



The 2011 legislative session begins tomorrow (Tuesday, March 8) and it has the potential to have a significant impact on educators specifically and public employees in general.

Let me start by reiterating what I have said before: The process is just getting started. Everything is up for discussion, debate and revision. Much of what you are hearing and reading about right now is speculation or a proposal.

Still, there are a few proposals that we believe are likely to pass in some form, and they could affect our students, our schools, and our employees. They include:

- the overall education budget,
- a proposal to have public employees contribute to their pensions,
- a bill related to performance pay and evaluations for teachers, and
- curtailing or ending DROP (the Deferred Retirement Option Program).

The Budget

Despite the fact that our state and nation are in recovery from the recession, revenue is still down. That's due largely to the fact that property values still have not rebounded and therefore tax collections have remained low.

We do not expect the introduction of any proposals to raise significant new revenue. The budget picture is further complicated by the fact that the two-year federal stimulus package has run its course, so we can't depend on that "stabilization" money. Over the last two years we have known this was coming and we planned for it. The end result is that budget cuts appear all but certain; it's just a question of how deep they will be.

Gov. Rick Scott has proposed drastic cuts to education. Legislators have indicated that, to the extent that they can, they would like to maintain education funding. That will be a major source of debate over the coming weeks. Regardless of how that debate unfolds, we expect more budget cuts.

At this time, the School Board and I have no intentions of veering from the principles we established at the start of the economic downturn. We have been proactive and conservative in our approach and we believe that will enable us to stick to the principles we have established. We will do everything we can to protect the classroom, and we will do all we can to avoid layoffs or pay cuts.

Pension Contribution

At this time, public employees in Florida do not pay directly into their retirement and pension. That contribution has been made by the employer – in this case, the school district. Gov. Rick Scott wants to change that. He has proposed that public employees pay 5% of the contribution toward their retirement. Legislators are discussing similar proposals, though at a smaller percentage.

That, too, will be a subject of debate in the coming weeks. Either way, we believe that public employees will end up paying some percentage of the contribution to their retirement.

We will follow that debate closely because we recognize that having employees bear the responsibility of contributing directly to their pension would have the same effect as a pay cut to our employees.

Pay for Performance Proposal

As happened last year with Senate Bill 6, this year there are proposals that introduce significant changes to the way teachers are evaluated and compensated.

The important thing to remember is that our own Empowering Effective Teachers initiative has given us a head start on such reforms, and that we will be allowed to continue on our own path. There are differences between EET and what is being proposed in Tallahassee. EET involves an evaluation system where 40 percent of the evaluation is based on student learning gains, while the proposals under consideration in Tallahassee call for 50 percent tied to student learning gains. Our proposal also places a greater emphasis on supports for teachers.

Our proposal is the result of input from our teachers, principals, administrators, and national experts. We believe our proposal is thoughtful, balanced, and well constructed, and we are going to continue leading the way in this regard. Legislators have signaled that they don't want to jeopardize our EET.

Deferred Retirement Option Program (DROP)

There are discussions about ending the DROP program. These are only discussions at this time and they include provisions to "grandfather" in current DROP participants.

A word of caution to DROP-eligible employees: If these changes do take place, we anticipate they will not happen until the start of the fiscal year at the earliest. **It would be unwise to make career decisions based on the possibility of legislative action.**

We will keep a close watch on these issues and others as they come up. We also will keep you informed as the legislative session progresses.

As I talk to people in our school district and around the state, I recognize that there is a great deal of unease about the upcoming legislative session. I share that sense of unease. Let me offer this reassurance to our employees. You have several very capable people doing their best to look out for the interests of our students and employees. The School Board and I are committed to a principled approach to handling our budget challenges in a conservative yet innovative manner that has served us well. The Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association and the Hillsborough School Employees Federation have experienced and effective leadership, and they look out for you every day, as well.

As always, thank you for all that you do to support students.

MaryEllen Elia
Superintendent