



Len Cabrera: Getting serious about education

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In early November, the Gainesville City Commission met with the Alachua County School Board to demonstrate that neither side is serious about education: They decided to set the unrealistic goal of getting all Alachua County third graders to read at grade level within five years.

The goal of 100% shows that the meeting was pure virtue signaling and not at all intended for serious policy. Even with unlimited resources, the goal would be unattainable, since there will always be students moving in from other districts and students (and parents) who just don't care about education.

The discussion echoed the city's equity fetish, emphasizing that Alachua County has the largest black-white performance gap in the state: the percentage of third graders reading at grade level is 77% for white students and 32% for black students, a 45-point gap.

While Alachua County does have the biggest gap, it is by no means the worst county for education. For example, Marion County has a much smaller performance gap (24 points), but performance is worse for all students: only 52% of white and 28% of black third graders read at grade level in Marion County.

Focusing on the performance gap allows Alachua County's education leadership to ignore their abysmal performance: In each of the last five years, the percentage of Alachua County third graders who can read at grade level has remained fairly constant around 55%. Other than baseball, in what other industry does a 55% success rate allow you to stay in business?

They talked about the performance gap but didn't mention last year's equity plan that set a goal of reducing the gap by three percentage points per year for 10 years. After the first year, the gap actually widened and overall student performance declined. So they're not even making progress toward their 10-year goal, and now they're making an even more ambitious five-year goal.

Given the public school system's past performance, the 100% goal might be attainable if they intend for all of today's third graders to be able to read at third grade level five years from now (i.e., all eighth graders read at third grade level).

They really are living up to Alexis de Tocqueville's prediction about "mild tyranny," whereby the government holds the population in a state of mediocrity, using its authority like a parent —

but unlike parents that want to see their children reach adulthood, the government seeks to keep them in perpetual childhood.

This goal is just a shiny object to allow politicians to ask for more money and more control of our kids. Never mind that there is no correlation between government funding for education and student performance.

The Cato Institute shows that student performance across all subject areas has been essentially stagnant since 1972, despite a near tripling of inflation-adjusted cost per student. The Heritage Foundation reports that Washington, D.C., schools spend roughly double the national average per student, yet their students score below average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The School Board wants more control of the students: before school, after school, pre-kindergarten, even pre-natal. They expect that parents are unaware of the history of failed academic policies from “experts.”

Susan Bowles, a kindergarten teacher in Alachua County, **recently wrote** how changes to kindergarten have made no improvements in future learning. She said, “The system is a mess because people who have no recent classroom experience are making the decisions.”

What could possibly go wrong in giving the system that has consistently failed to educate nearly half the children of Alachua County more time and money? Rather than giving the politicians more opportunities, the children should be given more opportunities by giving their parents more choices on where their kids are educated.

Bowles was concerned that the School Board and the City Commission would not be held accountable when the policy fails. They can assuage her concerns and put some real commitment behind their plan by signing a pledge that if 100% of third graders are not reading at grade level five years from now, they’ll resign and never run for public office again. That would show that they are serious about education.