

Dear Concerned Blankner Parents:

What is Leadership? Integrity, Energy, Self Belief, Vision, Courage, Creativity....does this describe what we've observed from the Florida Legislature?

Consider our founding fathers' vision of a government for the people and by the people...is this what's happening in Florida now?

Each member of the Florida House will be up for re-election in 2010. Each person thinks their seat is safe because of reapportionment and term limits. In 2008, all 120 members were up for re-election or there were open seats. There were only six serious House races.

Something is very wrong at the core of Florida's political system.

We brought another country to its knees in order to bring democracy to its people...yet our own state house is not representing the people of Florida. We're left with a shallow panel of bureaucrats whose one concern revolves around holding onto power through re-election.

Think about it. There must be more than one leader on this email list. Surely, there is more than one patriot among us. Consider becoming a candidate.

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I've attached some letters for you to read over the break. These are wonderful examples of what each of you is doing. We are being heard. We must keep the pressure on these people. Senator Wise, chairman of the Senate Appropriations K-12 Committee has introduced the concept of the 1 penny sales tax designated only for education. Senator Gary Siplin is the Vice Chair of this committee. Please write to these two men and encourage them to forge a solution to this extraordinary funding crisis. Please urge them to keep the word "public" in all references to education when writing this new bill. This is a very important point to make.

Senator Stephen R. Wise

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Senator Gary Siplin

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Dear Senate President Atwater and House Speaker Cretul,

You and your colleagues are facing a daunting task with our state budget. I have lived in Florida all of my life and I cannot remember a time that we faced a challenge as difficult as this. I am also a school administrator who has worked in the public school system for 18 years and I believe in accountability and high expectations for our students. More importantly, however, is that I am a parent of three children in the public school system. You have heard from thousands of people asking you to support education. You continue to hear ideas and suggestions as to what to do. I too want adequately funded schools, but I am looking at this whole issue from a unique perspective. I am a Republican who has become disenchanted with the leadership and credibility within my own party.

My party decries the stimulus package. They complain that portions of the bill will require them to fund projects or services long after the money runs out in 18 months. That is not fiscally responsible they claim. Really? My party routinely does the exact same thing to public education or they blindly turn their heads. We have a physical education mandate with no funds to carry it out. High schools are required to offer majors to prepare them for college. Where are those funds to support the majors that are supposed to be offered? The largest unfunded mandate deals with No Child Left Behind. You are writing waivers to get out of having to fund education at the level it was 3 years ago; yet, you sit quietly and do not complain about a federal mandate that imposes all types of requirements and paperwork and has no extra funds to support it. My party defends their actions by saying it is about raising standards. However, when my party does not like something, they call it government interference. I call it hypocrisy.

My party continues to profess that we all need to tighten our belts during these tough economic times and we all need to sacrifice some. Really? This from my party who feels those who breed fish need a tax break? For anyone who uses hospital physical fitness facilities, my party will save you from paying taxes on those fees also. My party will even protect critically important bottled water from sales tax. When I was a kid, a glass of water was good enough. I guess now my party considers bottled water a necessity of life. Faucet industry – you missed an excellent opportunity.

I have heard repeatedly that my Republican legislators are working hard to maintain and create a “world class education” for our students. Really? We consistently rank toward the bottom of per pupil spending, yet my party loves to tout our “high” ranking for achievement. The claim is it shows a smart use of money. Are we at the top of the list? Of course not. Are we close to the top? No, sorry. My party is not concerned with being the best. They simply settle with not being last and call it success. They will rush to offer tax incentives to lure a corporation who can bring prestige to the state, yet they will settle for mediocrity in their funding and commitment to public education. They climb all over themselves to provide tax breaks to companies that threaten to leave our state because my party believes maintaining a quality business atmosphere is critical, yet are willing to let thousands of teaching positions be eliminated and call it a difficult reality we must face. Really? I think the only reality my party must face is that they have lost the will to lead with credible ideas that actually solve problems anymore.

This state is facing a financial crisis that has never been seen in my lifetime. Tough decisions have to be made. Waste at all levels of business, public and private, should be ferreted out and eliminated. Unfunded mandates need to be repealed immediately. All funds allocated to education need maximum flexibility. Nevertheless, this crisis goes far beyond that. What I am looking for is someone in my party to stand up and lead. Our children should not be used as pawns while others maneuver for a senate race or future political office. To simply say and do nothing is not acceptable. Your job is to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. They should not require a lobbyist to protect their interests. That is YOUR job. Are you a party of public servants or a simply a party of politicians? Think wisely before you answer. Your actions will give everyone an answer, even to your opponents in the next election.

Rob Bixler, Principal

Westbrooke Elementary

## Governor Crist's Education Plan Disappointing

I just watched the local news in Orlando interview Charlie Crist and heard him tell the world that he would fund our education system through stimulus money until the economy comes back, and then we will fund education 'the way we always have'. When the interviewer questioned whether the way we fund education was really working, Mr. Crist said 'apparently it is' working, 'au contraire'...

How can any objective view, based on any travel outside the State of Florida, actually assert that our system of funding education 'works'? Florida consistently ranks in the national bottom 20% in funding per student (frequently dead last) and does not rank well in national student performance averages. I do not believe that we have tax structures that are on par with other national averages. In an effort by some to reduce taxes at all costs, the burden of paying for the present is consistently shifted to the future, in a misrepresented assertion that a couple hundred dollar savings on my annual taxes are actually going to change my financial situation and help the overall economy. In truth, quality schools are foundational to any statewide economic development strategy, and the well known mediocre public education record in Florida has been an Achilles Heel to business recruitment efforts for decades.

In times of economic stress, society is best served by assurance that the foundational systems of community are not threatened. Education is fundamental to this community support and social stability mission. Damage to the quality of our education system, and the support functions it provides such as special needs and gifted education, athletics, arts / cultural programs, physical education and after school programs are paramount to the health, safety and welfare of our communities today and the development of high quality, well rounded leaders for the future. The best thing that legislators can do for me and my family in a tough 2009 economy is to protect the schools that my kids use every day of the week, and for multiple activities during the mornings, evenings and weekends.

It is absolutely mind boggling to watch the cavalier nature in which many of our elected officials discuss the education issues facing our State and County. The nature and motivations behind recent tax

cuts (which I believe were entirely self-serving quests for state and national headlines by certain political figures) is equally disappointing and was executed with little concern about the long term consequences.

Here's a headline for them: Save Our Homes, Sink Our Schools.

Pete Sechler

Voter. Orlando, Florida

Thank you for your e-mail regarding education funding. Please know that I appreciate your hard work on behalf of our students, and that I welcome the opportunity to learn of your thoughts on this important issue.

Florida is currently experiencing a period of unprecedented economic downturn, and since the state's general revenue is derived mostly from sales tax, corporate income tax and documentary stamp taxes, when Floridians spend less, the state takes in less money. Due to the constitutional mandate that we balance the budget, the Florida Legislature recently held a special session to address the estimated \$2.3 billion shortfall in the current fiscal year's budget through a combination of spending reductions and trust fund transfers.

In order to responsibly balance the state budget, we were forced to make difficult choices and set priorities with our state's limited dollars. Ensuring that Florida's students receive a world class education is one of the highest priorities for the Florida Legislature; however, as education funding makes up thirty-two percent of Florida's total budget for the current fiscal year and fifty percent of general revenue expenditures, it was impossible to balance the budget without making some reductions to education funding.

Please know that I recognize the difficult times that we are currently facing and the impacts these decisions are having on people throughout our state. Be assured that I will keep your concerns and suggestions for additional revenue sources in mind as we continue to carefully consider every available option to provide essential programs in a fiscally prudent way.

Again, thank you for writing to me. If I may be of assistance to you in the future, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely, Larry Cretul, Speaker

Dear Speaker,

You had to be smiling when you wrote something like this in a response to a high school principal:

"Ensuring that Florida's students receive a world class education is one of the highest priorities for the Florida Legislature"

Please tell me you are not writing this with a straight face, so that I know "a world class education is one of the highest priorities" could not be what you meant. That would be patronizing and demeaning to me. I am sure this is a form letter response for those who have not been in the trenches trying to make it work with inadequate funding long before the current financial woes. This must be meant for those who are clueless on just how low a priority education has been in the legislature for years, when it comes to adequate funding.

The good news is that while you sit there with what must be a misinformed view of public education and an obvious disconnect to what it is really like out here, we will continue to climb the mountain before us, regardless of what you take from us and from our children. We will succeed in spite of you, not because of you. Then one day this generation, who will struggle through these times, will make the right decisions so that their children do not suffer as they did. I hope you find peace in the statement "to provide essential programs in a fiscally prudent way." Being the weakest funded school system in the United States seems to go far beyond "prudent" in my book, but it apparently meets your definition. Still we voted you in, so we are responsible. Hopefully we will reshape this future generation to make better choices than we have been able to make ourselves these past several years.

I do thank you for your response, regardless of how disappointed I was with its content.

Sincerely, Michael D. Armbruster

Principal, Ocoee High School