

ORIGINAL EDITORIAL

Lumbering bureaucracy is kids' nemesis

Published January 4, 2005

We have a blue ribbon panel investigating why there are so many dumb kids in Orange County.

It contains the usual assortment of hotshots from the world of politics, business and social service agencies. Such people know how to get things done, which is a good thing, but they do so by restricting their thinking to that which is possible.

They are not revolutionaries.

I believe a revolution is in order in our schools.

For decades, school districts have been growing like a Japanese monster at a nuclear test site. The premise is that this produces an economy of scale. One superintendent overseeing 200,000 students is cheaper than four superintendents each overseeing 50,000 students.

The only problem is that the savings never materialized. Once bureaucracies begin growing, they are like that blood-sucking plant in *Little Shop of Horrors*.

"Feed me, Seymour!"

They absorb any savings that are supposed to be generated by their size. The kids never see a dime.

Meanwhile, as school districts have grown, the quality of education has declined. Is it a coincidence, or is it the result of bureaucracies that have become entrenched, unwieldy, inefficient and resistant to change? If they were subject to the laws of corporate Darwinism, they would go extinct, as are the huge, unwieldy airlines that can't compete with the nimble economy carriers. Why isn't economy of scale saving them?

The biggest victims have been poor students, who are over-represented in these districts. They have become widgets in an assembly line. To reach these kids, you need educational intimacy. You need smaller schools, smaller classes and community involvement.

Jeb Bush's solution was to force accountability on the bureaucracy -- and he has achieved results -- but is this enough, particularly when it comes to closing the achievement gap between poor and affluent students?

I don't think so. Mammoth school districts simply can't keep pace with rapid changes in educational theory. The problem is magnified in Orange, which has this insane governance system in which there are seven equal board members with nobody actually in charge. At least the Three Stooges had Moe.

What we need are leaner, more responsive administrations, particularly in a county such as Orange that has entirely different issues facing its suburban and urban schools. Take out the map and draw boundaries that will group needs and allow resources to be targeted at them.

No, this is not racist. Racism is assuming that inner-city schools need suburban schools to prop them up. Racism is assuming that without white parents to care and without white School Board members to govern, a school district can't function.

There is nothing racist about returning schools to their communities and eliminating the bureaucracy that has alienated the two for decades.

Our blue ribbon panel should ask the Legislature for another blue ribbon panel to examine how communities that so choose can break up big districts. This should include the possibility of municipal charter districts, which would allow cities to run their own schools.

You can gauge the value of these ideas by the volume of the screaming you will hear from the education bureaucracy against them.

RESPONSE

January 04, 2005

Letters to the Editor

Orlando Sentinel

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Dear Editor:

Mike Thomas' Jan. 4 column suggested the solution to mammoth educational bureaucracy and poor results is to re-draw district boundaries. I disagree. The route to quality and equality in education is options.

Thomas noted that more money has never equaled better results for the school system, so why would more money equal better results for school districts divided largely by race? Integration is not the cause of under-performing schools; the cause is a lack of recourse for families failed by the system.

Instead of limiting options, we ought to allow every student – regardless of income – the opportunity to attend the school best suited to his or her needs, whether a magnet school in another district, a private school, a faith-based institution or a public school.

The best recipe for educational success is to empower underserved families. Competition increases quality in business and it does for schools, too.

Sincerely,

Paul Rene', Headmaster

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