



Citizens for Strong Schools, Inc.
P.O. Box 1071
Gainesville, FL 32602

www.yesforAlachuaschools.org

February 9, 2011

Voice of the People
The Gainesville Sun
voice@gvillesun.com

Editor: Less than a week before rolling out his proposed state budget, Florida Governor Rick Scott gave an interview to the *Wall Street Journal*. When he was asked how he could reduce property taxes and still maintain school funding at its current level, he said "What I'm doing is...I'm taking the savings out of the state dollars not out of the school system...so it leaves the funding for education the way it was."

What a difference five days made.

The budget Scott presented earlier this week actually includes a \$703 per student cut in school funding, or about 10%. For Alachua County Public Schools, that would mean the loss of almost \$19 million for the upcoming school year.

Since the beginning of the 2007-08 school year, funding has dropped nearly \$400 per student here in Alachua County. The state has cut its share of funding even more drastically. It's now spending \$1300 less per student than it was three years ago, a 27% decrease. It has continued to cut despite language in the Florida Constitution that says providing 'high quality schools' is the state's 'paramount duty,' language that was added by more than 70% of Florida's voters.

Yes, things could have been worse. For the past two years the Florida Legislature has used federal stimulus dollars to help balance the state's budget. This year's stimulus funding amounted to about \$8.6 million here in Alachua County and pays for more than 160 teaching positions. But that money dries up when the school year is over.

The Legislature has also refused to fully fund the class size law that voters passed in 2002, even though the law clearly says the state is required to pay for it, NOT local districts. Alachua County Public Schools has had to spend about \$1.75 million this year alone on class size.

To add insult to injury, the state plans to fine Alachua County at least \$150,000, if not more, because the district refused to limit the number of high school students taking advanced courses or transfer students to schools outside their zones or place students involuntarily in online classes or do any of the other things many districts in Florida did to fully comply with class size requirements.

Meanwhile the state continues to pile on more unfunded mandates, including new high school requirements and more standardized tests.

In some ways, Alachua County Public Schools is luckier than other districts. Thanks to the efforts of Citizens for Strong Schools and the support of local voters, we passed the one mill property tax initiative in 2008, which is bringing in between \$12 and \$13 million each year.

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But that money must be spent on the items listed on the ballot, including elementary art teachers, music teachers and guidance counselors, academic/career/technical magnet programs and classroom technology. It can't be used to save the jobs of other teachers. It also runs out in 2013.

The governor says part of the 10% per pupil cut will be offset by changing the pension plans of school employees. Scott is proposing that all state employees, including teachers, police officers and firefighters be required to contribute 5% of their income to the state's retirement plan. Essentially, it's a pay cut.

But even if that proposal is approved, it would save Alachua County Public Schools just over \$6 million. That still leaves the district with a nearly \$13 million hole to fill.

Scott says he wants to bring more jobs to Florida. But businesses want access to a well-educated work force and quality schools for their employees' children. How many will want to move to a state with such a dismal national reputation for supporting education?

During his *Wall Street Journal* interview, Scott also said "I also believe that funding for education is part of the success for education." Citizens for Strong Schools agrees, and we urge the governor and the Florida Legislature to back up those words with action.

Mark McGriff, Chairman
Citizens for Strong Schools
P.O. Box 1071
Gainesville, FL 32602
(352) 372-8406