

It's time for Lee to shrink number of school buses

I raised my eyebrows while skimming a recent News-Press supplement — 20 pages of public school bus schedules.

I wondered if all the routes were necessary. Then I read the editorial "School bus change a good idea."

Come to find out the 20 pages were the good news. The district had trimmed busing costs and would no longer provide "curb service." Costs were cut from \$49 million to \$47 million and the number of buses lowered to 684.

It didn't take long to discover other startling facts. Last year, county school buses traveled more than 12 million miles, consuming 13,000 gallons of fuel a day. An additional \$8 million was budgeted for bus replacement. Lee County spends almost double per student on transportation than the state average and a higher percentage of dollars on busing than comparable districts.

Further investigation produced what many parents seem to ignore. With the bus driver busy driving, some students take advantage of the unsupervised time producing an environment conducive to drugs, sex and bullying. Swearing, fighting and student assaults occur, certainly not the behaviors the district wants to condone.

Fact is, nothing good happens on a school bus.

Like their ancestors of the past, the modern-day dinosaurs are very similar to the buses that transported workers during

Guest opinion

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Les Cochran, a former president of Youngstown State University and a San Carlos Park resident, is running for the Lee County School Board District 3 seat now held by Jane Kuckel.

the Depression. Last year our students spent an average of two hours per day riding these yellow dinosaurs. There were no math or English lessons, no science updates. No TV broadcast from PBS, Discovery or the History Channel. No Wi-Fi. In fact, no educational value was added.

Still many parents like the system. They often indicate their decision to select a school was based on its location or starting time. Convenience? That's hardly justification for the expenditure of millions of dollars, particularly when it drains resources from the classroom. Expenditures that add no value must be minimized.

While Lee schools have strengths and pockets of excellence, the district doesn't stack up well when compared nationally. Being an "A" district in Florida is noteworthy, but when the state ranks 48th in the nation on qualitative measures one wonders about the state-rating system. Maybe an "A" in Florida is like a "C" elsewhere.

Lee County ACT test scores rank 40th out of 67 counties in the state and

fall below the public schools in Washington, DC. Lee graduation rates rank 48th in the state. And last year 62 percent of the 10th-graders scored below average in FCAT reading scores. Our youth and community deserve better.

Dramatic qualitative improvements must be made while living within existing resources. That means fewer administrators, less bureaucratic structure and fewer yellow dinosaurs. Rather than making adults happy, the educational interests of kids must be our top priority. Every dollar used for busing is one fewer that could be spent on the classroom.

The use of yellow dinosaurs requires thorough review. Reductions must be made, particularly at the elementary school level. The system needs to be modernized, with extensive use made of minibuses, taxis and cooperative ventures with LeeTran. It's far better to use one-time capital funds to build an addition to a neighborhood school than to bus kids forever.

We can't afford to maintain a failed system. More dinosaurs must go and the dollars saved allocated to the classroom. We need to invest in neighborhood schools, upgrade "C"-rated elementary schools and increase expectations. Students that advance beyond the fifth grade must be able to read at or above grade level.

Quality education, not yellow dinosaurs, must drive the future.