by the Consortium of Florida Education Foundations for their leadership. The awards were presented during FSBA's 63rd Annual Joint Conference last December in Tampa.

The Consortium of Florida Education Foundations 2008 Gold Star awards went to: Dr. Sara Wilcox, former Martin County superintendent; Scott Strong, Lake County School Board member; Dr. Richard DiPatri, Brevard County superintendent; and Kathryn Starkey, Pasco County School Board member. The consortium is a membership organization for Florida's local K-12 public education foundations.

Local education foundations from throughout the state nominated school system leaders for the awards sponsored by the Suncoast Schools Federal Credit Union. Four recipients were chosen, one school board member and superintendent each in school districts of less than 50,000 students and one each from school districts of more than 50,000.



The Consortium of Florida Education Foundations Gold Star recipients were, from left: Scott Strong, Lake County School Board; Dr. Sara Wilcox, former Martin County superintendent; Dr. Richard DiPatri, Brevard County superintendent; and Kathryn Starkey, Pasco County School Board.

Senate committee to focus on Florida's economy

Senate President Jeff Atwater, R-North Palm Beach, has appointed a Select Committee on Florida's Economy to create incentives and eliminate disincentives to economic recovery and growth and to ensure that government functions more simply, more transparently, less expensively, and more effectively.

The Select Committee will be in existence for two years, the full term of Sen. Atwater's Presidency. The members of the committee include Senators Don Gaetz (chair), R-Fort Walton Beach; Jeremy Ring (Vice Chair), D-Margate; JD Alexander, R-Winter Haven; Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton; Dan Gelber, D-Miami Beach; Mike Haridopolos, R-Melbourne; Tony Hill, D-Jacksonville; Jim King, R-Jacksonville; Ken Pruitt, R-Port St. Lucie; Garrett Richter, R-Naples; and Eleanor Sobel, D-Hallandale Beach.



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Learning First Alliance joins call for adequate funding

Funding education adequately, Florida school districts' primary legislative goal of the past few years, has now received the blessing of a group of organizations which are members of the Florida Learning First Alliance.

The alliance features businesses represented by the Florida Chamber, education groups representing teachers, school boards, superintendents and parents and local governments.

"We narrowed our focus and will be pushing the Legislature to follow Article 9, Section 1 of the Constitution regarding adequate funding for public schools. The vote was unanimous," said alliance Chair Jack Lamb, Hillsborough County School Board.

"We're very pleased about the number of groups hanging in there with us and particularly that we're getting good input from the business sector," he said.

"I believe this is one of the strongest coalitions we have in the state for education," commented FSBA President Beverly Slough, St. Johns County School Board. "For us to sit down at the table, education, business, county government, and develop some common goals is pretty amazing. And it also paints a picture that education is not just a family issue but a statewide issue that affects business and local government."

She added: "Without a strong education base, the rest of the state's infrastructure is in jeopardy."

The next meeting of the alliance is scheduled for October in Tallahassee and will be hosted by the Florida Association of School Administrators.

The Florida group is an offshoot of the national Learning First Alliance that was created in 1996 by the National School Boards Association and 11 other national education organizations.

"It is our hope that the FLFA will serve to highlight and strengthen the links between a high quality public education system and strong economic development," Dr. Lamb said at the alliance's first meeting in 2007.

Florida Schools of Excellence Commission apparently dead

The Department of Education has decided not to fight an appellate court decision that declared legislative creation of the Florida Schools of Excellence Commission unconstitutional.

In its ruling, the court noted that the statutes that established the Florida Schools of Excellence Commission "pose a present total and fatal conflict with article IX, section 4 of the Florida Constitution."

The commission was created to oversee charter public schools. The DOE, in announcing its decision not to appeal, said that while the commission had already approved some charter schools, the charters have not been executed, so no disruption should occur.

Teachers rally



From left, FSBA Executive Director Wayne Blanton, Mike Cahill, president of the Orange County Classroom Teachers Association and Orange County School Superintendent Ron Blocker meet during the teacher rally.

The only legislator at the conference, Rep. Dwight Bullard, D-Miami, chats with FSBA President Beverly Slough at the teacher's gathering, which he compared to a pep rally before the big game, in this case the convening of the Legislature.



Two other school board members at the rally included Cindy Barrow, left, Lake County, and Brenda Priestly Jackson, Duval County.



From the Executive Director

By **WAYNE BLANTON**



WAYNE BLANTON

Making sense of this year's budget puzzle

Like jigsaw puzzles? Then you'll love this year's budget conundrums.

While the federal stimulus package is supposed to lessen Florida's budget woes, it likely won't prevent further education cuts. They just won't be as big. But that's depending on when the state will receive the federal handouts which, at the moment, is anyone's guess.

Right now, it's like a huge jigsaw. At least with puzzles that come in a box, you know what the end result is supposed to look like. But here, you have stimulus dollars, less the downturn in assessed property values and new revenue estimates that come in lower and lower. And then you have to figure out how all of this is supposed to fit together. It's a wonder anyone can make any sense of it.

This uncertainty is causing a lot of angst, not only among legislators but with school boards too. Florida's share of the \$787 billion stimulus package, known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, is nearly \$12 billion of which \$3 billion is for education. That leaves other state money that could be used to balance the budget and which would take some pressure off education.

Technically, Florida may not even be eligible for stimulus money for education. The bill says that for states to be eligible for education money, it has to have maintained its maintenance of effort with 2006. That means Florida's

education funding this year should be on a parity with what schools received in 2006. But Florida has been below 2006 by about a half a billion dollars and on the surface that would seem to disqualify Florida.

But new U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan can waive these maintenance of effort requirements. And since two other states are in the same boat, specifically California and Nevada, such waivers are likely to be issued.

Florida, California and Nevada tend to be on the leading edge of any economic downturn, be it a recession or boom. The stimulus bill was written for the other 47 states which are just beginning to make budget cuts. We've been making budget cuts for two years.

Even with this stimulus influx, school districts need to remember that these funds are non-recurring and are intended solely to stimulate the existing economy. This shot in the arm will not be in hand, nor will it be enough, to overcome the \$5 billion shortfall that is expected when Florida's state Legislature creates its 2009-2010 budget.

It is also important to note that, for the most part, these stimulus funds will be provided over two years and that most funding will not begin to be available until July 1, 2009.

In the meantime, we have school districts getting ready to lay off people which defeats the purpose of the stimulus program. School districts in many counties are the largest employers and if many of these people are out of work, they won't be capable of doing those things that would stimulate the economy.

The only truth we can rely on is that we don't know the truth. There are still just too many unknowns. For example, how can the state put together a budget if it doesn't know when it will get the stimulus checks? I have never seen so many different puzzle pieces that the Legislature will have to try to fit together to produce a coherent picture.

Because of all of this, it will be extremely difficult for the Legislature to complete its budget in the next 60 days. I predict we'll be here way past May 1. We will keep you up to date during the legislative session with our daily updates on our Web site (www.fsba.org) and our weekly legislative Webcast every Friday.

Dr. Blanton is executive director of the Florida School Boards Association.

Upcoming Events

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| April 4-7 | NSBA's 69th Annual Conference
San Diego, Calif. |
| April 16-17 | Master Board Forum, Gainesville |
| April 30-
May 1 | Master Board Forum, Panama City |
| May 1 | Legislature adjourns |
| May 7-8 | Master Board Forum, Ocala |
| May 13-15 | Florida Education Negotiators
Conference, Daytona Beach |
| June 10-12 | FSBA's Annual Spring Conference,
Grand Hyatt, Tampa |