



Letters To The Editor

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Neighborhood elementary schools must drive district's future

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To the editor:

Over the last decade school choice drove decision making in Lee County schools. Incremental changes produced a standardized elementary school curriculum, specialized high schools, tailored programs for those with special needs and centers of excellence. And stable leadership ensured the movement away from the court-ordered busing requirements of the past.

Minority student enrollment grew to 52 percent with over 70 percent of the students being eligible for the reduced and free lunch program. While the district made modest gains as measured by FCAT scores, it failed to keep pace with community expectations.

State and national comparisons reveal the daunting task ahead. County ACT test scores (a measure of a student's preparedness for college) rank lower than Washington, DC. Some try to explain the disparity, but the scores are still unconscionable! Comparisons in the state fared no better with Lee County ACT test scores ranking 40th out of 67 counties.

Florida Department of Education 2010 data confirm the challenge. Lee County graduation rates ranked 48th out of the state's 67 counties. Sixty-two percent of tenth graders had FCAT reading scores below average. Sixty-seven percent of eleventh graders had FCAT science scores below average.

Clearly, the new superintendent and board must take substantive action that leads to qualitative improvements. Starting in the elementary school far-reaching changes must be phased in.

Elementary school covers a child's formative years-it's when student values are shaped and their attitudes are developed. Expectation must be increased. Research indicates that students who meet academic challenges during this period go on to do well. Those who fail to build the necessary skills fall further behind in later grades.

These attitudes and behaviors are best formed in neighborhoods, where kids are comfortable and among friends. We need to strengthen our commitment to these schools, and ensure that space is available and that the schools are physically up-to-date.

The elementary school-year calendar needs to be increased, moving closer to the international average. By adding twenty days instructional time would be increased by 10 percent-over five grades that would be the equivalent of adding a half year. It would also shorten vacation time, reducing the summer learning-loss problem. Students lose ground in the summer, and those with language problems (of which there are thousands in the district), lose 15 to 20 percent on their test scores.

Neighborhood elementary school buildings should become year-around virtual learning centers. By keeping the library/computer areas open, students below grade level could continue to make progress and high achievers could be pushed even further. Through the use of existing programs elementary students could teach their parents English. It's a win-win situation.

Best of all, these changes can be made within existing resources. There's NO NEED to increase taxes! It requires a 3 percent reallocation of existing funds. That's something most organizations could accomplish without a blink of an eye.

It's time for quality, not buses, to drive the future!

Les Cochran

San Carlos Park

(Dr. Cochran, an announced candidate for the Lee County School District, taught in the Detroit Public Schools, and served for more than thirty years as an administrator in higher education, retiring as President of Youngstown State University.)