

## opinion

GUEST OPINION: LES COCHRAN

## SW Fla. schools must focus on basic instruction

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

They've lowered cut-off scores to raise success rates. What sense does that make? They increased standards only to find that 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 for a dollar. Where's the logic?

It's the responsibility of school districts to provide the best possible learning environment for all students. Testing should follow the curriculum, not vice versa.

Focusing on the learning environment requires



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local officials to explore all means to ensure the best possible student outcomes. It 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.

Assuming we agree that it makes no sense to have 10-year-olds getting

up at 5 o'clock to reach school by 7:55 a.m., we could shorten elementary school bus routes, eliminating one hour per day on the bus. That hour could be replaced by an hour more of instructional time. Instead of ending classes at 2 p.m., the instructional day would be extended to 3 p.m. Not counting cost savings resulting from less bus time, the costs would be \$23 million. An hour more of learning and an hour less of busing sounds like a good deal.

Adding a "student enrichment hour" from 3 to 4 p.m. would cost an estimated \$5 million. This would be time when the thousand-member Literacy Council could lend a helping hand. Parents and civic groups could become engaged in our elementary schools.

College interns, paraprofessionals and other volunteers could help underperforming students learn the basics. Parents could move average student achievement levels higher. Business leaders could provide new challenges for the brightest. It's a winner for the community, students and working parents. The last \$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 elementary schools that rank close to the bottom out of state's 1,700-plus elementary schools.

There are countless changes that could 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 is noted for its learning environment where students learn to speak politely. 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/she will NOT pass. The trickle-down results

means that underprepared pre-K students, kindergarteners, and first and second graders don't progress to the next level. While the ego of some parents may be damaged, they'll quickly learn that they have a shared responsibility to help their child succeed.

We must make changes like these within the framework of equal opportunity to ensure that every student has a choice to learn in 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.

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