



This year the school board trimmed busing costs and announced they'd no longer provide "curb service." Annual costs were cut from \$49 million to \$47 million, the number of buses lowered to 684 and students in gated communities started being picked up at the entrance. "Makes sense," I thought so I decided to dig a little more.

It didn't take long to discover some startling facts. Annually, county school buses traveled over 12 million miles, consuming 13,000 gallons of fuel per day. Assuming a discount rate of \$3.00 per gallon, that costs \$39,000 per day or roughly \$7 million a school year. More prudent use of buses could result in significant savings, and more dollars that could be shifted to the classroom.

Quality Education, Not Yellow Dinosaurs, Must Drive The Future

Written by Les Cochran

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It's better to solve the problem. In addition to the \$49 million, the school district spent over \$19 million in the last two years purchasing new buses. A new elementary can be built for \$20 million. It'd make a lot more sense, and save dollars and cents, if schools were built where they are needed rather than busing kids forever.

There's plenty of room to prune. The district spends almost double per student on transportation than the state average, and a higher percentage of dollars on busing than comparable districts in the state. Good business sense suggests that we analyze the budget where costs are significantly out-of-line and make appropriate cuts.

The question goes beyond costs. Last year Lee students averaged two hours per day riding in yellow dinosaurs. With the bus driver busy driving, the unsupervised time produced an environment conducive to drugs, sex and bullying. Swearing, fighting and student assaults occurred—certainly not the kind of behaviors the district wants to condone. Fact is nothing good happens on a school bus!

Riding on a bus adds no educational value. Modern-day yellow dinosaurs are similar to their ancestors that hauled workers in the Depression, except now they're painted yellow. There's no math or English lessons, no science updates. No TV broadcast from PBS, Discovery or the History Channel. No Wi-Fi. Not even National Public Radio.

It's all about quality. Lee schools have many strengths and centers of excellence, but the district doesn't stack up when compared with others. Improving a percent or two each year is not good enough. We must "leap-frog" the quality of our schools. Ranking 40th out of 67 counties in the state on ACT test scores is not good enough. Being 48th in graduation rates is not acceptable. And having 62% of the tenth graders last year scoring below average on FCAT reading scores is just awful. Our youth and community deserves better!

It's time to shift dollars to the classroom. Dramatic qualitative improvements must be made while living within our means. That calls for fewer administrators, less bureaucratic structure and fewer yellow dinosaurs.

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We need to invest in elementary schools. Schools that are failing need a shot in the arm. We need to ensure that the best principals and teachers are working with children demonstrating the greatest need. We need to increase standards and expectations, and strengthen discipline. And, we must insist that all students can read, write, speak, and compute at grade level before they leave the 5th grade.

Quality education, not yellow dinosaurs, must drive the future of our schools!

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