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Rally for Public Services: Diverse groups protest state cuts

By Heidi Rogers Kinchen

The state cannot cut its way to excellence or continue to get by on the Jindal administration's "do more with less" budget tactics, said speakers at a Capitol steps rally in Baton Rouge on Wednesday.



The rally, organized by Better Choices for a Better Louisiana, brought together a number of labor, health, education, faith-based, community and consumer groups to urge lawmakers to stop cutting publicly funded programs and instead do what is necessary to change the revenue side of the budget equation.

TANGIPAHOANS — Tangipahoa Parish teachers, from left, Phyllis Lockwood of Sumner Middle School and Nadine Anderson and Debbie Pingno of West Side Middle in Amite join other state employees for the rally. Photo by Heidi Rogers Kinchen

"We cannot cut our way to excellence," said Melissa Flournoy, director of the progressive nonprofit Louisiana Progress. "I hate to say this because no one likes to do it, but I'm willing to pay more taxes to live in a better state. I'm tired of being 50th in everything."

"We're in a financial crisis of our own making, and we can solve it," Flournoy said.

"Tax is not a four-letter word," said Father Dan Krutz, of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference. "It's a three-letter word like 'yes' and 'now.' It's a good word."

Not everyone in the "Better Choices" coalition has to be pro-tax, though, said Steve Monaghan, president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers.

"We're simply standing up for a better life in Louisiana," he said. "Our message to the governor and the legislators has to be that there are other choices, better choices in priorities. If we keep doing more with less, the results won't get any better."

Tangipahoa Parish teachers Phyllis Lockwood, Nadine Anderson and Debbie Pingno said they are concerned about the state budget crisis and its trickle-down effects here in the parish.

"Not just in education and health care, but overall," said Lockwood, a teacher at Sumner Middle School. "I'm concerned about the deficit and about future budget cuts."

Pingno said rising gas prices are also a concern.

“With all the new magnet schools and our school system being in financial distress, I don’t know how we’re going to pay to transport the kids to all these different schools,” Lockwood agreed.

“The economy is getting worse,” she said. “Why are we continuing with budget cuts when that hasn’t worked so far?”

“I think we’re going to start to see, because the (Tangipahoa school) tax didn’t pass, things happening that people didn’t realize could happen,” Pingno said. “Whether that will be good or bad, I don’t know yet.”

Southeastern student Brad Ictech said he’s worried about the state’s increasing shift of costs onto the backs of students and others who can’t afford it.

“The revenue issue is affecting everything else,” Ictech said after Wednesday’s rally. “People who are against taxes are not looking at the bigger issue. They’re only looking at their own pocketbooks.

“It’s class warfare,” he said. “Who do you think goes to public colleges and uses public programs? It’s mostly the poor.”

Ictech, who founded the Save SELU campaign on Southeastern’s campus last year in response to budget cuts, said he doesn’t think the governor has gotten the message yet that people can’t take any more cuts to services.

“I think he heard us at the first rally (in November), and I think he’ll hear us at this one, but this is not an instantaneous thing,” Ictech said. “It’s a process.

“We’ve just got to keep at it and really hit him where it hurts come election time,” he said.