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My Position: Orange County voters should reject efforts to politicize education

The opportunity for voters to make a profound difference in Orange County's future is rare.

It is in their power to kill a bad idea that would inject parochial politics into Orange County's public schools and throw them into chaos. The idea -- to create an elected school board chair that would violate the Orange County School Board's constitutional responsibilities for consensus decision-making and obfuscate the superintendent's constitutional responsibilities to equitably and fully serve all Orange County students and operate as chief executive officer-- into one horrible proposal the state legislature put into statute and the former Governor signed into law after being misinformed by its supporters.

Now this resolution may come to the voters and threaten the very legacy of education reform that the school board, superintendent, administrators, teachers, students, families and community partners have worked so hard to build. Among accomplishments are the 300% rise in Advanced Placement enrollment, "B" rating by the Florida Department of Education, over 2/3 of Orange County schools rated "A" and "B" in FCAT performance, and new vision to be "the top producer of successful students in the nation."

But what good are these accomplishments as a foundation for further progress if go backward to old-style parochial politics? And make no mistake, an elected school board chair would be under immense political pressure to trade those accomplishments for political favors, and is a shadowy path to a rival "elected" superintendent. Schools in communities with less political clout would be at the mercy of this elected chair because of the political environment that is forcing its creation. That's no way to ensure that all students in Orange County get access to quality K-12 education. What our public schools need now is stability.

Remember, voters eliminated the elected superintendent years ago and more recently chose single member districts to ensure better accountability and equitable treatment of all students and all schools. Core supporters desperately want this position, so the political deal making has begun to gain support among local power brokers along with a heavy dose of misinformation. But that kind of behavior is politics, not leadership. Leadership is looking past who gets what contract tomorrow. It's looking to the future driven by a strong economy built by an educated workforce.

Orange County voters maintain high expectations for our public schools, and have stayed committed and supportive of them. They also know that it takes the whole community to build and sustain great public schools. In their wisdom, they will no doubt see this for what it is- a ruse- and should reject this proposal and ensure there are great public schools for our children for many years to come.

(This isn't meant to be plagiarism, but meant to make a point. It's the same argument made by the Sentinel editorial board on April 23, 2008 against an elected state education commissioner. Both K-12 education and higher education require less, not more politics.)

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