

Sue Legg: Alachua County schools are treading water

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By Sue Legg Special to The Sun

In 2008, the state cut \$14 million from Alachua County schools' operating budget plus millions more from school facilities. Voters approved the One Mill referendum to keep the schools afloat.

This year, the League of Women Voters reviewed the district's needs and found that the district has been treading water. In 2015-16, the district was surprised to find 1,000 new students enrolled. This year 900 new students arrived. Hiring teachers, new transportation costs, additional behavioral resource teachers and urgent facility maintenance accounted for all of the year's increase in state funding.

Enrollment is increasing rapidly and schools are aging drastically. The state Legislature is still playing catch up on education funding. It needs to do better.

Elementary schools are bursting at the seams: Only six schools, all located in rural or low-income neighborhoods, have some space for students. All others are above capacity. Two hundred and fifty relocatable classrooms are parked at K-12 schools. Finding teachers to staff them is a growing concern.

One month after school opened this fall, Alachua County still had 20 teacher vacancies. Low salaries are only part of the problem. Nationwide people are leaving the profession. Declining enrollments at the University of Florida College of Education make the county's pool of new teachers smaller. Even worse, experienced teachers leave due to the state's constant focus on testing rather than on instruction.

Students need more time to learn: Ten years ago, Alachua County schools lost the seven-period day and summer school. The impact on instruction is significant. The state now supports an extra hour for reading at only five of our schools.

Most schools cannot afford the cost to extend the school day. Thus, during the regular school hours, Title I federal funds provide extra reading instruction for 624 low-performing students in 20 schools and extra math instruction for 114 students in four schools. To participate, students either miss physical education/art/music, or science or social studies.

Even worse, perhaps, is that these children tend to lose their reading gains over the summer. In addition, there is a need for blocks of time, rather than 50-minute classes to expand career certification programs. Simply finding adequate space is a challenge.

Alachua County schools need repair: More than 20 years ago, Alachua County passed a bond to build and remodel schools. Since then, the state Legislature reduced the facility funding districts were allowed to raise. The result was, as a staff member said, each year they just patch the roofs and fix the air conditioners. This fall, for example, 300 air conditioners had to be repaired.

A new elementary school, modern middle and high school science areas, adequately sized food service rooms at Santa Fe High, Idylwild and Terwilliger elementaries (where lunch begins at 9:30 am), and replacing portable classrooms with permanent construction have all been passed by. It is time for action.

Let's make our priorities known: Alachua County can be proud but not complacent about its public schools. Due to the One Mill, the quality of our arts, magnet and certification programs is obvious. The energy from research-based instruction at the Duval Learning Center and Rawlings school for the arts is palpable.

The One Mill matters to students. An Eastside High student has been named to the All-National Honor Ensembles Mixed Choir. A Buchholz student will perform with the U.S. Army's All American Marching Band in January. The Gainesville High band took the overall championship, and the Santa Fe High band took third place overall in the Florida Marching Band Coalition's Central Florida Marching Arts Invitational.

Funding schools is a responsibility shared with the state. Supporting the One Mill demonstrates that our community is doing its part.

Some citizens believe that lottery money fills the gap, but its funds primarily support the Bright Futures Scholarships to colleges and universities. It does little to help K-12 schools.

The League and our community must urge our legislators to do their part to keep our schools afloat.

— *Sue Legg is president of the Alachua County League of Women Voters.*