

Elected School Board Chair Agenda Behind Criticism

The Sentinel editorial board has an agenda. They want a countywide elected school board chair in Orange County, an eighth member with double-vote privilege. Supporters desire another politician to “make deals,” gain political leverage via 23,000 employees, and diminish the superintendent’s CEO role. Editorials imply that our school district is inferior without such parochial politics.

Facts ignored: School board members and the superintendent are constitutional officers with definitive, statutory responsibilities. Orange County Public Schools is a high “B” school district, over 2/3 of schools are “A” and “B”, and our middle and high school reform initiative is a national best practice. A strategic plan is being developed to achieve our vision to be “the top producer of successful students in the nation.”

Fragile Evans High School is now being used in misleading, disparaging editorials to push their agenda.

Designated an “F” school by the Florida Department of Education, Evans suffers from long-standing school choice policies allowing many high-achieving students to transfer. It sits in Pine Hills, an area experiencing demographic changes, poverty and crime. Pine Hills and Evans endure incessant ridicule. Students are marginalized.

Arriving in 2004, I found it unacceptable that Evans was near the bottom of the sales-tax renovation list. Superintendent Blocker, “Kat” Gordon and I advocated accelerating Evans and Oak Ridge high schools. COVE and the school board concurred.

Fifty-year-old Evans, typical of Florida’s aging schools, deals with mold, water penetration and flooding. It has received \$4.3 million for upgrades and maintenance since 2002.

Further action since 2004: first-class administration, strengthened faculty, rigorous curriculum including International Baccalaureate and Global Technologies programs, and plans for a new campus built swiftly in a more stable location.

In 2006, COVE and the school board unanimously approved rebuilding Evans on its freshman campus and adjacent property acquired for that purpose. The school district entered the county process to gain approval

for institutional use of the acquired property. School district and county staffs worked collaboratively. Planning, engineering and design work were performed simultaneously. There was no controversy. Planning and Zoning Commission gave the thumbs-up.

Evans' replacement school within its attendance zone, on its freshman campus and on the edge of a rural settlement, would be located "where city services are already provided." Urban areas surround the rural settlement in which private development is restricted. It could not "set the stage for more big-city sprawl." Trees and retention ponds would provide buffer.

Mayor Crotty and three commissioners gave the thumbs-down, without explanation.

Mike Griffin, Deputy Editorial Page Editor, calls the school district a developer. Developers are private entities that generate profit. Public schools are part of vital community infrastructure.

Evans students are being sacrificed in this toxic political environment. Many opponents are using rural settlement as a proxy for racial animus.

That should be the subject of an editorial, but children's best interests and ethical governance are not the agenda.

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