

Lorain County superintendents want more say over curriculum-related policies

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By Lisa Roberson

ELYRIA — From the state-mandated Third Grade Reading Guarantee to academic assessments, teacher evaluations and preschool, educational leaders of Lorain County emphasized one word during the first superintendents' summit:

Local.

As in they believe local control over the educational policies put in place at the state and federal level is needed to ensure children are educated in a way that's best for them.



Avon Lake Superintendent Bob Scott

“I’m the superintendent of Avon Lake Schools, and my school board should be able to make policies and set agendas that affect the kids in Avon Lake,” Superintendent Bob Scott said. “That idea is not out there right now, and that concerns us.”

Instead, districts said they have been told by federal officials to switch to a Common Core Curriculum, ready their students for computer-based assessments, and evaluate their teachers on a system that is still being developed.

“It sounds so simple to say the needs of a rural district in southern Lorain County are not the same as the needs of a suburban district on the east side of the county,” Scott said. “The people who know this but are left out of the conversation are the ones in the classrooms and offices and on the board of those individual districts, and it’s time we return the control to those people.”

It is not often when the leader of every district in the county — 16 in total — converge to speak on the same topic.

Lorain County can be seen as a microcosm of Ohio and the rest of the country with districts that can be labeled as urban, suburban and rural. However, there is a tendency for like-minded districts to associate with one another when deciding how to tackle educational issues.

On Thursday, the broad spectrum of public education was on display as superintendents were armed with a voter survey they say speaks to the confidence residents have in the local public schools.

“Twenty percent of respondents felt there should be more government control over local schools,” said Greg Ring, superintendent of the Educational Service Center of Lorain County.

“That tells us that 80 percent of people want decisions made on the local level.”

But the survey alone is not enough to push any agenda.

Hosted by the Lorain County Chamber of Commerce, the event was geared toward pulling community business partners on board.

Tony Gallo, the chamber’s executive director, said bringing his organization, which represents hundreds of Lorain County businesses, into the conversation is a smart move because quality education and economic development is akin to the proverbial chicken-and-the-egg debate.

“It’s hard to say which drives the other,” he said. “But we know that without either, the county cannot progress and advance.”

The superintendents’ joint effort was lauded by Stephen Dyer, an education fellow at Innovation Ohio. Dyer, a former reporter with the Akron Beacon Journal and former Ohio representative.

Dyer spoke about school funding and the impact of charter and community schools on local budgets.

His message to business leaders was not just to fund levy campaigns and leave districts to haggle with politicians. Rather he urged them to “get involved, get educated and advocate for kids.”

The charter school system set up in the state to allow publicly funded schools to operate privately has not stood up to the original idea, which was to give parents an option to failing schools in their communities, he said.

Instead, a less-regulated system was constructed that financially hurt public schools across the state.

“It’s kind of an underground economy that is just now coming to the forefront,” Dyer said.

“People need to understand the impact charter schools have on their kids and communities.”

Many in the room are longtime opponents of charter schools because of the way the state has chosen to fund them. Elyria and Lorain have been heavily hit by students leaving public education for charter schools.

However, Thursday was about more than just charter schools.

Local educators expressed that they are often hand-tied to make changes that deviate from legislative actions.

The Third Grade Reading Guarantee is a prime example, Avon Superintendent Mike Laub said.

The mandate, the state’s answer to low reading proficiency in youth, calls for all students to read on grade level by third grade or be held back.

“We can identify when students are struggling as soon as kindergarten, first or second grade and put the right interventions in place without this so-called guarantee,” Laub said. “It’s not needed because retention is not intervention. Retaining a student does not solve the reading problem.”

The voter survey referenced numerous times during the luncheon, however, spoke to voters who feel differently.

The poll by Burges & Burges Strategists of Cleveland, surveyed 620 registered voters in Lorain County on educational matters such as academic achievement, high-stakes testing, public perception of local school districts and teachers and support for public preschool programs. When asked about the guarantee, 65 percent of respondents were in favor of retaining it.

Other survey results included:

- 70 percent of respondents said (districts) were doing an excellent or good job of preparing children for the future.
- Districts earned an overall grade of “B.”
- 33 percent of respondents felt public education is getting worse, 30 percent the same and 21 percent thought it better.
- Finances is the biggest problem facing the schools, followed by parental involvement, according to respondents.
- 67 percent do not believe that increased state testing has helped student achievement.
- 77 percent support expanded preschool for low-income students and a majority would support increasing taxes to support such (55 percent).

Elyria Superintendent Paul Rigda said the latter sentiment is something he stands behind — he has often called preschool the “silver bullet in education.” So much so that, despite the called for local control, he believes preschool is where state and federal input would be most useful.

Districts could use more money to educate more kids sooner, he said.

“I remember when preschool was an option you could send your kids to if you felt like it or wanted a break on baby-sitting,” he said. “Those days are over. With today’s standards, students who do not go to preschool are behind those who did and are constantly playing catch up.”

He likened it to coming into a movie 30 minutes after the start.

Lorain Superintendent Tom Tucker echoed Rigda’s rally call for preschool.

“Preschool is the answer,” he said. “There is no question.”

He didn’t just speak anecdotally. In Lorain, of those in the incoming kindergarten class who took the kindergarten readiness assessment in literacy, just 13 scored high enough to be considered ready for kindergarten, Tucker said.

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