

viewpoint

OPINIONS PAGE BLOG

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Duval makes big progress in graduation rates

point of view

nikolai vittti

There are few indicators that better determine the health of a school district than its graduation rate.

The culminating skill and dedication of thousands of educators and support staff comes together to ensure a student graduates on time. Over the past four years, it is irrefutable that Duval County Public Schools has made tremendous strides in this area.

It recently was announced that for the fourth year in a row, we posted a record high graduation rate of 78.8 percent. This represents a 2.2 percentage point increase over the prior year and an 11 percentage point increase over the past four years.

The gap between the state average and our district has narrowed from 7 percentage points to 1 percentage point over the same time frame.

To be clear, the graduation rate is defined by the federal government and is standardized across the country. This rate

does not count those earning a Certificate of Completion as a graduate. These students are unable to pass state assessment requirements despite completing all course work, which is credence that today's diploma is harder to obtain.

What is particularly unique and inspiring is that all students are graduating at a higher percentage and number. This fact is essential when discussing improvement due to the reality of a historic achievement gap that has negatively defined our district, especially between white and African-American students.

In terms of the graduation rate, that gap has been narrowed from a 10 percentage point gap four years ago to 6 percentage points, and the gap between white and Hispanic students has narrowed from 9 percentage points to 2 percent.

Among the seven largest districts in Florida, including Orlando, Tampa, and Miami, we lead in the percentage of African-American graduates for the second year in a row.

In fact, we have led all of the seven largest districts in the rate of improvement of the overall graduation rate and among each of the major student subgroups.

In the past four years, increases include a 13 percentage point increase for African-American students, 15 percentage points for Hispanic students, 22 percentage points for students with disabilities, 12 percentage points for English language learners, and 15 percentage points for students in poverty.

Students are not only graduating in greater percentages but in total numbers.

In 2011-2012, our district graduated 5,403 students. This year we saw a record number of 6,482 graduates — a near 20 percent increase. In addition, more students are college-ready in reading and mathematics and more are enrolling in college after high school.

College readiness, which is determined through national exams such as the ACT, SAT and the college placement test, ultimately determines whether an incoming

college student is required to take remedial coursework.

Nationally, it is estimated that 60 percent of students must take remediation classes when entering college. This year, 84 percent of our graduates were college-ready in reading and 72 percent in math, respectively, this is an 11 percentage point and a 17 percentage point increase over the last four years. These students started college without remediation classes.

As a community, we need to take the holidays to celebrate this improvement but not declare victory. As a team of committed educators and community partners, led by our school board and me, we are focused on continuing this momentum until a 100 percent graduation rate is achieved.

While that work is seemingly never-ending, we have certainly moved closer to that high expectation.

Nikolai Vittti is superintendent of the Duval County Public Schools.

Military looks for big impact at lower cost

point of view

george will

SAN DIEGO — The military service resists reform.

The next secretary of defense, retired Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis, has the most difficult management challenge in American government.

Technology has the potential to make peace through making deterrent strength less expensive.

He will now rely on companies like General Atomics here, whose business is leveraging technology to produce maximum military impact with minimal costs.

For about \$500,000 in expenditures, the 9/11 attackers did over \$2 trillion in damage to the United States and the world economy. General Atomics'

scientists toil to redress this imbalance with, for example, the Predator and other remotely piloted aircraft.

But they bristle at the word "drone," which they think falsely suggests mindlessness on the part of aircraft that perform three missions — intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance.

Pilotless vehicles can hover for 40 hours over a Middle East target and deliver with Hellfire missiles a munitions payload equal to an F-16's.

The "fast movers" — F-16s and the like — must refuel coming and going from the Gulf, and most have returned to their carriers without expending their ordnance.

A Reaper, another pilotless vehicle, can deliver what an F-35, the most expensive fighter aircraft, can.

Pilotless vehicles, which have logged more than four million flight hours looking, listening and attacking, can discover what the enemy is planning and doing, and can deliver precision strikes with minimal collateral damage.

They could have been an inexpensive and low-risk way of intervening in Syria by enforcing a no-fly, no-movement zone that would have protected President Bashar Assad's enemies and victims.

The Navy is using high-powered electro-magnetic energy to replace steam catapults to launch 80,000-pound aircraft off carriers with less stress on the planes, and hence less maintenance expenses.

Now the Navy is acquiring rail guns that use such energy to fire 15-to-25-pound, 18-inch projectiles at 5,000 miles per hour. They hit with the impact of a train slamming into a wall at 100 miles per hour.

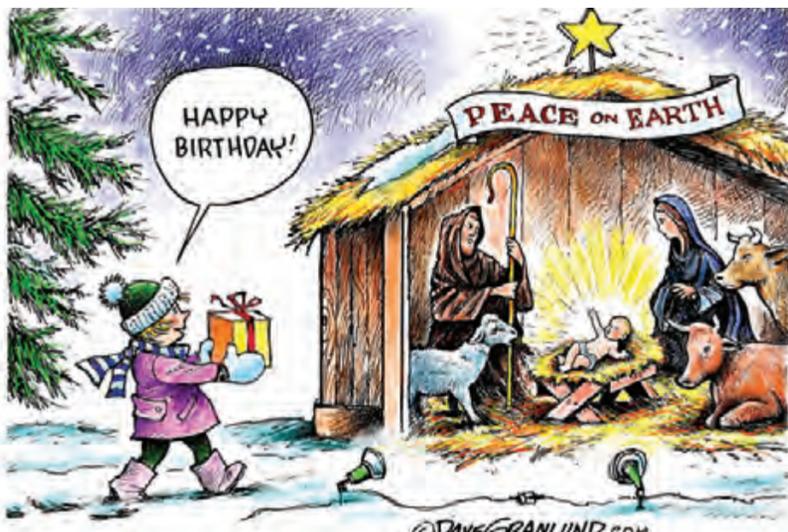
The high-speed, hence high-energy projectiles cost just \$25,000.

New technologies can revolutionize defense against ballistic missiles because small, smart projectiles can be inexpensive. A single 25-pound projectile can dispense over 500 impactors and can destroy expensive missiles and multiple warheads.

Mattis will be trying to take control of the Pentagon, to match slowly developed weapons to rapidly metastasizing threats.

The nation just experienced a raucous presidential campaign during which there was silence about the crisis of the entitlement state — an aging population's pension and health care entitlements swallowing government resources with alarming national security implications. But technology, pursued determinedly, has the potential to make peace through making deterrent strength less expensive.

Dave Granlund Creators Syndicate



Curry's view on pensions

point of view

lenny curry

Unsound assumptions and questionable cost projections expressed in the Dec. 20 column "Curry's pension plan will cost the city much more," fail to address the pension issue comprehensively and demonstrate how taxpayers are left out of the equation.

I believe current employees and retirees under existing pension agreements are owed the benefits they were promised, and I will keep those promises. To do so, I will build on reforms put forth two years ago by the Jacksonville Retirement Reform Task Force.

So the claim I am "rejecting" these policies is wrong.

But it is dishonest for anyone to suggest that those changes alone came close to resolving Jacksonville's staggering pension debt.

As has been well-documented, to fund existing pension agreements requires a source of payment for \$2.8 billion in unfunded pension liability. The half-cent sales tax extension that voters overwhelmingly approved in August offers a dedicated funding source for these costs.

The assertion that the "only question is what costs will be incurred in the future for new employees" also misses the mark.

This myopic view typifies the critical element lacking in many previous pension reform efforts: true reform must be comprehensive — looking at costs today and tomorrow and weighing the impact on all stakeholders, including past, present and future city employees and taxpayers.

Although the pension tax extension has passed, the law requires that to access this new funding source, we must close the existing pension plans for future employees.

In turn, this allows us to then create sustainable retirement plans for future employees that aid in the recruitment and retention of high-quality employees.

An example of how this is accomplished is my retirement proposal for police and fire personnel. The critics wrote that my proposal is more expensive than what we pay now. That is false.

Back in April, the police and fire pen-

sion fund sent an invoice to the city for what the city is to pay the fund for the upcoming year.

The city's obligation is 119.6 percent for every police officer or firefighter.

That means the city must place \$1.19 in the Police and Fire Pension Fund for every dollar in salary. So for a police officer or firefighter making \$50,000 per year, the city would pay the officer's \$50,000 annual salary and deposit \$59,800 into the pension fund.

That is \$109,800 in annual costs to the city for every \$50,000 in salary.

That 119.6 percent is required for all police and fire personnel hired from 30 years ago until today, and every one in-between.

If these pension funds are not closed to new employees, as 65 percent of voters approved in the referendum vote, the expense of this 119.6 percent calculation must continue into the future. It is a cost that is not sustainable and leads Jacksonville to financial ruin.

To close the police and fire pension funds, I have proposed a retirement plan for new public safety employees that starts with a 12 percent salary match, and 2 percent increases in that match up to a cap of 20 percent after 20 years of service.

This new retirement plan, plus the salary increases I've offered, will attract and keep future police and firefighters.

Many of the biggest critics of this pension reform effort conducted over the past year are a part of the political establishment that created this problem. And opinion columns like the one on Dec. 20 demonstrate the defense they make for past failures.

It's time to lead with bold and sustainable solutions that best serve the interests and needs of taxpayers.

My offers to unions show that I am committed to working with our employees and union leaders to come up with solutions that do just that.

Doing anything less is guaranteed to repeat the mistakes of the past leaving Jacksonville saddled with mounting, unfunded debt and withering infrastructure.

Lenny Curry is mayor of the city of Jacksonville.

The simple joys of Christmas are fondly recalled

point of view

garrison keillor

My mother loved Christmas with her whole heart.

With six children and no credit cards

and my father ever watchful for unnecessary expenses, Christmas was a mountain for Grace to climb, requiring

As you get old, you gain a stripped-down life, minus the clutter and hullabaloo, the excess food and alcohol, the meaningless gifts.

endurance, planning, stealth and skill, but she brought it off to perfection every year until she was in her 90s and then she coasted on her memories.

Her mother died when my mother was 7 and mother had no memory of her, which troubled her deeply.

Grace was third from the end of 11

children, the 12th having died with the mother, of scarlet fever, and Grace was raised by her older sisters.

Complaint was not encouraged in that family, and mental health was not a topic for discussion, but clearly Christmas was a shining moment of gaiety in a family of modest means and strict decorum.

When I was 19, my older brother asked me to look after his house over Christmas so he and his young family could drive out to New York for a week.

His house was in the woods and I, intoxicated by Henry David Thoreau at the time, was more dramatic than necessary and announced that I would spend Christmas alone out there "to figure things out."

A poem of mine got in the college literary magazine.

The poem was about skating but a girl I knew thought it was suicidal and she came out to the woods to visit me and bring me dinner from her mother — turkey, candied yams, cranberry, wrapped in tinfoil.

We lit candles and sat and meditated on the mystery of life, and it was pleasant to have someone be so concerned about my well-being.

Life is good.

On a winter night, looking into a fire, our dead are around us, testifying to that.

The books on the shelves, the young people around the table, the carols on the radio in the kitchen, the shining snow on the hill that looks out at the Mississippi River.

As you get old, you gain a stripped-down life, minus the clutter and hullabaloo, the excess food and alcohol, the meaningless gifts, and it is quite satisfying to sit with your true love in candlelight, a plate of cookies on the table, and let memories come and go.

My mother is there.

It's 6 a.m., still dark out, and I've come down the stairs in my pajamas to the darkened tree, a note from Santa, the crumbs of the gingersnap I left for him, and I hear the padding of bare feet on the stair, and suddenly the tree bursts into light and my mother is standing there in a raggedy robe.

She missed her dead mother and found her every year in making Christmas for us.

Even after she moved to Florida, she flew back for a proper Minnesota Christmas with frost on the windows and wind in the chimney.

What you do for children is never wasted: this Christmas will live on and nourish them long after you have faded away.