

Len Cabrera: School Board should push achievement, not equality

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The focus of the Alachua County School District's equity office and an equity plan passed in August are misguided and guaranteed to produce bad policy.

The emphasis on skin color at the county, state and national levels is part of the problem. Rather than emphasizing other attributes that correlate to poor school performance — poverty, single-family homes, truancy, drugs, etc. — they literally only look skin deep. What does it tell a student or parent when skin color is the main focus of inequality? They can't control skin color, but they can control some of the actual factors that lead to poor performance.

Even the recommended solutions, including hiring more minority instructors, come across as inherently racist. The assumption that students can only learn from teachers who look like them is reminiscent of the segregation era. The quality of the teaching, not the pigmentation of the teacher, should be the primary consideration when hiring faculty.

The goal of narrowing the achievement gap by 2028 is unwise. For example, it wouldn't be a problem if Alachua County remained No. 1 in academic inequity if the bottom 10 percent of county students outperformed the average from other counties. It would be worse if the county had perfect equality in student performance but all our students' scores were in the bottom half of the state.

Equity is often achieved by bringing down the performance of the top students. San Francisco schools eliminated the option for Algebra I in eighth grade in the name of equity. We're already seeing a similar push in Alachua County. In September, Janine Plavac, director of the Academy of Health Professions program at Gainesville High School, lamented that 25 percent of incoming freshmen will be chosen by a lottery, ignoring other criteria like teacher recommendations and student essays.

The focus needs to be on raising the achievement level for all students. Sadly, that's not going to happen if we simply focus on narrowing the gap, especially when the metrics chosen are easily manipulated by the county. For example, it's easy to narrow the suspension gap by not suspending students that deserve it. We can end up with a system similar to Broward County, where the goal of reducing the "school-to-prison pipeline" avoided police reports that could have prevented the Parkland shooter from buying a firearm.

Similarly, raising the graduation rate is easy if you simply pass students who shouldn't pass. An investigation by National Public Radio's WAMU discovered that every senior from Ballou High School in Washington, D.C., graduated last year, despite half of them missing more than three

months of school. Only 9 percent of those students passed the English standardized test and none passed the math test.

Any metric measured by the school creates an incentive to cook the books to get the results the county wants. At the extreme, you can end up with a scandal like Atlanta, where 35 district workers were jailed for cheating on standardized tests. There are countless stories of schools cheating to improve their U.S. News and World Report college ranking; a report on Aug. 22 revealed five schools inflated graduation rates.

We've been educating kids for hundreds of years, yet progressive educators always insist on new ways to teach. Most of us have heard of Common Core math, which is now a punchline in a Pixar movie. Focusing on self-esteem ("character education") resulted in lots of confident kids who didn't know anything. Pushing inclusion (combining students of various skill levels, including English-as-second-language and learning-disabled) resulted in chaotic classrooms with more distractions than instruction.

Education reform needs to be at the elementary school level and should focus on the basics: reading, writing and arithmetic. Also, the School Board needs to realize that education is a two-party process. The schools teach, but it's up to the students to learn. We can't allow the students who don't want to learn (or how we deal with them) to impact the ones who do.

Throwing money at the problem also isn't the solution. Andrew Coulson at the Cato Institute shows student performance across all subject areas has been essentially stagnant since 1972 despite nearly tripling of inflation-adjusted cost per student.

The new equity office, like much of school administration, is a misallocation of resources. Its budget would be better spent on directly helping students through teacher salaries, classroom materials or facility improvements. Maybe we wouldn't be stuck with special assessments for school funding if the county didn't waste money on education fads.