



Time to put an end to double dipping

Tuesday, the Monroe County School Board meets at Coral Shores High School.

The agenda may give few hints on a hot topic that just might surface during discussions about cutting teacher positions.

To meet a tighter budget for next year, 35 teachers have been told their contracts will not be renewed for the 2008-09 academic year.

That's actually fewer cuts than last year, which comes as somewhat of a surprise given the \$6 million spending cut for the 2008-09 school budget year.

All that obscures an issue that has not truly surfaced yet and it involves a group of senior administrators who have been invited to retire, freeing up payroll space for classroom teachers, who - on average - earn half, sometimes only a third of the top-paid administrators.

In today's Keynoter on Page 13, School Board member John Dick raises questions about what is sometimes called double dipping.

This comes when state employees enrolled in the Deferred Retirement Option Program (DROP), created in 1998. It was designed to encourage skilled, senior managers to stay, offering a pre-retirement inducement. At the end of five years, those enrolled in DROP were expected to retire and begin drawing on this enriched retirement benefit.

However, an investigation conducted earlier this year by the St. Petersburg Times found that 8,000 state employees and elected officials not only took the DROP program benefit, but then retired for 30 days, returning to their old posts and drawing a new salary and building yet another retirement fund.

This is what's been dubbed double dipping.

Lucy Morgan, the St. Pete Times' veteran Tallahassee bureau chief now retired, wrote the series. In 42 years of covering state issues, she wrote, nothing has provoked as much reaction.

"Some states have laws against double-dipping," she wrote. "Public employees cannot collect a pension and return to the same job... Some states limit the amount of salary a retiree can earn and still collect a pension.

"Florida has nothing like that. We don't even limit the number of pensions a person can draw. Some are working on their third pension, collecting a government salary and two pensions. And legislators, many of whom are among the double-dippers, don't appear to be seriously interested in changing things."

There are some members of the Monroe County School Board - and some upset teachers - who'd like to see that change. We'll see what happens at Tuesday's meeting to start the ball rolling.