

Editorial Opinion



Guest commentary

Emphasis in education should be on learning, not testing

By Les Cochran

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The latest FCAT debacle demonstrates Tallahassee's obsession with testing and the extent to which they've lost sight of the main purpose of education — learning!

Officials have temporarily lowered cutoff scores to raise success rates.

What sense does that make? They increased standards only to find out we don't teach grammar, punctuation and spelling. What happened to the basics? We teach fractions, yet students can't measure 4 feet, 2 inches or make change.

Where's the logic?

Prominent educator Diane Ravitch said in her 2010 book "The Death and Life of the Great American School System" that testing is one of the most divisive forces in American education.

It "makes no sense," she said, "when it undermines the larger goals of education" (learning). It's the responsibility of school districts to provide the best possible learning environment for all students to learn the prescribed content. Testing

should follow the curriculum, not vice versa.

Focusing on the learning environment requires local officials to explore all means to ensure the best possible outcomes. This starts by asking, does the school district devote a higher percentage of its budget to instruction than the state average? In the case of Lee County the answer is no. The district allocates 57 percent to instruction while the state average is 65 percent. That 8 percent translates into \$60 million. If we reallocated just \$30 million to our elementary schools, think what we could accomplish.

We could agree that it makes no sense to have 10-year-olds getting up at 5 in the morning to reach school by 7:55 a.m. Shortening bus routes could make the system more "student-friendly" and eliminate at least one hour per day on the bus. That hour could add more instructional time, ending the school day at 3 p.m. instead of 2 p.m.

It would cost \$23 million, not counting cost savings resulting from less time on the bus. An hour more of learning and an hour less of busing sounds like a pretty good trade-off.

We could add a "student enrichment hour" from 3 to 4 p.m. for elementary students at an estimated cost of \$5 million.

This is a time when the thousand-member Literacy Council could lend a helping hand. Parents and civic groups could become more engaged. College interns, paraprofessionals and other volunteers could help underperforming students learn the basics, move average student achievement levels higher and provide new challenges for the brightest. It's a winner for both students and working parents.

The remaining \$2 million could be invested in our "C-rated" elementary schools. While we're proud that Sanibel Elementary is No. 1 in the state, little is said about our schools that rank 1,672, 1,462, 1,455, 1,410, 1,363 and 1,354 out of state's 1,750 elementary schools. We need to establish incentives to encourage outstanding teachers and principals to work in these schools. We need to invest more in proven instructional programs and ensure that these facilities stimulate the highest level of learning.

Changes can be made without adding costs. It doesn't cost more money to raise academic and behavioral standards. It doesn't cost a cent to empower teachers to teach beyond the test or to encourage them to use their creativity in pushing students to new heights.

There's much, too, that can be learned

from outstanding charter schools. The KIPP Academy in the South Bronx, N.Y., for example, is noted for its learning environment where students learn to speak politely to principals, teachers and others. They learn how to dress neatly, be on time, finish assignments and do their homework.

Ending social promotion sends another message. Using third-grade passing scores as the minimum tells parents that if their child cannot read, write, speak and compute at grade level, he or she will not pass. The trickle-down application means that underprepared pre-K students, kindergartners and first- and second-graders wouldn't progress to the next level. While the ego of some parents may be initially damaged, they'll quickly understand that they have a shared responsibility in helping their child succeed.

Finally, we must make these changes within the framework of equal opportunity, ensuring that every elementary student has a choice to select an A- or B-rated school. Through efforts of this type the school district can shape a new future rather than being shaped by the past!

Cochran, former president of Youngstown State University, seeks the District 3 seat now held by Jane Kuckle, who is not seeking re-election.



Les Cochran