

## What do elected chair supporters really want?

I'm having a tough time figuring out why the *Sentinel's* editorial board is so hung up on the idea of a county-wide elected school board chair. I guess the phrase "a strong leader" has a certain vague, general appeal. The person elected to the position, according to the *Sentinel's* January 15 editorial, would "present a vision to all the county's voters." Would that "vision" be arrived at independently of board dialog, or imposed without its approval? So where's the advantage? After 12 town hall meetings and input from 2,700 employees, the board recently made it official that we want Orange County Public Schools "to be the top producer of successful students in the nation." Would an elected chair's vision trump that?



You want leadership? Over the last three years the school board has hosted a growth summit to ensure all cities and the county are tuned into concurrency and the need for schools; raised impact fees to pay for new student capacity; pushed the agenda to end the court's desegregation order; endorsed a vital high school reform plan; adopted 80 resolutions from Blue Ribbon Panel recommendations; and earned "master board" status among its peers.

The *Sentinel* argues that an elected chair would have a strong voice in Tallahassee. It's curious that Rep. Andy Gardiner is pushing the bill, considering that he's already in Tallahassee and in an excellent position to help our students. It's also strange that Orange is the only county out of 67 with a proposal like this on the ballot. Go figure.

Do Orange County public schools function as well as they could or should? Of course not; but of all the reasons they don't, the specific makeup of the board is surely pretty far down the list. Anybody who reads serious educational literature and studies the performance statistics of America's schools knows that what school boards do or don't do is far less important than other factors over which board members have little or no control. Childhood poverty, for example, is an issue that must be addressed by an entire community.

There are two major tasks this board needs to undertake in order to become the nation's best school district. One of them has already been done, putting an aggressive vision in place. The second is assembling the largest parent, community and business coalition in the country, dedicated to making up for decreasing support from local, state and federal sources. How about some editorial board support for pulling that coalition together?

Scapegoating is easy, especially in education. I've been on the Orange County School Board for 10 years, and in those years, the present one seems to me to be most aware of the big picture, and the most willing to put its collective butt on the line. The *Sentinel* should reexamine its priorities on educational matters, and work with those of us trying hard to do what's best for kids.

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