

# Guest opinion: Our children and our community above politics

The Greater Naples Chamber works every day to help build and maintain a great community with a great economy. One of the most important aspects of a community is its schools. Great schools attract (and develop!) great citizens. And, fortunately, we have a high-performing public school system.

For the 2021-22 school year, Collier County Public Schools (CCPS) students and staff once again earned an "A" rating, continuing a successful "A" streak dating back to 2017. Additionally, the district's graduation rate has improved to 92.7% in 2021 from 72.5% in 2011, a 20.2 percentage point increase.

If we want to maintain that quality of public education, we need to have a dedicated and knowledgeable school board – a board whose priorities are focused on high-quality education for our children.

Three school board seats are up for voter consideration in November. With a five-member school board, three members will control the votes, the direction, and the quality of public education in Collier County.

In Florida, local school board elections are nonpartisan. That's in our state's



constitution. The framers felt that child education and welfare needed to be above politics.

Unfortunately, in the upcoming CCPS school board elections, three very partisan challengers are seeking to turn our public schools into a platform for their political beliefs. And to get there, they are playing fast and loose with politics verses facts.

**Politics:** 40% of Collier Public School students cannot read or do math at grade level.



**Fact:** Our district is ranked #5 among all 67 districts in the state of Florida for fourth grade student performance.

Claiming 40% of all students cannot read or do math is simply not accurate. Florida has extremely high standards, as evidenced by our state's performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, where Florida is ranked #4 in math and #6 in English Language Arts (ELA) nationally.

In Collier County Public Schools, 54% of students come from homes where English is not the primary language, and approximately 15% of the students are English Language Learners, some students simply may not have fully developed the vocabulary and command of the English language to demonstrate full proficiency. For those students, intensive support is provided, and, in fact, most of our students from homes where English is not the primary language successfully graduate and pursue post-secondary

education.

**Politics:** Collier County schools are teaching critical race theory.

**Fact:** They are not.

During a brief time in 2020, following the death of George Floyd and in response to national and local dialogue regarding perceptions around the many facets of diversity, a book discussing racial awareness was used in training for administrators and a select group of school leaders. The choice of the book was not based on supporting critical race theory, but to understand the national race discussion and its impacts on education. The current school board ended its usage when staff felt they better understood the dialogue regarding perceptions around the diversity conversation. This is another fact.

In June 2021, the school board issued a notice informing our community that "the School Board and the Superintendent do not support the teaching of Critical Race Theory ("CRT") in its classrooms, and CRT is not and will not be part of the district curriculum and teaching and learning framework."

**Politics:** CCPS allows sexually explicit and age inappropriate materials in school media centers.

**Fact:** Our school district continues to ensure that all students have access to a variety of learning resources and opportunities, not only to increase student achievement, but to promote career, and life readiness as well as college opportunities.

All media centers provide developmentally appropriate, highly engaging, and standards-based materials for students. To ensure that parents retain ultimate control over what their child is reading from the media center, the

district provides parents directions for accessing the online system to view books checked out by their child(ren). They also have advisory notices in the electronic circulation system informing parents about books flagged as “of concern” by some community members.

**Politics:** LGBTQ and transgender materials are being presented to encourage gender dysphoria.

**Fact:** Fortunately, our school district strives to educate all children in a nurturing, supportive environment.

The current school board has not adopted any policies, administrative procedures or practices promoting gender dysphoria. They have taken the Parent Bill of Rights seriously and have incorporated it into policy, along with training district administrators and staff. Additionally, Collier County Public School administration requires instruction aligned with Florida Standards and provides instructional materials and curriculum guides aligned with those standards.

**More facts:** CCPS is one of only five districts statewide who have been “A” rated since 2017. Plus, CCPS schools have outperformed the state average in all twenty-one tested areas, positioning our district’s schools as some of the best in the state.

Moreover, CCPS is on track to be debt free in 2026. The district is also in position to pay cash for their new high school, saving taxpayers over \$41 million in interest payments by not taking out a loan for the construction. Moreover, while over twenty other school districts in Florida went before the voters to request a tax increase, our school board proposed a tax neutral referendum instead of a tax increase.

We urge all voters to be informed. It makes no sense to try to fix something

that is not broken. Worse, why try to fix something that is running so well.

Be informed. Know the issues and get the facts. Go to the candidates' websites and review their platforms. Above all, vote! Our community is counting on your vote to maintain academic excellence and dedicated leadership to best serve our children and community.

*Michael Dalby is the president and CEO of the Greater Naples Chamber.*