

## Guest commentary

# Leadership transition is valuable opportunity for Lee School Board

By **Les Cochran**  
San Carlos Park

The changing of the guard in the public schools provides Lee County School Board members with an opportunity to rethink existing policy. But, for board members to effectively fulfill their primary task of hiring a new superintendent, they must first come to terms with the issues. They have a responsibility to communicate district policy and plans. Candidates should have a clear understanding of the challenges ahead.

It starts with a commitment to conduct a national search. Being the nation's 40th-largest school district and striving to become a world-class school district leave no choice. Even if the next superintendent comes from Florida, the person should be validated by a national process, assuring the public of the highest level of excellence.

Equally important is how the board chooses to operate in the months ahead. The interim superintendent could serve in a caretaker role with board members acting like politicians, pointing fingers and throwing stones. Instead, Larry Tihen should serve with gusto, guiding the district toward an alternative school choice plan that incorporates the views of board members.

They must also find ways to build consensus. Debating with civility will serve them and the community far better than arguing over differences, furthering the divide and turning the split into a schism. Likewise, they'll be better off analyzing and evaluating data rather than relying solely on their personal opinions.



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Greater reliance on national measures such as ACT test scores will foster new directions. With Florida ranking 48th in the nation on ACT test scores and Lee County placing 40th out of 67 counties, the board must aspire beyond state expectations.

Even Washington, D.C., one of the nation's weakest big-city systems, has a higher ACT average than Lee County.

Clearly, being an "A district" by state measures has little meaning on the national landscape.

We're faced with compelling questions: Should the district continue to make massive transportation expenditures when there are critical unmet educational needs? Should the "happiness quotient" of parents toward school placement be used as a measure of leadership effectiveness? What academic changes could be made if millions of dollars were reallocated to support instruction?

Answers must be found. The new superintendent deserves our best — an opportunity to begin on a level playing field. To reach beyond, the board should:

- Conduct a national search for the superintendent. Review all employment policies and procedures related to the superintendent and approve negotiation guidelines (salary, benefits, severance package, etc.) and professional expectations prior to selection.

- Charge the interim superintendent to work, in concert with board members, to create a school choice alternative focused on the upper grades that substantially reduces transportation costs and invests the savings in the classroom.

- Develop enrichment plans for all "C-rated" elementary schools that infuse personnel, programs and resources, thereby improving student experiences and test scores, and ensuring only "A- and B-rated" elementary schools in the district.

- Use academic outcomes measures (ACT, SAT, reading, math, science, etc.) and financial comparisons from peer districts, other counties, the state and nation to make informed decisions.

- Commit to a three-year plan that reallocates funds to instruction, making the district's proportion of dollars allocated to direct instruction the highest in the state.

- Implement specific academic initiatives designed to improve educational experiences for regular students, those below grade level, ones with special needs and high achievers.

- Require board members to participate in a series of team-building workshops.

- Appoint a business task force, composed of business professionals, to review and evaluate business, accounting and auditing procedures.

The next nine months is not a time to defer decisions or pass the buck to the new superintendent. Instead, the board must address these challenges and develop plans, proposals and recommendations to implement change.

The transition is an opportunity too valuable to waste!

*Cochran taught five years in the Detroit public school system and completed his doctorate in education at Wayne State University. His university career spanned 32 years, serving as a professor, dean, provost and president of Youngstown State University for eight years. He retired in 2000 and moved to Lee County in 2004.*