

# Education is being put at risk in Florida

*When other states emerge from the recession and begin hiring more teachers and faculty, will we see an accelerated exodus of our educators?*

This spring legislators are passing law after law on education that will make it very hard either to strengthen the state's economy or to recruit and retain the talent we need to educate students to enter an improved economy. The problems begin, but do not end, with budget cuts.



**TOM AUXTER**

The final budget deal is presented by the leadership as "only" 6.5 percent less than last year for pre-K-12. That figure conceals the real damage, with unfunded mandates requiring school boards to pay for legislators' "merit pay" schemes and bazaar and labor intensive accountability data-tracking systems.

Paying for these mandates, along with unfunded increases in energy costs, will force thousands of layoffs of teachers, counselors, and librarians. Over \$1 billion is cut from education to cover the deficit. This means one third of the deficit is paid for by cutting funds for Florida's next generation.

In effect, legislators are

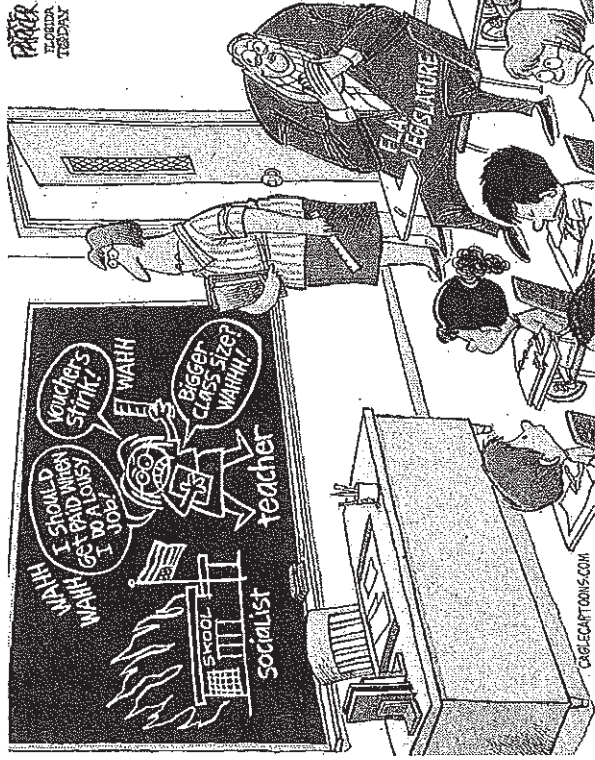
abandoning Florida's recent commitment to build an educated workforce prepared to enter a strong, diversified economy. Although politicians say they want a knowledge-based economy in order to change the options for citizens, their plan will give Floridians few career options besides fitting into the service economy we have now.

In the past decade (except during the recession) teachers left their jobs in Florida at the rate of 5,000 per year. Salaries for teachers have been at the bottom of national rankings for two decades. All teachers have to do is cross the state line into Georgia to give themselves a \$5,000-\$10,000 raise. They already have an incentive for teaching elsewhere.

What about college faculty? During the past decade the annual rate of faculty leaving Florida universities to take jobs elsewhere was as high as 14 percent, at a time that other states had (at worst) a rate of 11 percent. This high turnover rate is especially damaging to Florida universities because departments and programs are so underfunded and understaffed that the loss of even one person can mean, for example, there is no one qualified to teach a specialization students need in order to graduate.

The salary problem is so bad that faculty are \$10,000 behind their counterparts for every 10 years they stay. Thus for faculty as well as teachers there is already a strong salary incentive to look for work elsewhere.

Can legislators today make



CAGLE CARTOONS

## One legislator actually said we need to get rid of "the trash."

things worse than this? Yes, they can! For example, with no advance notice they can reduce paychecks by 3 percent, forcing educators to pay expenses for pensions previously covered by the state as a form of compensation for low salaries.

Recent attacks on tenure also create an incentive for leaving. "Tenure" for teachers is a misnomer, except in three counties. Everywhere else "continuing contracts" are what is at issue, which simply means that a teacher cannot be fired "at will" without advance notice and cause. Just cause must be stated and due process respected before termination. (In no case does any educator have a permanent job, even with

improve. One legislator actually said we need to get rid of "the trash."

The messages sent to teachers are clear: (1) Teaching is no longer a profession in which credentials and professional development are valued and funded. (2) Factors outside the classroom that affect student performance will for the most part be ignored in the testing and evaluation process. (3) Teachers are now to be compared with employees of companies like Kaplan that offer coaching on national standardized tests and reward "teachers" for higher scores.

The next week the sponsor of SB 736 introduced a new bill to abolish tenure in state colleges and community colleges. When asked why, he indicated that after SB 736 passed, the colleges were "next." (This should send a chilling message to universities too.) The bill was temporarily derailed after college presidents voted unanimously to oppose it, and union leaders mobilized faculty to contact legislators.

When other states emerge from the recession and begin hiring more teachers and faculty, will we see an accelerated exodus of our educators? Unless legislators realize they are creating new incentives for teachers and faculty to leave, we will again see a brain drain that undermines all other efforts at improvement in the state.

*Tom Auxter is president of the United Faculty of Florida and a professor of philosophy at the University of Florida.*