



January 16, 2008

## What the property tax vote means for you and our schools

### *A special message from Superintendent Dan Boyd*

If you are a registered voter in Alachua County, January 29 will be a very important day. That's the day you will have an opportunity to cast your ballot on an issue that will affect our schools and the quality of life in our community and throughout Florida for years to come. That issue is the statewide property tax referendum.

The Florida Legislature is putting before the voters a constitutional amendment that would reduce property taxes. Some people may be under the impression that schools would be exempt from any changes, but the fact is that two of the four tax-cutting proposals on the ballot would have a significant impact on public schools. As Superintendent, I feel I have a responsibility to share information about that impact with our employees.

One of the proposals would allow homeowners to take their current property tax value savings under the Save Our Homes program and apply them to the taxable value of a new home, up to half a million dollars. (The Save Our Homes program limits the amount by which a property's taxable value can increase each year.) Statewide it's projected that this would result in a loss of about \$84 million for schools next year and nearly \$1.2 *billion* over the next five years. Then there's the proposed \$25,000 exemption on equipment used by businesses. It's expected this would cost Florida schools about \$77.5 million next year and \$402 million over the next five years.

What about the impact on Alachua County Public Schools? We're estimating that our school system would lose more than \$17 million over the next five years in both operating and facilities funding if this amendment passes. That would be a significant financial blow to our district at a time when the cost of so many necessities—energy, insurance, etc.—is rising rapidly. It would also have an impact on salaries and jobs. With more than 80% of our operating budget going toward salaries and benefits, it's obvious that a major budget shortfall is going to negatively affect both employees and students. The state is already facing a budget crisis that is expected to grow next year. This initiative is likely to make a bad situation even worse.

Many people aren't aware that under Florida's current educational funding system, most of their school property tax rate is actually set by the state legislature, not the school board. Here's how it works. Each year lawmakers decide how much money they will allocate per student. **They** set the property tax rate that each local school board must levy in order to receive state funding. The state then makes up the difference between the money collected through that local property tax and the overall student allocation.

If less money is collected locally, where will the state get the extra money needed to make up the difference? Will it cut per pupil funding, which is already more than \$1500 below the national average? We don't know the answers to those questions.

We do know that some cities and counties are already considering the possibility of raising fees for certain services to make up some of the anticipated shortfall, which means you could actually be spending more money out of pocket. And keep in mind that homeowners get a break on their federal taxes based on how much they pay in property taxes. Fees charged for services once supported through property taxes would not be tax deductible. That's another impact on homeowners' wallets that hasn't been well-publicized.

For years the School Board has asked lawmakers to adopt changes to the state's tax structure that will ensure a fair and stable funding system. We certainly recognize the need for meaningful tax reform in Florida. The question for voters is whether or not this initiative meets that need.

I encourage you to learn all you can about this proposal and consider its long term impact on your finances, your family, our schools and the quality of life in our community. Share that information with your co-workers and friends. And most importantly, go to the polls January 29 armed with **all** the information you'll need to make this very important decision.

# Finalists selected for 2008 Teacher Recognition Program

Three local teachers, two of them classroom veterans and another who entered public education more recently, have been selected as finalists in the 2008 Alachua County Teacher Recognition program.

Petrina Leggon, Jane McMullen and Janine Plavac were selected by a group of previous Alachua County teachers of the year as the finalists for this year's program in the elementary, middle and high school categories. In just a few weeks, one of them will be selected as the district's overall Teacher of the Year and Alachua County's representative to the statewide Teacher of the Year program.



Leggon is in her ninth year as a teacher at Williams Elementary School, where she teaches a multi-age classroom of first- and second-graders. With her trusty puppet Wally often helping with her lessons, Leggon says that working with children and encouraging them to be the best they can be makes her very happy.

"I want to inspire children to learn," she said. "I feel like I'm contributing to the world by encouraging students to be lifelong learners and to believe that they can be somebody."

McMullen works with special needs students at Kanapaha Middle School. She's been an exceptional education teacher for more than thirty years, and says she wants her students to know that they can learn and that they have the capacity to do something important with their lives.

"Every day we're learning new things," she said. "I want the students to recognize that when you're learning it gives you new ideas about what you want to do, how to live in the world and how to relate to other people."



Although Janine Plavac has been teaching for less than five years, she says that educating others was a big part of her job as a nurse, which was her profession for more than 30 years. Now she is sharing her expertise and experiences with students in Gainesville High School's Academy of Health Professions.

"I want them to be the best health care professionals they can possibly be," she said. "If I can give them my compassion and my passion and my desire to succeed in this field, then I've accomplished my job."



Leggon, McMullen, Plavac and thirty-eight other teachers chosen as Teachers of the Year from each school will be honored at the 16th annual Robert W. Hughes Teacher Recognition Program reception in early February. The teacher selected as Alachua County's Teacher of the Year will go on to represent Alachua County in the Florida Department of Education-Macy's Teacher of the Year Program.