

January 19, 2005

Sally Butzin
My View

Here's a multiple choice test. Which option would voters likely choose if asked to repeal the class-size reduction constitutional amendment?

- a.) Repeal the amendment and hope the Legislature will do the right thing to support education.
- b.) Repeal the amendment with the assurance that costs avoided would go toward increasing teacher salaries across the board.
- c.) Repeal the amendment with the assurance that costs avoided would go toward investing in what works and paying more for effective teachers who get real results.
- d.) None of the above. Keep the amendment as is.

The *Tallahassee Democrat* editorial board in its Jan. 9 opinion, "Repeal and retool; Class-cap provision bad for Florida," is wise to advocate for repeal of the noble-sounding class-size reduction constitutional amendment. That mandate will continue to gobble up needed education resources for years to come.

It's also wise to recommend a retooling, rather than a sledgehammer approach in asking voters to overturn the amendment. But there is one piece missing that will sell voters on repeal. And this piece is to mandate real reform of the current instructional methods that are rooted in days past. It's the 21st century, and way past time for our schools to catch up. The high rates of failure can be directly linked to students who are bored to death, unchallenged, and unmotivated to learn in today's old-fashioned learning environment of textbooks and teacher talk.

The real danger is that most voters would likely choose (d) unless they are given another viable option. Certainly (a) is a loser. Who can trust a Legislature that backed away from funding quality standards for the universal pre-K amendment, and the shameful ranking of Florida as 47th in education spending?

Option (b) has a gut-level appeal, but upon reflection most people realize that raising salaries in and of itself cannot make the major impact required to truly transform mediocre schools. The same teachers, with the same methods, will continue to teach in the same tired way. They'll just have a little more money in their pockets.

What about recruiting new teachers? Surely more attractive salaries would help. But survey after survey shows that the reason bright young people do not want to become teachers is not the salary, but the unappealing working conditions and poor job satisfaction with little opportunity for professional advancement.

I'd vote for option (c), and I think a majority of voters could be persuaded to vote the same way. But they must be assured that the class-size costs would be invested in proven innovations that work, along with paying effective teachers at much higher levels. It's time to create a true career ladder for teachers who can be rewarded financially for

staying in the classroom and producing high student achievement.

How do we know what works? There are many examples from around the country including Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) academies, which set high expectations, accept no excuses (the kids are poor, the parents don't help, etc.), and get results using a rigorous curriculum and extended-day learning.

Another program called DWOK (Different Ways of Knowing) accepts that people learn in different ways, and uses music and the arts to engage students in creative projects that result in higher learning gains across the board.

There are many examples right here in our own community. Take a look at the Charter School of Arts and Sciences, nationally recognized as an excellent school, which uses multi-age groupings with hands-on thematic learning to challenge young students.

Take a look at SAIL High School, which engages students in small group learning through projects and positive peer group support. It, too, has been recognized as a model for the nation.

Take a look at the Florida State University School (Florida High), which uses our Project CHILD (Changing How Instruction for Learning is Delivered) program. Project CHILD actively engages children in grades K-5 through technology, active learning, and a unique three-year continuous progress system with a team of expert teachers. It likewise has been recognized nationally as an effective program.

Let the Legislature put a proposal for true reform on the table for voters to choose. I see this as a historic moment to truly transform our public schools. Gov. Jeb Bush and legislative leaders have a rare opportunity to offer a carrot to voters that can turn things around. It's time to invest in innovation and meaningful change, not more of the same old same old. Our children deserve better.

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