

COALITION

From page 1

“Art and music is a vital part of an education,” Mr. Donzelli said. “We all know the data. No one is arguing that point. What it comes down to is if you only have \$5, you can’t pay \$10.”

But a group sponsored by the Florida Department of Education, Arts for a Complete Education, is a new voice in Lee County, refuting the district’s claims that state lawmakers are to blame. ACE members point out that music and art programs in elementary schools are mandated by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. ACE also advocates partnerships between school districts, teachers, parents and community groups.

“If it all depended on Tallahassee, we wouldn’t need a school board,” says Susan Burke, executive director of the Florida Alliance for Arts Education, which helps start ACE coalitions in counties. “Across the state, every student gets the same allocation of money and no other county found it necessary to cut all of their art and music teachers.

“(Art and music) is part of what’s funded when they give the per student allocation in Florida. It’s part of the curriculum. It’s part of the funding. How (school districts) are going to spend that money is a local decision.”

Many Florida counties have established ACE coalitions since 1990. Lee County’s was established just this month. If Lee County cuts half its music and art teachers, Ms. Burke says, “that’s not enough to teach the curriculum that is approved by the Florida Department of Education.”

But spokesperson Mr. Donzelli says the district has no choice other than cutting music and art teachers. He calls the No



Child Left Behind Act and Sunshine State standards “unfunded mandates.”

With the property tax increase Superintendent James Browder has proposed, about 40 teachers would lose their jobs, he says. Eighty would be cut without the tax hike. The increase would mean a homeowner who owned \$125,000 worth of taxable property would pay about \$31.25 more next year.

“If you adjust for inflation, Florida is funding its schools at 1990 levels,” Mr. Donzelli says. “How are you supposed to have a 21st century education using 20th century dollars?”

Florida Arts Education Director Ms. Burke says the school district is trying to evade responsibility for the cuts by putting the onus on state lawmakers. “They wanted people to go away and quit bother-

ing them,” she says.

A last-minute rescheduling of a recent Lee school board meeting had others wondering the same thing. When a group of arts advocates showed up to the 5:30 p.m. meeting, they found out it was rescheduled for the following Monday, May 11, at 3:30 p.m., an inconvenient time for teachers and parents.

School board Chairman Jane Kuckel explained to those present that it was the only time all five members could be there. She also said the cuts to music and art are “not disproportionate” as Ms. Burke and others claim.

More than a dozen teachers, parents and others made it to ask the board not to cut music and art programs. They included Andrew Kurtz, conductor of The Gulf Coast Symphony; Jim Griffith, director

of the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center; and a grade school student from Pelican Elementary.

“As a clinical psychologist, I know what the arts do and that’s why I support the arts,” said Joshua Myers. Mr. Myers said he was there in part to represent “at least a dozen other professionals who could not be here today,” because the meeting was rescheduled. “All the taxpayers deserve to be heard,” he said.

ACE members in other counties say the coalitions strengthen and unify these diverse arts advocates so that it will be more likely they will be heard.

“ACE is probably the most important way to keep in touch with other arts education organizations in Florida,” says Pablo Remonsellez, community coordinator for Viera-based Brevard Cultural Alliance.

“When you do advocacy by yourself, you’re just loco. When you have a unified front all through Florida, people really listen to you because you are part of a stronger voice,” he added.

ACE aims to partner with teachers, parents, arts organizations and businesses, as well as with the Lee County School District, to create ongoing support for music and art education in schools here and at the state level. Jussi Doherty, choral director at Diplomat Middle School, is the group’s communications director in Lee County.

“What we are really hoping to do is have a broad spectrum from the community concerned about having a strong arts education in school,” he says. “We would like parents, business owners, real estate agents, whoever, to get involved. And we don’t mean there’s a whole lot of work to be done — just sign up for our e-mail list, come to our meetings. Anyone is welcome.”

You can contact Mr. Doherty and Lee’s ACE Coalition by sending an e-mail to leeacecoalition@gmail.com. ■



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