

Les Cochran: Guest commentary ... New superintendents share common problems, have the same leadership opportunities

By Les Cochran San Carlos Park

Wednesday, October 5, 2011

Walk into a fine restaurant. Play golf on an outstanding course. Go to a top-notch beach.

Regardless where you go, you're struck by the same impression: We live in paradise — a world-class community!

That's what new superintendents Kamela Patton in Collier County and Joe Burke in Lee County thought until they read district reports.

They found something different: two school districts mired in mediocrity.

That's not to suggest everything is poor. To the contrary, there are plenty of success stories, numerous centers of excellence and hundreds of outstanding teachers. Yet, when the districts are compared to state and national standards, they don't stack up well.

The newcomers have a daunting task. Their challenge is compounded by Florida's near bottom ranking in nationwide comparisons. Layer on Collier's 33rd and Lee's 40th ranking on ACT test scores out of 67 counties. Add graduation rates that rank 47th and 48th in the state.

Weigh in the fact that last year 60 percent of Collier's and 62 percent of Lee's 10th graders had Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) reading scores below average, and you quickly see the magnitude of the task ahead.

The numbers tell a grim story.

Significant changes must be made if we are to maintain our quality of life.

While world-class educational systems may be out of reach, there's no reason the districts shouldn't be ranked in the state's top 10. Like the classroom, when the bar is set higher, students reach higher. With the resources available in Southwest Florida, we must raise our expectations.

Improving at a rate of 1 or 2 percent per year won't get us there; we'll simply lose another generation, producing more underprepared youth and fewer able to compete. We need strong leadership to move the districts into the top 10. That means investing in elementary schools rated C or below.

It's the same thing a business would do if a function or job site was not performing at an acceptable level. They'd change supervisors, move their best people there and institute "best practice" procedures.

Likewise, the best principals need to be assigned to underperforming schools. The best teachers need to be placed there. Higher standards and improved discipline are needed.

Elementary schools cover a child's formative years. It's when values are shaped and attitudes developed. Expectations must be increased. Students who meet academic challenges during this period go on to do well. Those who fail fall further behind in later grades.

Expecting people in the central office to change is not enough. Principals run the schools and they must be held accountable. They must be selected through a rigorous assessment process. Principals must be evaluated through a comprehensive review process. And, they must receive extensive training in school management and evaluation techniques.

The districts need to move beyond the 180-day calendar rooted in the past. Adding 20 days to the elementary school calendar increases the number of school days by 10 percent. Japan, Korea and China have moved to 210, 220 and 230. Time on task and raising the bar makes a difference.

Shortening the summer break lessens summer learning loss — a problem that plagues American education. Test scores for all students go down during the summer. Losses vary by subject, with mathematics having the highest grade-level equivalency losses at 2.6 months. Students with language problems lose 15 to 20 percent on their test scores. Students in the lowest socio-economic group suffer even greater losses, about three months in reading.

Cutting the length of the summer break and adding days to the school year is a win-win situation. It shortens the "downtime" and increases the amount of time on task. Best of all, these changes can be made within existing resources. It takes roughly a 3 percent reallocation of funds to implement these changes. Such pruning is what business regularly does. And it's done without a blink of the eye.

While our counties look like paradise, we can't be world-class communities with second-rate school systems. Our communities deserve better and so do our youth.

Cochran served as a public educator for 38 years. He taught in Detroit public schools and served in higher education as a professor, dean, provost, and president, retiring as president of Youngstown State University in 2000. He ran for the Lee County Commission four years ago and now is a candidate for the Lee County School Board, District 3.

