

This is a follow up to my last column on the performance of the school district. A reader, Rick Davenport, had mailed me a really thoughtful letter, and I published it, along with my response.



A summary: He said we need to hold school district accountable and stop babying them and pretending there aren't problems. I said, yes the schools need work, but we need to give the new board and superintendent a year to work on their goals.

Mr. Davenport's response:

Dear Laura,

Thanks for sending me a copy of the goals. One of the things that drives me absolutely crazy is that Dr. Truesdale's predecessors supposedly had goals, too. The trouble is, nobody, including the very school board to which they reported, ever held them to account for failure after failure in meeting the goals they had. No business could hope to survive without accountability at every level of the organization and it always amazed me that somehow the school board (I guess) thought the school system could. Hopefully there's been a significant shift in the thinking in that respect and the disconnect between saying the feel-good stuff and requiring it to happen has been eliminated. We'll see.

I appreciate your considered reply. I once heard insanity defined as "repeating behavior you already know doesn't work expecting a different outcome." Perhaps we can agree that we've all been successful in proving what doesn't work here in Beaufort County. It's time to implement what will work, with outstanding people leading the charge coupled with accountability to and participation from the community that is without equivocation.

Please do not mistake the thoughts I expressed to you as lacking support for the school system. I haven't washed my hands of the whole thing even though my youngest child is now 31. I do confess to having significant frustration with the whole thing and perhaps that came through in my note to you. It's way past time to stop pretending that somehow it's all going to be all right and that these darned, sticky comparisons with everybody else just aren't fair. Let's get on with the business of straightening this mess out. Your idea of giving Dr. Truesdale a year before the tough love happens strikes me as fair, with the understanding that her performance will be closely monitored in the meantime.

Best,

R.

This letter conveys the frustration a lot of people in this community feel. The school district has gotten on their last nerve and they want change.

So how do we translate this feeling into community action?

Susan Dickson wrote to me, "I think (not feel) that the Beaufort County schools need less 'aid and comfort' and much more accountability and positive results. Feelings about how we need to

improve need to morph into thoughts about how we can improve.”

The new school board has put a lot of thought into what it will take to get our schools to improve. It's all reflected in the superintendent's goals for 2007-2008. The goals fall within six broad categories:

1. Academic achievement
2. Financial management
3. Facilities management
4. Community relations
5. HR and district staffing; and
6. Board relations.

Each of these categories represents a paragraph within the goals document, with the exception of academic achievement. That item is so important – and requires so much specificity – that it has a big one-and-a-half-page addendum devoted to it.

Here's the Academic Achievement Goal:

“The superintendent will achieve the stated annual Achievement GAP reduction goal for 43 measurable student performance indicators as shown on the attached spreadsheet. The district's short-term goal is to have the district's average scores for the 2008 Achievement Gap to be 20% lower (improvement) than the 2007 Achievement GAP, where the Achievement GAP is defined as a district average score lower than the state average score for a particular indicator. The district's long term goal is to have the district's average scores on all 43 performance indicators meet or exceed the state's average scores on or before the 2010 test results.”

It's gonna be hard to turn that into a sound bite, but here goes: If Beaufort County School District did worse than the state average in any of 43 measures, we need to reduce those gaps by 20% in the coming year. We need to close those gaps completely by 2010.

The measures include PACT scores from third through eighth grade; ACT scores, SAT scores, graduation rate, drop-out rate, % of juniors and seniors in advanced classes, % of 9th graders failing English and math, GPA, and % of teachers with master's degrees.

For 2006, we were below the state average for around 3/4 of the measures, so we have our work cut out for us.

In future columns I'm going to write in more depth about these academic goals, mostly because I need to learn more about them myself. Eventually I'll take a look at the other goals, but measuring academic performance is so complex that I need a lot of time to really study it.

The questions I'll be asking: What does the jargon mean? I have no idea what “TAI” is and I bet you don't either. Are our numbers accurate? Was our dropout rate in 2006 only 6.8%? I don't know if I believe that.

And why on earth would I want to tackle this?

I feel that if we as a community are going to hold the school board and superintendent accountable for performance, then we as a community need to educate ourselves about how performance is measured.

And I think we can do it.