

January 2011

expressions

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In a Teacher's Words:
Educating Young Minds





Your VOICE

Education in Southwest Florida

WGCU Public Media's initiative, *Your Voice*, examines issues affecting Southwest Florida, combining a live, call-in, television broadcast featuring an expert panel, radio shows and articles in *Expressions*.

This month, *Your Voice* focuses on issues facing public education in Southwest Florida — extending the academic year, meeting mandated class-size requirements, school choice, busing, parental involvement, online learning and a host of other topics. WGCU has partnered with *The News-Press* and *Naples Daily News* on this project to share and expand coverage.

What Are Our Teachers Worth?

Unraveling Performance Pay

Your Voice Community Forum

Sponsored by: *The News-Press* and WGCU Public Media

When: Wednesday, Jan. 19 @ 6 pm

Where: Lee County Alliance of the Arts, 10091 McGregor Blvd., Fort Myers

RSVP: wgcuyourvoice@gmail.com

TELEVISION

Your Voice Education in Southwest Florida

Thursday, Jan. 27 @ 8 pm

Simulcast on WGCU-FM 90.1

Education in Southwest Florida is a hot topic with enormous consequences. Despite massive spending, students in the Sunshine State and America are reportedly lagging behind their peers in other developed nations. Some say we are paying too much and getting too little. Others cry for systemic change. Perhaps a longer school day, year-round schooling and teacher performance pay are options for success. Is school

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School Choice office in Lee County

Eye on Public Education

Public education has taken center stage in the national spotlight over the past year under the scope of news coverage, federal discourse and even the cinematic box office. This month, WGCU Public Media is putting a lens on the major issues facing local education through the quarterly, multimedia initiative, *Your Voice*.

To expand coverage, WGCU is partnering with *The News-Press* and *Naples Daily News*. Through the partnership, Dave Breitenstein, *The News-Press* education reporter, and Katherine Albers, *Naples Daily News* education policy reporter, probe the key issues facing the school districts they regularly cover.

Lee County: School Choice and Transportation

by Dave Breitenstein

In Lee County public schools, the people are changing.

The issues are not.

A newly elected school board majority will be selecting a new superintendent, who likely will hire new administrators and move staff to new positions. But they'll be chewing on an old debate: Is Lee's school choice system better than neighborhood schools?

"There's a love and hate for it," says Mike Smith, director of planning, growth and school capacity.

Under a student assignment plan adopted in 1997, Lee parents can choose from up to 15 schools within their geographic zone based upon academic programs, special services, location and other reasons. About nine in 10 parents are granted their top choice during the first registration period. Two new school board members, Tom Scott and Don Armstrong, want to tweak the system, which has its pros and cons:


What's to love:

- Specialty programs: Each school offers a unique program to attract students, like arts and gifted programs, while others host specialized services for students with disabilities.
- No rezoning: Once students are assigned to a school, they cannot be sent elsewhere. Other districts redraw attendance boundaries on an annual basis.
- Class size: Lee County meets Florida's class-size requirements because it can assign students to schools with ample space.

What's to hate:

- Transportation: A one-day snapshot in February showed the average morning bus route stood at 65 minutes, and the 2010-11 transportation budget rose to \$49 million.
- Community: Parent involvement is low at some schools because families don't have a strong connection or history with their assigned school.
- Newcomers: Families who move to Lee County during the school year often have little chance at gaining entrance into more popular schools, which quickly reach capacity.

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choice working? Why does busing remain controversial? Some say it takes a village, but shouldn't the village foundation begin with involved parents? What are the solutions?

We assemble a panel of Southwest Florida education leaders to talk about the changes coming to our region and to take your calls. **(Re-airs: Saturday, Jan. 29 @ 5:30 pm and Sunday, Jan. 30 @ 1 pm)**

RADIO

Your Voice on *Gulf Coast Live!* @ noon

Monday, Jan. 24

The Achievement Gap

As the film *Waiting for Superman* gets national attention, we gather a live studio audience to talk about the state of the achievement gap in Southwest Florida. Are lack of parental involvement, role models, resources, opportunities and motivation contributing? What can the community do to fill the gap? (This program will repeat @ 8 pm.)

If you'd like to be in the studio audience, reserve your seat: gulfcoastlive@wgcu.org.

Tuesday, Jan. 25

Class Sizes / Race to the Top

Collier County has the highest percentage of class-size violations in the state. Lee County has no classrooms over the size limit. More than half of Florida's 67 school districts could face fines for violating state class-size limits. The Florida School Boards Association plans to challenge those fines. We'll examine the issue from all sides.

Plus: The Florida Department of Education was awarded an historic \$700 million grant in the federal Race to the Top Fund competition aimed at preparing students for the 21st century economy. Lee County will get more than \$9 million. Collier County will get \$4 million.

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Connect Now meeting in Collier County

Lee County, from page 3

Until 2004, the federal court required Lee to maintain school choice as a means of diversifying schools, using race as an assignment factor. Race no longer plays a role, though, and schools' minority ratios have been climbing. Overall, 50.6 percent of the district's 81,000 students in Lee are minorities, and 14 schools now report minority enrollments greater than 80 percent. Franklin Park Elementary in Fort Myers counts only seven white students among its 478 children, while a mile away, just one of 200 students at Lee Charter Academy is white.

So what's wrong with that? Does a minority school mean children aren't receiving a sound education? It once did in Lee County, where all-black schools received hand-me-down textbooks and desks, and school facilities weren't maintained at the same standard as all-white schools. However, Lee Charter has earned three consecutive "A" grades from the Florida Department of Education, while Franklin Park garners accolades as the district's elementary technology hub.

"Schools are filled by choice," Smith says. "We're not forcing students into Franklin Park or any other school."

Choice is working, Smith believes, and points to a statistic showing seven in 10 parents selected a school that's not closest to their homes.

"People will be hard-pressed to change something that works," Smith says. 

Collier County: Community Conversations

by Katherine Albers

Two years ago, the Education Foundation of Collier County and a group of community members changed the conversation about public education in Collier County.

Instead of asking what's wrong with education in Collier, the organization asked, "What do we expect from the educational system in this community?" in more than 50 meetings held throughout the county as part of a process called Connect Now.

"It was meant to reconnect the community and the schools," former Connect Now co-chairman Alan Horton says. "It was about stopping the recriminations and the finger pointing. It was about how we move forward."

The final, 10-page statement focuses on "what people want, not where they differ," according to the document's preamble. "We know that good schools are the highest-priority investment, yielding the greatest return that any community can make, and that the best schools exist where communities refuse to accept anything less and support this goal."

The statement addresses the challenges residents face in getting the schools they want. These challenges include low educator and staff morale; uneven communication between the community and the school system, and within the school system itself; and inconsistent parent involvement.

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Top 5 Education Issues

Lee County

- Addressing future of school choice
- Trimming transportation costs
- Hiring a new superintendent
- Managing the \$1.4 billion budget
- Preparing for enrollment growth

Collier County

- Hiring a new superintendent
- Addressing the demands to comply with the Class Size Amendment
- Managing the \$960 million-plus budget
- Improving student achievement
- Improving communication between the district and the community

— DB / KA



Radio Programs, from page 8

Wednesday, Jan. 26

Low Performing Schools / Alternatives

The Alliance for Excellent Education and data from Johns Hopkins University report Florida has more than 160 of the nation's lowest-performing schools, putting it second behind Texas. Four Collier high schools are among the lowest-performing in the country. The Obama Administration has committed \$3.5 billion to fund changes in persistently low-performing schools with priority given to high schools with graduation rates below 60 percent. We'll look at how to turn low-performing schools around.

Plus: We'll look at school alternatives including charter schools, home schooling and private schools.

Thursday, Jan. 27

Arts Edition: Highly Talented Kids

We seek out Southwest Florida students who have performed on NPR's *From the Top* to explore how being an extraordinary musician has changed their lives. Some research shows that starting music lessons at a young age enhances the ability to do math. We'll see if there is any correlation in these top musicians.

Friday, Jan. 28

Sound Off With Sasha:

Losing Programs / No Child Left Behind

We'll examine how budget constraints have forced districts to cut foreign-language programs and art, theater, music and physical education programs. What impact do these losses have on students?

Plus: Will the next Congress reauthorize the "No Child Left Behind" law? We'll look at the current law and what it means for Florida.

Kristin Brooks Cohen's students show off special projects.

In a Teacher's Words: Educating Young Minds

by Kristin Brooks Cohen

Kristin Brooks Cohen, of Fort Myers, teaches at Allen Park Elementary School and has been an educator for 15 years. She is a recipient of the 2010 Golden Apple, an award that recognizes excellence in teaching, from the Foundation for Lee County Public Schools. Here is a glimpse into a day in the life of her classroom.

I am a double agent leading a double life. On weekdays, I am a fourth-grade teacher. By nights and weekends, I am still a fourth-grade teacher.

My profession is more about who I am than what I “do.” I can only speak for the perspective I have once the morning bell rings and my classroom door closes to public observation. The difference between what the outside world observes and what is actually transpiring within the secret world of 9 and 10 year olds is often a paradox. The preparation that goes into each day's curriculum has been thoughtfully conceptualized with my young clients in mind in order for them to receive maximum academic and social results.

Rise and Shine

Three hours before I welcome 22 fourth graders into my classroom, I start my day at home with a cup of coffee, a bowl of grits, the morning news and Internet access to respond to school email sent from night owls and early birds. My work is officially underway as visions of the school day dance in my head. My personal hygiene routine becomes rote so my mind is clear for “Random Notes to Self”: dry son's baseball uniform for tonight's game, pack Elvis costume for lesson, buy lettuce for guinea pig, pack amethyst geode, unlock screen door for pest control, wake my son, kiss my husband good-bye. (I have accepted the fact that this may be the last time today I will apply lipstick, brush my hair or use the restroom until the school dismissal bell rings.)

At school, I sign in, check my mailbox and head for my classroom to begin 45 minutes of nonstop data entry of grades for papers I graded last night. Just as I've found my groove and the rhythmic clicking of the number keys begins to sound like a STOMP production, the phone rings. A parent is calling to say that his son will be out of school for the remainder of the week due to the flu. Stop. Go through student's desk. Find textbooks and related workbooks. Bring to office with a homework list and note that reads: “Feel better. We'll miss you. Thank you for not sharing.”

Resume data entry. Click, click, click. New e-mails pop up. Reminders: Today's menu has changed from spaghetti to chicken patty; chorus will not meet next Tuesday; Code Red Safety Drill is today; a second-grade teacher is in desperate need of 18 forks for an unexpected birthday cake; Fall Festival meeting immediately following safety drill; picture retakes on Thursday; instruct students that they are not to disturb the egg-laying duck at the school entrance. Sticky notes are invaluable friends.

Rrrriinnng goes the morning bell. Students enter one-by-one as we exchange morning salutations. Some go for a free breakfast, others unpack and turn in their homework. All trickle in with expressions ranging from an engaged smile to a Key deer in headlights. The baggage students carry into the classroom is bigger than what their backpacks can hold and invisible to the human eye. Issues weigh heavily in students' lives: divorce, unemployment, medical concerns, bullying, grades, self-esteem, body image and more.

Elvis Sighting

After noting homework in their agendas and watching the school's news broadcast, we await the Code Red announcement. Once the safety drill is over, we line up and proceed to physical education. I head to my Fall Festival meeting to ensure our rubber duckies are all in a row. I have already collected homework, checked agendas for parents' signatures

⇒ *In a Teacher's Words, continued*

and electronically entered attendance. Forty minutes later, I head to the P.E. field to collect the sweaty bunch. We proceed up the stairs for a restroom break and snack time.

It's time to read. I confer with students on individual skills while others head to the media center to exchange library books. During conferencing, I distribute one Band-Aid for a picked scab and one plastic baggie for a lost tooth. I also fill out two clinic passes: one for nausea, the other for a sore arm improperly slept on.

It's time to write. A quick costume change channels my inner Elvis. Dressed in aviator sunglasses with sideburns, Elvis makes a surprise appearance from behind my desk to perform a song about prepositions through a cordless microphone. Students' reactions range from shock to laughter to pretend faints. Later, they read their original prepositional phrases aloud into the microphone and conclude with, "Thank you. Thank you, very much."

Smart Boards and Geodes

It's lunchtime. Restrooms. Café helpers are reminded of their duties. We must walk straight and silently on the sidewalks' blue lines. Someone has forgotten their lunchbox in the classroom. About face. Redo. Reline. Proceed. We are now running one minute behind on our 25-minute lunch period. I check my mail in the office, then power walk back to my classroom. Do I eat with the 17 precious minutes I have left or do I finish entering my grades from this morning? Compromise. Enter grades while downing water and a miniature Snickers confiscated from our "Sweet Treat" box. Oh, the shame. Should I have gotten the chicken patty? No. Too much time and effort.

It's time for new and improved math: hands-on manipulatives, state-of-the-art technology with a Smart Board, cartoon introductions and games...all before the students open their textbooks. It's the "new math" alright...infotainment!

In science, my 20-pound amethyst geode is the *piece de resistance*. Igneous, sedimentary, metamorphic...oh, my! It's a hit that sparks an interest for students to share their own rock collections with the class tomorrow.

Riinngg. The office informs me that one student will be picked up by a parent instead of going home by bus; another needs to head to the bus ramp instead of waiting at parent pick-up. Dismissal time...we organize, straighten and pack. We hug and high-five.

I enter the last of my grades, collect homework and class work that has accumulated atop the "in" box, and roll my work away in a plastic crate, secured to a dolly with a bungee cord. The glitz and glamour never ends.

Yes, I *am* a teacher. Amidst the piles of papers, e-mail flow and classroom maintenance, I feel honored that parents entrust me with the academic and social well-being of their children. I feel like a double agent who mixes equal parts innovation, instinctual trust and the ability to make 500 split decisions each day in pursuit of uncovering a positive learning environment. 📧

Collier County, from page 5

And, it appears, the Collier County School District is listening. The school board hired Collective Communications Group, the company that helped the Foundation write its Connect Now statement, to assist board members in developing its recent strategic plan and goals.

Mary Ann Gemmill, chief administrative officer for the district, says the Connect Now initiative and the district's strategic plan was used to help Collier develop its plan for the county's \$4 million portion of the Race to the Top grant to spur education reform. The district's plan was approved by the Florida Department of Education in November.

The Education Foundation has used the Connect Now statement to shape its work in the community. In addition to going through an evaluation of its own processes, the Foundation has launched the "Get on the Bus" website and campaign, which will connect community members and businesses with opportunities for funding teachers' projects, and promoting volunteerism and local scholarships.

Since the Education Foundation has made Connect Now available to the public, Horton says, the movement has achieved several goals. For instance, the school board has become more collaborative with the public and interest groups. "Those become the foundations on which you can build," he says.

Some of the conditions that create challenges include the community's size and diversity — the 43,000-student district is 60-percent minority — and the fragile economic climate. It ends with a blueprint for what needs to happen to continue making progress.

But those who developed it say the school district will constantly have to use Connect Now as a checks-and-balances system on the district.

"It is discouraging to think we could fall back if we are not careful — that we could go back to the discord and the division and the animosity," says Horton. "There will always be financial challenges, policy challenges and politics presenting the opportunity for discord."

Susan McManus, president of the Education Foundation of Collier County, says the conversation about education in Collier County will continue to evolve. Connect Now does not have a "finish date," and she says that makes some people question the work.

"I understand there is a healthy skepticism. That's okay. Not everyone has had experience with this," she says. "We plan to stay committed to reaching out to every person in the community as we can. We are going to stay committed to a sense of urgency." 📧