

The Florida Times-Union

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\$2



THE LONG PATH TO RECOVERY

Mandarin volleyball star battles back after near-fatal car crash
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HURRICANE DAMAGE BILL: \$1.59 BILLION

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VISIT FLORIDA CEO TO RESIGN IN PITBULL FLAP

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Duval's graduation rate again improves

High school graduation jumps 2.2 percentage points in county

By Tessa Duvall & Amanda Williamson
The Times-Union

High school graduation rates in Northeast Florida counties include some of the highest in the state — and one of the lowest.

Statewide, 80.7 percent of high school students graduated in 2015-16, according to rates released Friday by the Florida Department of Education, a 2.8-percentage-point improvement over last year.

Duval County schools, Northeast Florida's largest district, increased its rate over last year by 2.2 percentage points and had a 78.8-percent graduation rate. That's an increase of more than 11 percentage points in the last four years, and ranks Duval County as one of the most improved among the state's seven largest school districts.

"We have seen graduation rates improve across the country, but we are outpacing that improvement by far," said Superintendent Nikolai Vitti in a Friday afternoon news

RATE continues on A-4

'WE FELT LIKE GOD LED US TO HER'

Isabella Bunso is one of 18 boys and girls to have new homes for the holidays after annual Jacksonville adoption ceremony



Newly adopted 16-month-old Isabella Bunso (center) receives a stocking while her new brother Noah Bunso, 2, and new mom, Danae Bunso, look on during the "Home for the Holidays" adoption ceremony Friday in Judge David Gooding's courtroom at the Duval County Courthouse. (Photos by Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union)

By Dan Scanlan
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The judge in his black robe in front of her didn't faze 16-month-old Isabella Bunso, and neither did a Duval County courtroom behind her half-filled with family and friends Friday morning.

No, the little girl in the red dress only had eyes for the twinkling Christmas lights and big red bow hung in front of Judge David Gooding, even as he made Danae and Chris Bunso her official parents.

"The best foster care system in the world isn't as good as a permanent family, so thank you for being the ones," Gooding said before declaring the adoption final, and Isabella joining in on the applause.

"We want to adopt Isabella because we felt like God led her to us," Chris Bunso said of the little girl, who came to them as a 3-day-old foster child. They already have four children.

HOME continues on A-4



Adrianna Byrne (from left), 11 months, waves as she and her new parents Karen and Frank Byrne stand before Judge David Gooding. Adrianna was the couple's granddaughter, and they adopted her.



Pension fund will try to help city

\$44 million increase in pension spending due next year squeezing city

By David Bauerlein
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The Police and Fire Pension Fund will explore options for softening the blow of a sky-rocketing \$44 million increase in the city's pension costs next year, possibly by phasing in the escalating expense so the first-year bump would be limited to \$18 million.

Rising pension costs have repeatedly rocked the city's budget. State-mandated contributions to the Police and Fire Pension Fund have gone from \$70 million in 2012 to almost \$159 million this year. The prospect of a \$44 million hike would tighten a chokehold on city spending in a host of other areas, ranging from employee pay raises to neighborhood improvements.

The Police and Fire Pension Fund board unanimously voted Friday to get feedback from state regulators in advance of a January workshop. The fund will invite Mayor Lenny Curry to attend that meeting.

Curry has leveled harsh criticism at the pension fund, most recently this month after a draft actuarial report showed the city's contribution in the 2017-18 fiscal year would be \$202.6 million compared to \$158.7 million this year.

Pension fund board Chairman Richard Tuten said he wants to get everybody on the same page by inviting Curry, City Council Finance Committee Chairwoman Anna Brosche, and the city's top finance administrators to join the board in its discussions.

"What I want to make sure of is that if there is a question in the future, we were all here, we all talked about it, there is no miscommunication, there is no misunderstanding, there is no wiggle room when it comes to this," Tuten said.

City law requires adoption of the actuarial report by Jan. 31 so city officials will have plenty of time to plan for the next budget that starts Oct. 1, 2017.

The actuarial report could become moot, however, if the city and unions can complete collective bargaining on terms that let the city take advantage of a half-cent sales tax for

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80 Today's high

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DAILY DEAL!

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PENSION

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pension costs that Duval County voters backed in an August referendum. But collective bargaining talks are shaping up to be a long grind over Curry's attempt to stop offering pensions to all new hires, adding more uncertainty about what the city's pension costs will be next year.

In regard to the \$43.9 million increase in the draft actuarial report, Police and Fire Pension Fund Executive Director Tim Johnson will sound out the Florida Division of Retirement on a possible three-year schedule that would increase the city's cost by \$18 million in 2017-18, then \$31 million the following year, and finally the full \$43.9 million the third year.

During the Friday meeting, board members pointedly noted the empty chair usually occupied by City Treasurer Joey Greive. Tuten questioned whether Greive's absence means city officials don't want to work with the pension fund, which is an independent agency.

"If we go into next month's meeting and we're trying to sort this out and no one from the city shows up again, besides the appearance of being a little disrespectful and not on the up and up, it makes it hard to get things done as a board," Tuten said after the meeting.

City spokeswoman Marcia Oliver said Greive didn't attend Friday's session because he was tied up with matters involving the Federal Emergency Management Administration and the city's disaster response costs for Hurricane Matthew. Oliver said Paul Barrett, an investment officer on the city's finance team, attended the meeting at Greive's request to report back on the discussion.

The higher cost in the draft actuarial report stems mainly from financial assumptions about future payroll growth, which is one of many numbers plugged into calculations that determine the city's contribution amount each year.

The pension fund says state regulators have given waivers for determining the rate of future payroll growth, and those waivers kept the city's pension cost from rising even more in recent years. But the waiver is ending so the city's cost will rise sharply next year. Curry has said the pension fund didn't follow state law in how it did previous actuarial reports, an assertion the pension fund rejects.



Marian Respass-Conley (center) holds grandson Stephon Conley, age 8 months, while her son Bilal Conley (left), 18, plays with new sister Jordan, 2, and son Khalid Conley, 17, plays with new brother Trevon, 1, during Judge David Gooding's "Home for the Holidays" adoption ceremony Friday. (Photos by Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union)



Judge David Gooding talks with a family during his "Home for the Holidays" adoption ceremony.



Zena Gainer (left) poses with her newly adopted son Clinton, 18. Eighteen children were adopted by 12 families during the ceremony.

HOME

Continued from A-1

"After this, she gets to call me Dad," he said.

"We are just so grateful to be here today and complete this journey and we couldn't do it without all these people, and people who couldn't make it today," added Danae Bunso.

They weren't the only ones in the ceremonial courtroom Friday. With ribbons, garlands and multi-colored balloons in abundance, Gooding hosted his annual "Home for the Holidays" ceremony to give 18 children permanent homes among 12 families.

One new mother is Zena Gainer, who has two adult children of her own. She met

18-year-old Clinton Gainer as a foster child in late October and just knew she wanted him as her new son.

"He had been burnt a couple of times, but he decided that he'd meet me and it just went from there," said the single mother and city employee.

"I needed this in my life because I want a family. I have always wanted family and I didn't have a father who cared," added Clinton, decked out in pink tie and gray suit.

Gooding handles foster care, delinquents and adoption cases, estimating that he does up to 300 adoptions each year one by one. He came up with the bigger event in 2005, annually packing the courtroom with children and their fu-

ture families a week before Christmas. Watch the video of Friday's event here.

"We want the community to share the celebration of family and children," Gooding said. "Our families are the greatest people in the world. They open their hearts and homes to children at the time they need it."

Staff from Family Support Services of North Florida, which handles foster care and adoption programs in Duval and Nassau counties, joined guardian ad litem volunteers who protect children's rights in legal cases in the packed courtroom. Also there were Frank and Karen Byrne, holding 11-month-old granddaughter Adrianna. When their biological

daughter couldn't take care of her baby, born premature, they began looking into becoming her parents.

"We visited her often and fell in love with her, and it was leaning toward that she would spend more and more time with us," Frank Byrne said.

Gooding left the bench after each child was adopted to pose for a family photo, saying it "just gets better and better" after meeting one big new family.

Gooding said his annual Christmas adoption ceremony prompts more people to look into adoption, foster care and volunteering with the guardian ad litem office. And most seem to have a good life.

"I can't say that they

FIND OUT MORE

- Family Support Services of North Florida – fssjax.org
- Guardian ad litem of Florida – (904) 255-8440

WATCH THE EVENT

To see video of the adoption event, go to youtu.be/8vQ4CjnnMec.

always come out with a happy ending. It doesn't always work that way," he said. "... But I can tell you that we are all better off because of it."

Each adoptive parent received Christmas gifts and a stuffed stocking for the child.

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RATE

Continued from A-1

conference. "Across all of our schools ... 20 out of 21 schools improved. The only school that didn't improve was Paxon, which is at 99.4 percent."

In the last four years, the graduation gap between the district and the state has narrowed from 7 percentage points to 1.9 percentage points. What this shows is that Duval County not only has a greater percentage of graduates, but also more graduates each year, Vitti said.

For the second year in a row, local African-American graduation rates continue to be the highest among the seven largest urban districts in Florida. This year saw an increase of 4.1 percentage points, capping a 12.9-percentage point increase since the 2011-12 school year.

Traditional high schools achieved a graduation rate increase of more than 8 percentage points, but Edward White High School saw an increase of 12.9 percentage points and Andrew Jackson an 11.6 percentage-point increase. William Raines High School is the first Duval Transformation Office School to exceed a graduation rate of 90 percent.

Among the high schools

"We have seen graduation rates improve across the country, but we are outpacing that improvement by far."

Nikolai Vitti
Duval Schools Superintendent

with the highest graduation rates in the district were Darnell-Cookman School of the Medical Arts and Stanton High School. Both had a 100-percent graduation rate.

'IT'S HOW YOU FINISH'

In surrounding counties, Nassau County had a 91.4-percent graduation rate, and St. Johns County had a 91.2-percent graduation rate, making them fifth and sixth in the state, respectively, among the countywide districts. Both counties had improvements of less than 1 percentage point over the previous school year.

Kathy Burns, the new Nassau County superintendent of schools, said she's very excited to see an increase in graduation rates, and joked she's glad to see the county has inched above St. Johns.

Burns said Nassau County will continue to work hard to meet the needs of all of its students.

In St. Johns County, Superintendent Joseph Joyner said he's ecstatic about his

district's graduation rate.

"It's something we pay a lot of attention to," he said. "In many ways, it's how you finish and it's very important."

Joyner said the district's philosophy is to never give up on any student, and it has many programs in place to help them stay focused throughout their high school careers. He said he also attributes the success to St. Johns teachers, who he said provide the best quality of instruction he's seen in any district.

Clay County improved by 1 percentage point, from 83.7 percent to 84.7 percent for 2015-16.

Baker County saw its graduation rate fall by 2.4 percentage points to 79.4 percent.

PUTNAM IMPROVES

Putnam County improved 8.7 percentage points to 63.6-percent graduation rate, making it the second-lowest in the state. Only DeSoto County, with 61.6 percent, ranked lower.

Rick Surrency, superin-

tendent of Putnam County School District, said he is "ecstatic" about the progress the district made this year, outpacing the state's rate of improvement.

In June 2015, Putnam hired three graduation coaches and set a goal of a 4-percentage-point improvement per year, Surrency said. To start with a nearly 9-percentage-point increase is a great start, he said. Graduation coaches consistently monitor student performance for warning signs like failing classes or excessive absences, trying to catch problems before they become severe. Surrency said the graduation rate does not necessarily mean students are dropping out; he said the biggest issue is that a failed class causes students to not graduate on-time with their cohorts.

Additionally, Putnam schools are trying to create vocational programs to meet the needs of the local business community, and is looking to team up with Georgia Pacific and Seminole Electric to create programs that lead to employment after graduation.

A job opportunity in the future is very motivating for students, Surrency said.

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GRADUATION RATES

Graduation rates for Duval County public high schools:

School	2014-15	2015-16	Difference
Lee	80.9%	86.0%	+5.1
Jackson	70.3	81.8	+11.6
Baldwin	88.7	91.4	+2.7
Paxon	99.7	99.4	-0.3
Parker	78.5	86.9	+8.4
Englewood	77.5	83.0	+5.5
Ribault	74.9	78.0	+3.1
Anderson	97.9	99.3	+1.4
Cookman	100	100	-
Stanton	99.7	100	+0.3
Raines	87.7	92.0	+4.3
Fletcher	89.9	93.7	+3.9
Wolfson	82.6	89.1	+6.5
Sandalwood	89.6	90.4	+0.9
Westside	86.8	88.7	+1.9
White	67.2	79.8	+12.6
Mandarin	91.9	95.1	+3.2
First Coast	84.9	91.2	+6.3
Atlantic Coast	87.4	89.1	+1.7
Peterson	92.2	92.9	+0.7
Randolph	89.4	90.9	+1.6

RATES BY SCHOOL DISTRICT

County	2014-15	2015-16	Difference
Baker	81.8%	79.4%	-2.4
Duval	76.6	78.8	+2.2
Clay	83.7	84.7	+1.0
Nassau	90.9	91.4	+0.5
Putnam	54.9	63.6	+8.7
St. Johns	90.5	91.2	+0.7