

FLORIDA STUDENTS DESERVE MORE SUPPORT

By Benjamin J. Williams, Chair, School Board of Broward County, Florida

As a lifelong educator and current Chair of the School Board of Broward County, I see everyday what the current status of inadequate state funding for education means for our students.

As a former teacher, assistant principal and principal, I know the level of resources required to provide a good education for children. It requires well-trained and dedicated teachers; a well developed curriculum aimed at advancing student performance; and technology in the classroom to prepare students for our 21st century workplace.

Florida is currently ranked in the bottom ten percent in per pupil state funding for education among the other 49 states. Depending on which ranking you believe, we are either in 49th, 47th or 45th place. Whatever it is, we are near the bottom of the stack when it comes to the resources our children need to obtain a good education.

As a member of the School Board of Broward County, I am charged with making decisions everyday that impact the lives of children. Let me tell you – constantly trying to do more with less is a most difficult responsibility. Deciding between what students really need and what they should have and deserve to have is a most daunting task, because we should be providing our children with both.

We have become fairly adept at doing more with less when it comes to consistently advancing student academic performance. But we can only do so much with so little for so long. Without a doubt, it will soon come to the point where this inadequate level of state support for education will begin to have more of a negative impact in the classroom on student learning.

The Governor's recent spending proposal for education would provide Broward County schools with approximately \$100 million in additional funding. But while this sounds like a lot of money, it doesn't even begin to move us out of the bottom ten percent in state funding for education. Basically, that \$100 million is already spoken for in small cost of living raises for teachers and staff; for increases in health and liability insurance costs; for escalating utility and transportation fuel costs and more.

It is imperative that the Governor and our state legislators look at the State of Florida in comparison with the other 49 states and bring us up to at least the middle of the pack in the area of per pupil funding for education. Florida is simply too wealthy a state to remain at the bottom of the list in this area. Our average per capital personal income places Florida about 25th in the nation. With our lucrative tourist industry, growing citrus groves, massive university and college systems and burgeoning technology industry, there is no reason for Florida to languish in the bottom ten percent in state funding for education.

Adequate state funding will provide us with money to increase teachers' salaries, thus improving our ability to recruit and retain qualified teachers. It will also allow us to put more technology in our classrooms, thus providing teachers and students with the computers, electronic whiteboards and educational software they need for our 21st century world. It will also allow us to build new schools and classrooms, as our student population continues to grow.

Lastly, the state constitution makes it the legal responsibility of the state legislature to adequately fund education. Is the bottom ten percent adequate? Don't our children deserve more? If you believe as I do that current state education funding levels are not adequate and that our children do deserve more support from the adults who represent us in Tallahassee, I hope you will join me in urging the Governor and our state representatives to provide the level of support our children need to be on a par with the rest of the nation when it comes to their educations.