

Art, music, PE classes on Broward schools hit list

BY PATRICIA MAZZEI

pmazzei@MiamiHerald.com

The dire message was largely intended to jolt parents into paying attention: Art, music and physical education at Broward elementary schools are next on the budget-cut hit list.

That's what school system officials told School Board members Tuesday about the district's looming budget shortfall -- which it blames on lawmakers in Tallahassee.

"You've got to put a face on things," Superintendent Jim Notter said after the workshop meeting. "Otherwise, it gets so esoteric."

On March 25, Florida parents and students are scheduled to descend on the state capital for a second annual rally against education cuts.

Since January, the Broward board has been talking about how to ax millions from the district's spending plan -- cuts that will almost certainly result in layoffs, though the school system does not yet have an estimate of how many could lose their jobs. (The district is also advertising to hire teachers, but in specialized areas like middle school and high school math and science.)

EVEN MORE CUTS

After \$135 million in cuts from the state over the past three years, Notter said Broward could lose another \$80 million to \$100 million in 2010-11.

That would be on top of \$62.8 million the district will have to slash from its \$2 billion budget for day-to-day operations. This year, the district tapped into its reserves to cover the costs.

The board did not make any decisions at Tuesday's workshop, which did not include time for public comments. But about a dozen parents and several students showed up anyway to hear how the district might go about trimming elective classes known as "specials."

E-mail from concerned parents and teachers flooded board members' in boxes.

"Enough is enough; well-rounded children need more than an FCAT to get a good education," wrote Beverly Wurts, who identified herself in the e-mail as a parent of a student at Harbordale Elementary in Fort Lauderdale.

"If we do not educate our children to be complete citizens, we are shortchanging our total society and future generations," wrote Robert and Patricia Van Epps of Sunrise.

PLEAS FOR THE ARTS

Board members, too, made impassioned pleas to save the arts, yet they acknowledged they might not be able to do so.

"For some kids, this is the only thing that sparks them," said board member Robin Bartleman, who was near tears.

Under state law, districts must teach core academic subjects like English and math, which makes specials like the arts vulnerable in tight budget years. The law also says elementary students need 2 ½ hours of P.E. a week, but schools have experimented with in-class activities that involve stretching and movement counting toward that requirement.

Among the ideas discussed Tuesday:

- Having more elementaries share art, music, P.E. teachers and media specialists. That way students would still have those classes, although fewer of them, board members said.
- Having one teacher lead two classes at once with the help of an aide. The state's constitutional amendment on class size does not apply to specials.

“What we're really trying to do here is pick the better poison,” board member Kevin Tynan said. “I'd rather see a larger class size than a cut.”

- Having classroom teachers incorporate art and music into their regular lessons. For example, during a unit on African geography, the teacher could include a lesson on the influence of African music on jazz. That model has been tried at at least one school, West Hollywood Elementary, this year, and most on the board strongly opposed it.

“We've heard from our elementary school teachers that they do feel overwhelmed with every other requirement they have to teach,” board member Stephanie Kraft said.

- Relying on “virtual” field trips. For example, students would remain in class and watch an educational program.
- Eliminating early-retirement extensions for teachers. The district did so last year and was sued by the Broward Teachers Union, but won the lawsuit.