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Alva Political Candidate Forum Answers to School Board Questions

Arnold Gibbs District 1

1. I believe that the class size amendment was a failed attempt to rectify the problem of some classes having too many students, thereby detracting from the effectiveness of many teachers in their effort to maximize teaching strategies. What came out of Tallahassee was not what was proposed by the teachers who were seeking the relief from oversized classes. Since its passage, legislators have come to grips with the fact that the dictates of the amendment are unworkable. I support any effort to facilitate the enhancement of teacher effectiveness in the classroom and, thus far, the proposed initiative which is set to be on the ballot in November will repeal the amendment and is a step in the right direction.
2. I am of the opinion that reading, writing, and arithmetic should be included in middle and high school and every student should be required to take the courses until they are able to perform at their grade level. It is senseless to require these students to take higher level classes when they haven't mastered the basics. If a student is lacking in reading skills, it is highly improbable that the student will excel in higher level courses, because they won't be able to comprehend what is in the textbooks, or they will struggle with comprehension of the material in the textbooks and fall behind. I have actually had students in my classes at Edison State College who are incapable of comprehending the material in textbooks and can't write a decent short essay; they have been pushed through the system without having ever mastered the basics – reading, writing, and arithmetic, and it is the fault of the system which requires them to take higher level classes because they are in a higher grade.

Tom Scott District 5

Alva candidate forum questions -

1. Your position and reasoning on the Class Size Amendment. Should it be repealed?

As an educator myself, I've taught classes of all sizes – from 10 students in a smaller room to hundreds in an auditorium. I know the results are often more positive when class sizes are reduced, but in our current economic situation this amendment would bankrupt the system. We must allow more control over class size to be held at the district level and repeal this amendment at this time.

2. Instructional reading classes for middle and high school levels?

According to Richard Itzen, Lee's Director of Accountability, Research, and Continuous Improvement, reading has only been taught in high school for the past four years. If we're doing that now in our county, the results aren't showing much of an increase yet. Some of our middle schools have book clubs that help get that age group excited about reading and hone this skill. These are often run by teachers who "give" of their free time. As for high school, the basics of reading should be well-established for each student, but additional work on context, comprehension, and critical thinking would be valuable. Reading courses for students with English as a second language should always be available. For students with exceptional reading ability, electives like speed reading would assist those who plan to attend a university and want to earn an advanced degree at some point. So yes, the more reading instruction we offer, the better it is for everyone.

Steven Teuber District 4

(see below)

WHAT IS YOUR POSITION AND REASONING ON THE CLASS SIZE AMENDMENT? SHOULD IT BE REPEALED?

In 2002, Florida voters statewide approved a class size amendment (Amendment 9) aimed at reducing the number of students per classroom. Proponents said it would improve instruction and learning. Opponents questioned the potential cost. Voters in Lee County overwhelming voted against it but the five largest South Florida districts touted the idea of lower class sizes and passed the amendment. Everyone close to the issue knew that it had the potential to bankrupt the state.

Section 1 of Article IX of the State Constitution was subsequently amended in November 2002 establishing, by the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year, that the maximum number of students in core-curricula courses assigned to a teacher in each of the following three grade groupings:

- (1) Prekindergarten through grade 3, 18 students;
- (2) grades 4 through 8, 22 students; and
- (3) grades 9 through 12, 25 students.

The Legislature enacted SB-30A specifically implementing the reduction of the average number of students in each classroom by at least two-students-per-year beginning with the 2003-2004 fiscal year until the maximum number of students per classroom does not exceed the 2010-2011 maximum.

If a district's class size does not meet the required maximum, the district must reduce to the constitutional maximum in each of the three grade groupings or the average number of students in each of the three grade groupings by at least two-students-per-year as follows:

2003-2004, 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 at the district level
2006-2007 - 2008-2009 at the school level

The 2009 Legislature extended the calculation at the school level for an additional year to 2009-10. Therefore, beginning with the 2010-2011 school year, districts must be in compliance at the classroom level. That means if a core class goes even one student over the specified number, a new teacher must be hired. School districts have to meet the new class size rule when schools open in the fall or face financial penalties from the state. Districts that fail to meet the new standards lose their operating funds from the Florida Education Finance Program, which is based on the number of full-time (FTE) students enrolled. In fact, when a district fails to meet the requirements and then present a plan to correct the problem, the state will only give them back 75 percent of the allocation. The other 25 percent is kept and put into a fund that is then redistributed to districts already meeting the plan.

Where the "rubber meets the road" in this philosophical debate couldn't come at a worse time as many districts are struggling following four years of funding cuts by the state. Property values are way down. In Lee County over the past two years property values have dropped about 50 percent and that's meant a corresponding drop in tax revenue. To get needed funding, the district needs a 96 percent collection rate, something the district doesn't expect to happen. On top of that, federal stimulus funding is running out. The Florida Department of Education estimated in early 2010 that 2,769 schools statewide still would not be able to comply. According to the Department of Education 33% of pre-kindergarten classes didn't meet the cap

in Fall 2009. Additionally, 30% of middle schools and 38% of high schools didn't meet the requirement that same year.

According to reports, from 2003 till early 2010, the state has spent approximately \$15.8 billion in order to help reduce class sizes throughout the state. The Florida Department of Education reports that an additional \$350 million is needed to meet class-size caps - including more classroom space and teachers. This cost takes into account cuts to health, education and other state programs in order to eliminate a looming \$3.2 billion state budget shortfall. To further exacerbate the funding issue, the oil spill in the Gulf and what that will mean for Florida's tourism industry and the sales taxes it generates is yet to be calculated in the revenue forecasts for next year's budget. All this money and there has been no proof that the smaller class sizes had any discernible effect on education.

In fact, in May 2010 Harvard University released a study that revealed that Florida's 2002 class size amendment has had "no discernible effect on student achievement." It is the first study to look at its effects on class-size reduction in Florida. According to reports the study used data from the Florida Department of Education and was conducted by Harvard research fellow Matt Chingos. Specifically Chingos looked at the impact of smaller class sizes on grades 4-8 through 2007. Chingos concluded that for the amount of money the state of Florida spent on reducing class sizes it had "no greater or lesser effect on academic performance than allowing schools to spend similar pots of money as they see fit."

While it is agreed by all concerned that some type of caps are useful, the current laws that were drafted to conform the Constitutional Amendment provided no flexibility and, as a result, needed to be changed. Florida voters will get the opportunity in November to reconsider the 2002 class size amendment, by what has been presented as Amendment 8. Basically, Amendment 8 is a referendum, that requires approval by 60 percent of the entire voters statewide to pass. It would essentially freeze the class size amendment at the school average rather than going to the "door to door" counting method as well as increase the maximum class size limit by three students in pre-k through third grade and five in other grades.

If the Amendment fails, the impact on all the School Districts will be dramatic, particularly ones like Collier that uses boundary (neighborhood schools). They will live in constant fear of the 19th student showing up in a neighborhood and that causing either disruption (causing certain students to be bused or portables be placed on sight), or a lawsuit. However all districts will face the serious reality in regards to art, music, and other non-core subject courses. Since the class size amendment only applies to core course - English, math, science and social studies (including some foreign languages), it does not help reduce pupil numbers in electives, dual enrollment or academy classes. That includes everything from performing arts classes to physical education to medical training courses. Therefore, if money is needed to comply with the Florida statute (e.g., the amendment does not pass), many of the elective classes and non-core activities will cease to exist. There will not be enough money to fund a lot of these electives. The cost of providing additional teachers for core classes plus associated costs for classroom start-up could eat up the money now funding those electives.

SHOULD INSTRUCTIONAL READING CLASSES BE INCLUDED AT THE MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL LEVELS?

The more important questions that relates to reading is how to make reading relevant to our children by engaging them in that activity and in core subjects. Infusing math and reading into other subjects such as social studies and science is critical to improve these basic skills. More importantly, we need to break out of the accepted teaching paradigm and show our students that those subjects permeate every subject and everything they do. When you can show students the importance and applicability of these two abstract concepts, interest in these subjects and overall improvements in those subject matters scores will be realized. It is proven that more effort is exerted on subjects that engage a student and that has relevance in current activities and areas of involvement. Our academic plan needs to build upon that by emphasizing the math and reading aspects in the important areas of our student's lives.

Mary Fisher District 1

Hello Ruby,

Although I was unable to attend the Forum since I was in New York due to family illness, I would like to submit my response to the two questions you sent to me.

1.) I Class Size amendment:

Regarding class size amendment, I do believe that there would be a benefit to relaxing the requirements at the upper levels, however, in the primary grades, smaller classes should be maintained. There is a concern, however, about the way the "average" number of students might be interpreted, so care must be taken to study the proposal before voting in November.

2.) Instructional reading at middle and high school:

Unfortunately, we do have considerable numbers of children who are not able to read and comprehend adequately at 'grade level'. For many of these students, significant gains have been made through formalized reading instruction at the middle and high school levels. I believe that we should continue with instructional reading classes for students with needs along with teaching reading strategies across content areas.

Respectfully submitted,

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