

## My View

Jackie Pons

In almost 20 years of experience as a school administrator, I learned that the best strategy was always common sense, especially when rules and regulations seemed to defy it.

Even as a principal, I told myself that I didn't become an educator to blindly follow without asking questions and determining whether what I was technically required to do was what was best for students.

Since last spring, principals and district administrators collectively have spent thousands of hours and some sleepless nights determining how Leon County Schools would comply with the class-size constitutional requirement. Traditional district school classrooms cannot exceed 18 students in grades pre-K to 3; 22 students in grades 4 to 8; and 25 students in grades 9 to 12, versus school-level averages that were applied last year. The Legislature did not hold charter schools to the same standard, but that's a story for another day.

Guess what? Our principals delivered. We are confident that secondary schools throughout Leon County will comply with the Florida Constitution's class-size requirement. Elementary schools devised a plan that would have enabled 100-percent compliance, too.

But I said no.

Instead, I have approved a plan that brings the district up to 99.5-percent compliant. We went from having nearly 2,000 students out of compliance based on 2009-10 projections to only 170 this year.

These 170 elementary students throughout the district are at the heart of the issue. Because these students are in different grade levels and are spread throughout the district, to fully comply we would need to hire approximately 75 new teachers at a cost of more than \$24,000 per student, for a total cost of more than \$4 million. That makes no sense.

As a result of my decision, Leon County Schools could face a financial penalty of \$518,000, if the state cuts the district no slack. On the other hand, that amount

could be reduced by 75 percent or more if the district completes a new compliance plan by February.

For me, the choice between complying at a cost of more than \$4 million or paying a penalty was easy. I have a responsibility to protect the interests of students and taxpayers, and that's what I've done.

In order to comply, we had to make some very tough decisions and try some new strategies. The alternatives were far worse. Some districts have eliminated art, music and PE classes. We've preserved them. Some districts have reassigned students from their neighborhood schools. We have not. I believe we cannot freeze parents out of their own neighborhood schools. Even as late as last week some districts have made mass schedule changes. We have not.

I decided to avoid creating that kind of disruption for our students and panic in the community.

I'm under no illusions. Our district and districts across the state are in financial crisis. Leon County Schools has cut \$50 million in the past two years. We've closed schools. We've not given pay raises for three years. In the midst of that, the Legislature wants me to spend more than \$4 million to comply with a constitutional requirement that it failed to fully fund?

Not on my watch – especially not after the Legislature in early 2010 gave school districts less than 25 percent of what Education Commissioner Eric Smith and the Florida Board of Education said was necessary to fully fund the class-size constitutional requirement.

In Florida, we seem to have lost our way. The Legislature has forced cash-strapped districts to spend millions of dollars from reserves or pay punitive financial penalties, which are found nowhere in the constitution.

Leon County principals, district administrators, School Board members and I have chosen a different path, always guided by the principle of protecting the best interests of students.

It's just common sense.

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