

Collier County education the focus of panel discussion

By JOHN OSBORNE

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NAPLES — More than 100 concerned parents, teachers and community members descended upon a conference room in the Naples Hilton on Monday night to participate in a forum titled "The State of Public Education in Collier County ... And Why You Should Care."

Panelists for the discussion hosted by The League of Women Voters of Collier County included schools Superintendent Dennis Thompson, school board member Kathleen Curatolo, president of The Education Foundation of Collier County Susan McManus, and Libby Anderson, president of EDA Services and co-chair of The Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce's education committee.

Thompson said the challenges facing the district were formidable, but he believes the district is prepared.

Thompson said Collier County public schools educate 42,000 students. Of those, 42 percent is white, 42 percent is Hispanic, and the rest is made up of African-Americans, Asians and other ethnic backgrounds.

"We're a majority-minority district, which is very rare," Thompson said. "Fifty-three percent of our students are eligible for free or reduced-prices this year, which is up from 44 percent last year. That means more than half of the students living in our district are living below the federal poverty line."

Thompson said that of the 67 public school districts in the state of Florida, Collier County has the second-highest percentage of English-language learners, trailing only Dade County.

The 163 new teachers the district hired this year was the lowest number in a decade, Thompson said. He said he expects to employ even fewer teachers next year, but that student programs would not be cut.

"Our enrollment has stabilized," he said. "We'll have less teachers, but it won't affect any of the student programs."

Thompson outlined what he called the four top priorities of his administration.

"The first is classroom-management by the teachers," he said. "Secondly, we must make sure that the teachers know how to teach. Third, we need to examine the home and parental involvement in the students' educations. Lastly, we need to have high expectations for our students. I've asked the principals in all the schools to make that their primary focus this year."

Thompson characterized third grade and the freshman year of high school as "gatekeeper grades."

"I had lunch with the Secretary of Education a few years ago, and he said the government decides how many prisons to build each year by looking at the level of reading-retention in third-grade students," he said.

Freshman year is also important, Thompson continued.

"A lot of people tend to think of dropouts happening during the student's junior or senior year," he said. "Actually, the decision is made much earlier than that. Students double their chances of dropping out if they don't make it to their sophomore year."

Thompson said last year Collier County public schools had 624 freshmen who didn't make it to their sophomore years.

"We hope to reduce that number by half in the next three years," he said.

Third-term school board member Curatolo repeatedly hammered home her irritation with fellow board member Richard Calabrese. Curatolo said Calabrese's lack of participation has hampered the district's efforts to improve.

"We've had four members doing all the work because of Mr. Calabrese's illness," she said. "I was very disappointed to read his guest commentary in the newspaper, and I really hope that he will start working with us."

Curatolo said Calabrese would participate via telephone in the next school board meeting, which is scheduled for Wednesday.

"We really hope that we can all get on the same page then and move forward in an efficient and productive manner," she said.

Curatolo said that while the district certainly faces challenges, it also has a lot to be proud of.

"Last year, 69 percent of our schools were considered to be 'high-performing,' receiving either an 'A' or a 'B' from the state. Nine Collier schools made adequate yearly progress, and we had 130 teachers ranked as National Board Certified."

Curatolo harkened back to the district's recent decision to make 50 percent the new zero for elementary-school students.

"We didn't include the community in that decision, but I've vacillated back and forth about how I feel about that, and I really appreciate the information that I've received from the public after the fact," she said. "That's one piece of the pie, and I know that we really need to do a better job in communicating with the community."

Representing the business community, Anderson reminded listeners that the quality of public education in Collier County affects everybody's bottom line.

"I'm looking at it from two perspectives here – both as a member of the business community and as the mother of two teens," she said. "In order to attract viable, strong businesses, the No. 1 thing they look at is the kids. They look at what kind of education system we have in place, and we really should be concentrating on having one that we can all be proud of."

Underscoring that point was Sandy Parker, vice president of the League of Women Voters. Parker said the quality of the public education system affects even those without children.

"Almost half of everybody's local taxes are paid to support the schools, so people should be concerned about at least that much," she said.