

Priorities for public schools

By Todd Bowden

Guest Columnist

Taking the reins of a superior school district from one of the most successful superintendents in its history has been a humbling experience, but one that caused me to pledge to honor that legacy of excellence.

I was extremely fortunate to work beside Lori White for two months before she retired. During that time I also visited every school in the district and consulted with parents, teachers, students and community members on how best to achieve even greater success.

I came away from those meetings with three clear objectives:

1. We must maintain excellence and strive for even better results.
2. We must focus more resources on students who need the most help.
3. We must ensure that every student graduates ready to succeed in college or in a rewarding career.

Sarasota is one of only two Florida school districts to have earned an A grade every year since district grading began in 2004. That history is a point of great pride, but, with state standards continually in flux, it is only meaningful if we continuously strive to improve student success, regardless of our grade.

We are initiating programs to improve reading proficiency of our primary-grade students. The Reading Recovery

program recently featured in the Herald-Tribune is proving to be a genuine breakthrough in helping students read at grade level. We also are collaborating on a program with the Campaign for Grade Level Reading to improve attendance, a key to student success.

We are expanding the number of summer learning academies and hosting summer learning camps to counteract “summer slide,” the loss of academic progress over vacation.

Programs to help middle and high school students identify areas of interest to lead to college and career success are being expanded. We also offer rigorous special diploma courses such as the International Baccalaureate and the Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education at several high schools.

We are laser-focused on helping our teachers do what they do best: Teach! Cutting-edge professional development programs will help teachers improve math instruction and the best research available is helping us identify instructional approaches that have the highest impact in the classroom.

I have spent my first three months on the job working with the School Board, principals and district administrators to streamline central administration and to direct resources to support classroom teachers.

We have realigned the central office to create

clearer lines of responsibility for instruction, operations and finance. Professional development, instruction and curriculum management are being aligned to grade levels rather than operating as separate departments. We also budgeted for new positions to help principals fulfill their role as instructional leaders, and restored or added positions to help teachers focus on instruction.

Our success depends on strong support from parents, generous philanthropic organizations and active community members.

To keep the community better informed of our activities and accomplishments, we are launching several communications initiatives, including an electronic newsletter, a public dashboard for tracking performance data, a series of town halls, video messaging, an enhanced presence in social media and an app that will make district information immediately accessible on smartphones.

It's been a busy spring! I wish teachers, staff, students and families a fun and relaxing summer. Know that school district staff will be here working hard to make the 2017-18 school year one in which all students in our schools learn a fundamental lesson: that they can achieve much more than they ever believed possible.

Dr. Todd Bowden is superintendent of Sarasota County Schools.