

Executive Summary

In May 2004, a crisis occurred in this community. The State of Florida released its Florida's A+ Plan grades for Orange County's public schools, and three of Orange County's high schools received F grades. Four more high schools received D grades. One of the three F schools, Jones High School, received an F grade for the third consecutive year.

Outrage over the failing public schools led to the call for immediate reform of public education within Orange County. The community's leaders decided that if something were not done quickly to address the crisis, the perception would become that the county's entire public school system was failing.

It cannot be disputed that the community perceives the Orange County Public School system as underperforming. In a recent poll conducted by the Orlando Regional Chamber of Commerce, 42 percent of Orange County residents ranked the public schools in their community as "Average" compared to schools in the rest of the United States and 34 percent believed the schools were "Below Average." The public's perception of the quality of their public schools is perpetuated by standardized test scores and school grades given by the state. For example, only 35 percent of the district's high school students read at grade level or above, only 53 percent of the district's students are at grade level or above in math skills, and 15 of the district's schools have received either a D or F grade from the state. These facts are widely disseminated by the local media and known by the public, all of which leads to the community's perception of low public school performance.

It was against this backdrop in the summer of 2004 that Orange County government, the City of Orlando, and the Orange County Public School board decided to jointly form the Blue Ribbon Panel on Education ("Panel"). Orange County Mayor Rich Crotty, Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer, and School Board Chairman Bert Carrier agreed to each make eight appointments to the Panel, and the three of them jointly agreed upon the Panel's Chairman. Bill Sublette, a local attorney and former member of the Florida Legislature, was named Chairman of the Panel, and 24 local business, political, community, and education leaders were named to the Panel.

MISSION

The stated mission of the Panel was to:

...develop recommendations that will lead Orange County Public Schools and our community into a new era of improved student performance.

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To that end, the Panel will identify the factors that are significantly impacting student and school performance in Orange County. Further, the Panel will seek to compare current practices in these areas within Orange County with documented best practices across the nation. The work of the Panel will focus on issues that directly impact student performance.

This comprehensive evaluation will lead the Panel to provide specific recommendations to OCPS, community leaders, parents and citizens, for the purpose of securing the greatest possible and significant improvements in the public education and student performance in Orange County's public schools. The evaluation will include consideration of available resources both within the district and within the community.

In essence, the Panel was asked to examine all the factors that affect the quality of public education in the community and to make specific recommendations for improving the quality of public education based upon its findings, a daunting task in a school district with 155 schools, 173,870 students, 22,807 employees, and a total budget of more than \$1.9 billion. It was made clear to the Panel from the outset that all issues were on the table and that the Panel was expected to do its best to examine every aspect of the delivery of public education in this community. It was asked to directed to complete its work in five months.

METHODOLOGY

The Panel divided into five committees: (1) Early Childhood Education; (2) Student Performance; (3) Teacher Performance, Retention and Pay; (4) Parental and Community Support; and (5) Education Management. At the outset the Panel decided school construction and growth management were not part of its mission. Both issues had recently been addressed by the community through the successful Change For Kids campaign to raise the local sales tax for new school construction, and through the recent amendment of the County's charter to change to the County's growth management process. It was felt that the Panel could not contribute anything further to those two topics in the relatively brief time allotted to it.

The public school expertise of the Panel's members varied from those with extensive experience in public education whom could truly be called experts in the field, to those with little to no experience beyond their own public school education or the education of their children. Because of this the Panel chose to spend its initial time identifying the challenges facing our community's public schools in an effort to develop a sophisticated level of understanding of those challenges. Only then did the Panel seek to

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identify and substantiate potential solutions to the challenges it had identified.

The Panel began its work on August 26, 2004. Originally, the Panel was charged with completing its work by the end of January 2005. It was quickly realized that the five months allotted the Panel for its work would not allow enough time to competently address the breadth and scope of topics which the Panel was charged with examining. Thus, the Panel sought, and was granted, until the end of April 2005, to complete its work.

It was important to the Panel that each of its recommendations be substantiated by documented, verifiable facts, and not be based upon anecdote or pure opinion. It was felt that only through thoroughly documenting its findings could the Panel fully justify and defend its recommendations. A number of methodologies were utilized by the Panel to provide the necessary foundational underpinning to its final report.

BEST PRACTICES

As originally envisioned, the Panel sought to look outside the local school district and state for examples of best practices used in other jurisdictions. To a certain extent the Panel has done that and references will be found throughout the Panel's Final Report documenting the practices of other jurisdictions and the findings from the academic studies of various education experts. Early in the Panel's work, however, it was realized that in a system as large as the Orange County Public School system, with its 155 schools and 12,150 teachers, the best practices for our community could largely be found within the district itself.

The Student Performance Committee, using a statistical method known as regression analysis, identified the best predictors of school FCAT performance. That regression analysis conclusively linked school grades under Florida's A+ Plan grading system (grades which are based upon a school's collective FCAT performance) with the socio-economic status of a school. Economically advantaged schools tend to receive higher grades than economically disadvantaged schools that have a large percent of students on subsidized lunch programs. At the high school level, student enrollment changes and mobility also were shown to have a high correlative factor. In addition, the academic achievement gap that exists between the district's two major minority populations, blacks and Hispanics, and their white counterparts, also were shown to affect a school's grade.

A six-page spreadsheet of all 155 district schools was created by the Performance Committee based in part upon the committee's regression

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analysis. Listed on the spreadsheets for each school in the district are the following data: the 1999 through 2004 school grades given by the state; the raw math, writing and reading score for the school; the predicted reading score for the school based upon the committee's regression analysis; the gains in reading scores by the various school populations measured in the state's grading system; the 2003 and 2004 points total for the school; the regression analysis's disruption index and socio-minority index score; an indication of whether the school is a Title I school; an indication of whether the school made adequate yearly progress as measured by the federal No Child Left Behind ("NCLB") Act; and the number of the 30 NCLB criteria satisfied by each school. The spreadsheets utilized will be included in the Appendix of the Panel's Final Report.

Based upon the Student Performance Committee's spreadsheets, those schools that fell significantly below or above their predicted reading performance score were identified. Reading was chosen because a school's reading score makes up more than 50 percent of its school grade under Florida's A+ Plan. An examination of the Student Performance Committee's spreadsheets immediately made it clear which local schools to look to for best practices or, as the Panel frequently put it, which schools were outperforming the demographic makeup of their particular student population.

Based upon the work of the Student Performance Committee, 15 schools in the district were identified as Best Practice schools by the Panel: Chickasaw, Eccleston, Maxey, Mollie E. Ray, Orlo Vista, Palm Lake, Rolling Hills, Tangelo Park, Union Park, Ventura, and Winegard Elementary Schools; and Carver, Lakeview, and Southwest Middle Schools; and Cypress Creek High School.

The University of Central Florida College of Education, under the leadership of Dean Sandra L. Robinson, and Education Department Chair Dr. Robert D. Williams, then conducted focus groups at seven of the Best Practice schools. The focus groups were conducted with a selection of the school's teachers and administrators. A final focus group with the principals of the seven other Best Practice schools was also held. The purpose of the focus groups was to learn what it was the 15 Best Practice schools were doing right, and differently, than other similarly situated schools in the district for the purpose of applying those lessons, through the Panel's recommendations, to other schools in the district. The report on the findings from the focus groups will be included in the Appendix of the Panel's Final Report, and the findings were used to substantiate a number of the Panel's recommendations.

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STATISTICAL SNAPSHOT

Recognizing that a thorough analysis of the statistical makeup of each of the district's 155 schools was necessary to fully understand the diversity of issues and challenges facing educators and parents at each school, the Panel asked staff to compile a thorough statistical snapshot of each and every school and attendance zone in the district. This snapshot will be found in the Appendix of the Panel's Final Report. The Panel strongly encourages parents, teachers, and policy makers to compare the profile of their school with others in the system.

The Statistical Snapshot provides three groups of data for each and every school in the district: student population data, teacher data, and attendance zone data. In it can be found a wealth of information ranging from the percentages of students ready to start school, the number of students on free-and-reduced lunch, the exceptional student population at each school, the educational attainment levels of teachers at the school, the tenure of the teachers and administrators at that particular school, the household income levels in the school's attendance zone, the racial makeup and education levels of the school's attendance zone, etc. The findings and data contained within the Statistical Snapshot were used to substantiate many of the Panel's recommendations.

TEACHER & ADMINISTRATOR SURVEY

The Panel has great deference and respect for the knowledge and abilities of the district's professional educators. They are also of the belief that the district's teachers know the solutions to most of the challenges facing the district. For these reasons it was important to the Panel to survey the district's educators and administrators to learn their perceptions of the various issues and challenges facing public education today and to confirm, or dispel, perceptions held by the Panel and the public about the delivery of public education in our community.

A survey was commissioned through the University of Central Florida ("UCF") College of Education of all of the district's instructional personnel and of the district's administrators involved in the delivery of instruction. The UCF teacher survey was an 86-question instrument covering the following topic areas: school/district grades, educational impediments, No Child Left Behind, standardized tests, the minority achievement gap, failing/low-performing schools, teacher pay, teacher training, instructional time, teacher recruitment and retention, FCAT, supplies, parent/community support, administrative support, National Board Certification, advanced degrees, union representation, alternative education programs, and professional development. The administrator survey was shorter, but covered many of the same topics.

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The survey was sent to all 12,150 of the district 's teachers, and to 592 school-based and headquarters-based administrators involved in the delivery of instruction. The survey was a voluntary instrument and the Panel hoped for a response rate of 10 percent or more. To the great credit of this district 's teachers and administrators, fully 41 percent of those sent the survey (5,171 persons), responded to the survey.

The Executive Summary of the results of the Panel's survey will be found in the Appendix of the Panel's Final Report along with the results in their entirety. Survey findings were used to buttress many of the recommendations found in this Final Report and to provide substantiation for the perceptions reflected in this Report. The Panel encourages all those in the community interested in the quality of our public school system and in the delivery of quality instruction to review in detail the Panel's survey findings.

PARENT SURVEY

The Parental and Community Support Committee commissioned a survey of the parents of 16 schools in the district. Schools were selected based upon those identified as "best practice." More than 16,000 parent survey instruments were sent out through the mail, and nearly 1000 parents responded to the survey. The findings of the parent survey were used to substantiate many of the recommendations of the Parental and Community Support Committee.

BUSINESS SURVEY

The Parental and Community Support Committee also commissioned a survey of approximately 1700 businesses in the district. Registered OCPS business partners were surveyed, with 153 businesses responding. The findings of the business survey were used to substantiate many of the recommendations of the Parental and Community Support Committee.

COST ISSUES

The original charge given to the Blue Ribbon Panel by the Orange County School Board, Orange County Government, and the City of Orlando, was limited to identifying the factors that are significantly impacting student and school performance in Orange County and to provide specific recommendations for improvements in public education and student performance in Orange County's public schools. As such, the Panel's original charge was daunting, if not overwhelming. The Panel was not originally charged with developing cost estimates for its recommendations, nor was it charged with locating revenue sources for its recommendations.

In November 2004, the School Board gained new leadership. On February

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18, 2005, the newly elected Chairman of the School Board wrote to the Blue Ribbon Panel's Chairman and requested, for the first time, that the, "Panel include with each of its recommendations an estimate of the cost of implementation of that recommendation as well as a potential source of funds to cover the cost."

Chairman Shea's request has been a controversial one to many on the Panel. Many Panel members simply believe that deriving cost estimates and revenue sources was not part of the original mission of the Panel, and that it was unfair to request such estimates and revenue source six months into the Panel's work and only two months from the Panel's completion of its work.

Nonetheless, the Panel acceded to Chairman Shea's request and this Final Report contains cost estimates of all those recommendations that have a more than nominal cost. The Panel has also sought, with the aid of a Florida education budget consultant and expert, to make revenue source recommendations for all those recommendations with a price tag of more than \$250,000. For those recommendations with a cost of less than \$250,000, the Panel feels the district could find the revenue sources on its own from its annual total budget of \$1,900,000,000.

The Panel wishes to emphasize that it continues to believe that the identification of revenue sources to implement the Panel's recommendations is solely the responsibility of the Orange County School Board and its governmental partners. The identification of revenue sources to implement public policies is always an inherently political decision, and the Panel recognizes that every decision to draw revenue from a particular budget line item or source of revenue has ramifications upon some other program funded by that current revenue source. Thus, the recommendations made herein for possible revenue sources to fund the Panel's more costly recommendations are recommendations only. The Panel recognizes and acknowledges that there are innumerable approaches to funding its recommendations and would ask the School Board to similarly acknowledge this budgetary, and political, fact.

CONCLUSION

Over the past eight months the Blue Ribbon Panel has met to try to address the public's perception of our public schools and to try to make meaningful recommendations for reform and improvement. During this time the Panel and its committees have held over 100 meetings and have taken testimony from over 150 persons. Panel members have contributed countless hours of their professional time to the completion of the Panel's work, and Panel staff has contributed thousands of hours to the completion of the Panel's work.

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The Panel cannot say enough good things about the commitment of Orange County Public Schools Superintendent Ron Blocker and his staff to the Panel's work. Superintendent Blocker staffed the Panel with senior administrators and every request for information and documentation made of the district over the past eight months has been cheerfully, and willingly, met by his staff. None of the five committee staff directors, their alternates, or the many other public school staffers who assisted the Panel were relieved of their regular, full-time job duties. Yet, each somehow managed to juggle the heavy time commitment required of them by the Panel with the heavy time commitment required of them in their normal, daily duties as senior administrators. The Panel is deeply grateful for their commitment to the Panel's work and to the children and families of Orange County.

The Panel is indebted to President John C. Hitt, Dean Sandra L. Robinson, Dr. Robert D. Williams, Dr. Michael Hynes, Dr. Joanne Vogel, and the University of Central Florida College of Education. They have been valuable in our work and have provided the Panel with unbiased, objective expertise it could not have found elsewhere.

What follows comprises the Final Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Education. Contained within the Final Report are <x> recommendations for improvements to the delivery of instruction in the Orange County Public School system and for changes to the management structure and administration of the district. It is the fervent hope of the Blue Ribbon Panel that its work not go for naught and that those constitutionally charged with making education policy in the district, the Orange County School Board and the Orange County Public School System Superintendent, immediately adopt and begin the process of implementing the recommendations found within this Final Report. The future of our children and of our community depends upon those in power addressing the crisis in public education before us.

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Bill Sublette, Chairman

Linda H. Sutherland, Committee Chair, Early Childhood Education

Richard E. "Rich" Morrison, Committee Chair, Student Performance

Ron Rogers, Committee Chair, Teacher Performance, Retention and Pay

Dr. Pamela McCauley-Bell, Committee Chair, Parental and Community Support

Thomas H. "Tom" Yochum, Committee Chair, Education Management

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Percy R. Luney, Jr.

Aristides "Kico" Diaz

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Dr. John Edwards

Cynthia "Lynn" Mederos

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Richard "Rich" Maladecki

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Robert A. "Bob" Mandell

Winston W. "Bud" Gardner, Jr

Lorenzo Phillips

J. Charles "Charlie" Gray

Dr. Alzo J. Reddick

Dr. Frederick "Fred" Humphries

Joan Ruffier

Millie Irizarry

Dr. James "Jim" Schott

Dr. Clara L. Walters

Chairman's Recommendation

The Blue Ribbon Panel on Education should be reconvened by the Orange County Public Schools, Orange County, and the City of Orlando, annually for the next three years for the purpose of annually measuring, and reporting upon, progress made on the Panel's recommendations.

FINDINGS OF FACT IN SUPPORT OF RECOMMENDATION

The Blue Ribbon Panel on Education is not a policy-making body. It can only study the delivery of public education in our community and make recommendations for improvement or change. In Florida, the only entity with the constitutional authority to impose education policies is the duly elected school board of each county.

This Panel has no doubt that the Orange County School Board will vigorously pursue and seek to implement as many of the Panel's xxx recommendations as it deems feasible. However, the experience of various members of the Panel is that voluntary commissions such as the Blue Ribbon Panel on Education routinely come and go in any community, and that it is only through publically noticed and held status reports that the community can be assured the findings and recommendations of the Panel were implemented to the extent possible. It is for this reason that the Panel recommends an annual reconvening for the next three years for the purpose of publically measuring, and reporting upon, progress made on the Panel's recommendations.

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