



By JOHN STRATTON
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I frequently hear tough questions from taxpayers about school funding. “Why are you always asking for more money?” “What about lottery dollars?” “Why should we pay more when schools are failing?” “Why aren’t you more transparent and accountable?” “Why are you restricting parent choice and access?”

I understand. We have a big organization and a big budget. But if you are open to considering my comments, I have straight answers to those tough questions. It troubles me that public education is taking such a beating these days from some who attempt to create distrust, fear and anger about our schools without offering facts or evidence but post half-truths to social media instead.

On behalf of our over 3,000 employees who work tirelessly every day for their students, I present easily verifiable facts to set the record straight. As a former educator, I care deeply about ensuring that all of our stakeholders have good information so they can make their own decisions about the value of the contributions made to our community by Hernando Schools.

So let’s begin with Question #1-*Why does the school district always ask for more money?* The fact is, we don’t. In 2015, we asked voters to approve a half-cent increase in sales tax to fund improvements to our school facilities. We proved to our community with irrefutable evidence that because of state funding cuts in 2008, our buildings were in a bad state and needed critical repairs. Since 2015, every cent of the sales tax has been dedicated to those improvements. Anyone interested in learning more can visit our district webpage to see photos and read project details. We also invite individuals to join our Sales Tax Advisory Committee created as a mechanism of accountability to our community.

Four years later, we approached the Board of County Commissioners to ask for an increase in impact fees. Because impact fees are only paid by those who purchase a home in the community, they are intended to offset the “impact” of growth on the county’s resources including schools. In our discussions with Commissioners, we used the data published in an economic development report that indicated our county is on track to experience growth and our current impact fees are well below what is needed to support that growth.

On the November 3rd ballot, we’re asking for a 1 mill increase to pay for staff salaries, school safety and enhanced academic programs. An easily verifiable fact is that over the past 10 years, millage rates have steadily declined in Hernando County. This increase really just catches us up. While the millage rates may be slightly higher than other counties, our property values are lower, which means we need the additional 1 mill just to generate the dollars for education equal to other counties.

In addition, costs go up and landscapes change in education. We are now in a very competitive market to recruit and retain quality teachers due to a critical national shortage. Every

good businessperson knows that when supply is low you have to pay more. The cost to keep our schools safe in today's world has gone up, along with the need for technology. Our community is demanding more career and technical programs, which has a cost. This is where the 1 mill dollars will go.

Question #2 - *What about lottery dollars?* Lottery dollars account for less than 1% of our budget. The State Legislature decides where it goes and has directed most of it to Bright Futures Scholarships and higher education.

Question #3 - *Why should we pay more when schools are failing?* Schools aren't failing. Test scores and standards are rising. Graduate rates have never been higher. The school district has maintained a "B" grade since 2014. Our career and technical programs are expanding, and many students graduate with industry certifications that allow them to earn money right out of high school. Sometimes the media and others can give you the wrong impression when comparing apples to oranges. Our data paints a picture of continuous improvement despite some very real challenges.

Question #4 - *Why aren't you more transparent and accountable?* Public schools are held accountable across many measures and by the Department of Education and oversight groups. Our budget is always available for inspection and posted to our website. Our school board meetings are open to the public and we post agenda items and provide supportive documents ahead of time for the public's review. Because our financial reporting shows a balanced budget each year and that we have restored a stable fund balance the district has been an A+ credit rating for 15 years.

Academic accountability comes in many forms. On the most personal level, we welcome parents and encourage them to contact their teachers and principals for a personal consultation about their children. As a district, academic assessment data is posted on the district's webpage and is reported to the School Board throughout the school year and is available to the public on FLDOE reporting sites. With feedback from the business and college communities, we have greatly expanded academic and extra-curricular choices offering more ways for students to find their individual pathway.

We are not perfect and there is always room to improve but we need community support. We will always have critics but it doesn't mean we won't continue to try to win them over. Given some reflection, we hope they remember that every day in our district, 22,000 students arrive at school (many on school buses), they are fed, they are educated by professionals, attended to by trained specialists and they are kept safe.

But we cannot operate as an island. Schools are woven into the fabric of our community, having an impact on the economy, jobs, property values, crime, income and overall quality of life. No community gets stronger with underfunded schools. This upcoming referendum is a defining moment for our schools and we trust our community to make the right decision.

(For more information about the school referendum, go to hernandoschools.org and click on Referendum 2020.)

Thank you,

*John Stratton
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Hernando County Schools*