

School leaders fear impact of Scott's budget proposal

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TAMPA When Gov. Rick Scott unveiled his budget plan last week, the sheer size of the proposed revenue reductions knocked the wind out of school officials across the state.

In Pinellas County, schools Chief Financial Officer Fred Matz said he took the numbers to Kevin Smith, the assistant superintendent for budget.

"We looked at it and we started laughing hysterically," Matz said. "It's one of those, we just couldn't believe it. We had been talking about potential budget cuts of almost \$30 million, and this is almost triple that."

The reaction in Hillsborough County was a bit more subdued.

"I don't laugh about budgets," said Superintendent Mary Ellen Elia, who nonetheless described herself as surprised and concerned. "We anticipated that there would be cuts...This was more severe than I thought it would be."

From his introduction of the budget at a Tea Party gathering to proposals to change everything from how things are done to the words used to describe them, Scott has upended the budget process in ways that have legislators and local officials reaching for answers.

Matz has been doing this job for more than 37 years, and says he has never seen anything like this budget plan. "It's devastating," he said. "It sets a new low."

The governor's budget proposal calls for a total revenue reduction in Pinellas County of \$86.6 million – counting the loss of \$35.9 million in federal stimulus money -- in a county with a total operating budget of \$891 million.

Hillsborough County, with an operating budget of about \$1.3 billion, is slated to lose \$108 million in revenue, counting \$64 million in lost stimulus money.

Pasco County Schools stand to lose \$44 million, including \$32 million in stimulus, on top of an already projected shortfall of \$47 million.

At the same time, officials say the funding calculations are based on possibly erroneous assumptions – that property values are going to increase in Pinellas County, for example, and student enrollment is going to increase in Pasco. This means, officials fear, that the budget proposal, if it were to become final, would result in even less funding than projected.

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For Matz, it's an upside-down year.

In the past, he said, the governor would propose a "pie-in-the-sky" budget, increasing education funding, doing "all sorts of nice things" for school districts. But then the Legislature would take out the scissors.

This year, Matz said, it looks like the opposite might happen – that Legislature will sheath its shears and decide to spend more than the governor, not less.

And while Matz said he has been encouraged by some comments made by legislators who seem alarmed by Scott's proposal, he's a little worried, too.

"Probably one third of the legislators are new," he said. "My concern is they don't have the experience.. Here they get the governor's budget; maybe they think it's their marching orders."

Elia, for one, is convinced the final budget cuts will be less. The governor's proposal, she said, is "the start of the process."

"There are three bodies that really make this decision and work through the budget," she said, referring to the Senate, the House of Representatives and the governor.

Senate Education Appropriations Chairman David Simmons said the body will carefully evaluate the budget.

"The first premise that I believe exists in the Senate is that we don't want to do any cuts to education," Simmons said. "However, we are realistic. Education is the most important expenditure that we are making for the future of the state of Florida. Any reduction in education spending will come after a thorough investigation of all of the options and alternatives that are available."

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Statewide, Scott is proposing that the per-pupil funding provided to school districts be reduced by \$703, or a little more than 10 percent.

"We all recognize cuts are going to have to be made," said House Education Appropriations Chair Marti Coley. "Ten percent is pretty steep."

One national education analyst welcomed Scott's proposals.

"My initial reaction is he is being more honest than possibly any other governor in the country about what's going on with education funding," said Adam Schaeffer of the libertarian Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.

"That's with regard to federal (stimulus) funds going away. With housing price declines and revenue declines at the state level, there's simply not as much money to go around, and that's been papered over by the feds until now."

Another analyst says the financial issues faced in Florida, and in other states are historic.

Raegen Miller, associate director for education research at the Center for American Progress, a think tank that promotes progressive values, said, "This is the first really serious economic downturn during which we've had accountability in our regime."

Scott wants to change the name of the state's school funding formula from the Florida Education Finance Program – or FEFP – to the Education Choice Fund, a nod, said Scott Kittel, the governor's education policy coordinator in a recent hearing, to the governor's hope for more ability for parents to choose what schools their children attend.

At least one legislator seemed skeptical about that idea.

"I'd like for you to specifically tell us how we have a choice," Coley said to Kittel during a committee hearing.

Local school officials said the districts have already gone through budget cuts over the last few years, leaving few areas to cut.

"If we've already cut a substantial amount of money, if it were to be (another \$108 million cut), you would see substantial changes in the services that we could provide to students in this district," Elia said.

But Elia wouldn't specify what the changes might be. "I'm not going to spend a lot of time on something that is probably not going to be the end product," she said.

Matz said he expects the financial picture won't be as bad as the governor is projecting. "We can't see this getting worse when the legislators meet," he said. "We hope it will get better. It has to."

Reporter Ronnie Blair contributed to this story.