

As you may have heard, Forbes recently compared 97 U.S. counties whose schools depend heavily on local tax dollars. Beaufort's rank was 93.



Why so low? According to Forbes, Beaufort County's per-pupil spending is much higher than average, while our college entrance exam scores and graduation rates are poor. In other words, we are not getting a lot of bang for our buck.

I'm not a big fan of Forbes' methodology, so my last column was a flippant look at how they arrived at their findings. But we have to take these findings seriously.

I was reminded of this by a reader, Rick Davenport of Lady's Island. He wrote me a really good letter, and he has given me permission to print it, along with the rest of our correspondence.

Dear Ms. Von Harten,

Your column in Lowcountry entitled "Beaufort Makes the Forbes List" ordinarily wouldn't have drawn a response from me had you just been an ordinary columnist printing comments with which I disagree. The rub is that you're now an elected public official and part of your job is overseeing the Beaufort County School system, at least from a budgetary point of view.

The hard truth is that we can cop out all we want but our school system is an almost complete failure. Most importantly, of course, it has failed the very children it supposedly seeks to educate. The graduation rate, average ACT and SAT scores and almost across-the-board inability to put forth adequate progress with respect to state and federal standards is a disgrace.

The school system has also failed the taxpayers who pump more and more money into the system each year never receiving the desired results. As an investment in the future, our school system doesn't even achieve junk bond status.

Interestingly, your article touched on an attitude that I think is pervasive; an attitude that prevents progress. You suggest that "we shouldn't beat ourselves up too much" as though that figurative shrug of the shoulders somehow makes everything all right. May I suggest instead that we beat ourselves up too little. Your job, as a community leader, is to demand better and lead us all to achieve better results for the students both now and in the future and for the investors; the taxpayers that are paying the bills. It is not okay with me that we're producing an astonishing percentage of children who can't read, write or do arithmetic. Competing with kids from Singapore, Spain, San Francisco? Surely you're kidding. These kids couldn't compete with kids from Stuckey, South Carolina. And it's our fault. We don't demand better. We don't require our administrators to manage, our teachers to teach, our board members to demand excellence. We don't implement programs designed for success – and eliminate the teachers and administrators who can't cut the mustard. □ □

The numbers speak for themselves. The Beaufort County Schools are a train wreck. Now, whether we like it or not, that's what the whole country believes, thanks to Forbes. It is that reality and that perception that we absolutely have to change. It'll take tough love, so to speak, and an understanding that what we've accepted for far too long is no longer acceptable. Will you lead? Or will you behave as though you're comforting a child with a skinned knee?

Kindest regards,
Rick Davenport

Dear Rick,

Thank you for writing to me about the schools. It's good to know there are people out there

who care, and want better for our community. What I was trying to get across is that comparing our spending levels and outcomes to those of Marin County the way Forbes did is not methodologically sound. The level of community resources available to families in Marin is much greater than it is here in Beaufort. And the fact that we have spent so much local tax money on schools – which is what got us on this list in the first place – is because we have many wealthy retirees who drive up the income averages that SC considers in the school funding formula, so we get minimal state money. At the same time we have a high number of poorer-than-average students in our schools. It is a demographic and finance nightmare.

That said, I am fully aware that the school district is broken. I intend to provide aid and comfort while it is healing. The best way for me to show leadership is to be supportive. It wouldn't be productive right now to point fingers and drag up dirt from the past. I have to trust Dr. Truesdale and the new board members. They have made public commitments to changing the culture of complacency in the school district. I am also impressed with the work of Phyllis White, the finance leader who has recently assumed responsibility for operations. She has already attained some considerable cost savings. The fact that these two jobs (finance and operations) are being combined into one is testimony to the level of structural change that is occurring. Instead of hiring more mediocre people, the district is asking the most capable and creative employees to do more. And that ever-burgeoning bevy of assistant superintendents at district office is being redeployed out into the schools to focus on curriculum. I'm attaching a copy of the new superintendent's goals, and will do whatever I can to support her and her board in this coming year.

And around this time next year, I'll let the tough love fly. Because you are right, our students HAVE to start doing better, and county council has to hold the school district accountable. And thanks for holding me accountable.

Best regards,
Laura

There isn't much room left, so I'll save the rest for the next column. In the meantime, if you want to take a look at the school superintendent's goals, visit the school district's web site and see if you can find them. The document is there, but I'll tell you, it's like going on a scavenger hunt.

And so the Year of Trust begins.