

Lee County will need new plan if it wants world-class schools

What's better than a world-class school system? Can you imagine a community where students exceed state and national norms? How about a place where parents are actively engaged in the educational process? Can you picture schools where teachers and students work together to exceed expectations? Sound like utopia?

Maybe so, but the Lee County School Board's vision "to be a world-class district" implies such qualities. These are wonderful ideals — students in world-class schools, having world-class educational experiences. What could be better?

But, a vision represents more than a statement projecting something we'd like to be. It must provide direction, project realistic aspirations — something that's reachable within a reasoned time frame, typically 10 to 12 years. And it must be bolstered by operational plans; goals, objectives and actions that make the vision attainable and deliver measurable successes.

The board has placed the vision on the website. They recite it before board meetings, list it on press releases and post it in classrooms. Local officials cite being an A-rated district and competitive scores when compared with other large districts in the state as the basis for the vision. To the casual observer these indicators may bode well, but "world class" requires more. To be a district of distinction requires achievement levels that exceed state averages and national norms.

Unfortunately, Lee County comes up short. ACT data for 2010 indicate that Florida ranks a dismal 48th in the nation. Some state educators debunk this ranking because of Florida's push toward using such test scores for high school graduation; yet, 20 states have higher participation rates, some at 100

percent, and all have higher test scores. County ACT test scores rank below the state average and are below Washington, D.C. — one of our nation's weakest big-city school districts. And, County ACT scores are 40th out of Florida's 67 counties. Based on national measures, Florida's A-rated districts look more like the nation's Average-rated districts.

Likewise, the county's vision has operational shortcomings. The phrase "world-class district" has not been defined. Goals and objectives are not supported by real action plans. There are no measures to evaluate success. Teacher and staff guidelines for achieving the vision are non-existent. The vision statement fails basic operational tests and comes off more like a marketing slogan than a guide for the future. The community deserves better!

Continued use of "world-class" requires bold action from the board. They must approve a definition for a "world-class district" and establish measurable standards, probably eight to 10, so progress can be evaluated. Working in concert with a national panel the definition and measures can be validated to ensure practicality and legitimacy of the district's vision.

Moving the district toward such a vision will require dramatic changes. The new superintendent is part of the equation. The board will need to reallocate resources.

A continuous budget evaluation and review process could prove beneficial. In this way, expenditures can be evaluated to determine the extent that they add value to the newly defined vision. Dollars dedicated to functions and services that contribute little or no value can be eliminated so resources can be increased in high priority areas.

The new superintendent

should provide leadership in developing a 10-year strategic plan that moves the district toward world-class status. Targets, timelines and standards embodied in the plan will ensure accountability, openness and transparency. And, the measures will provide evaluative information that can be shared with the community on an annual basis.

The school-reform collaboration model in Hillsborough County provides another leadership opportunity.

Teamwork between the administration and union there has produced higher pay for the most effective teachers and a coaching program for those less effective. They've developed a rigorous teacher-evaluation system that uses student-achievement gains and observations by principals and peers. They've demonstrated how working together can pay off.

The nationally acclaimed "90/90/90 Schools" program illustrates there's no need for C-rated elementary schools. Schools in this program have 90 percent of their students eligible for free and reduced lunch and 90 percent minority enrollment. Yet, 90 percent of the students meet or exceed accepted standards. Neighborhood elementary schools can be revitalized and energized by following such examples.

An effectively described vision, action plans and supporting measures of success provide the context for change. Nationally recognized programs exemplify the type of changes required for Lee County to become a world-class district. Quality improvements are required!

— *Les Cochran of San Carlos Park worked in public administration for more than 30 years, retiring as president of Youngstown State University in 2000.*