

A Case for Change in Pinellas Schools  
June 19, 2008

*“Public education needs to be a bridge to economic opportunity.”*

Pinellas County Schools has an opportunity to better serve its customers through a commitment to adopt the plan that has taken Okaloosa County to a number one ranking in Florida from a previous rank of twenty-seven. The Okaloosa County School district is a national model because of the remarkable improvements to its educational system. (see attachment A) Okaloosa has been a leader in Florida’s sixty-seven school districts under Florida’s A+ Plan and under the federal program, No Child Left Behind, for the past five years. Using an adapted model from the book *Financing Schools for High Performance* (Odden, Busch 1998), Okaloosa schools achieved a number one ranking by converting from a consumer of resources to a manager of resources. Okaloosa’s adaptation of the plan put the customer first and reallocated resources from the central administrative offices to the individual schools. They did not seek their solution in Tallahassee nor did they ask Okaloosa taxpayers for more money. They worked smarter and better managed their resources. Schools were led by principals who were empowered to serve with parent advisory groups to determine the best way to meet the needs of their students.

One noticeable difference in Okaloosa classrooms is that they have taken a twenty-first century responsibility for the future of the children of Okaloosa County. As a result, more students are engaged in relevant learning in all grades. In high schools as well as select middle schools industry certifications are preparing students for jobs and post-secondary degrees that train students for high demand, high skill and high wage careers.

When relevant instruction is incorporated throughout the curriculum the lower grades become feeder programs for upper level programs. Relevancy in the classroom is equally important for our lower grades because that is where we begin to lose our children. Children want to know why a concept is being taught. And, most of us learn best through experiential and applied teaching methods, not ‘chalk and talk’. Traditional teaching relies on process and theory and often lacks real world examples. Academia is reluctant to give up its traditional methods and this reluctance to change is contributing to a failure rate approaching 50% in our schools. There is no ‘one size fits all curriculum’ that will work for all schools.

Public education is a bridge to economic opportunity and economic development. Okaloosa’s teachers continue to embrace the change because of student success, and because it addresses a need that teachers have long experienced—making learning more relevant to their students. They agree with their students that relevance in the classroom is important, but it is also required to provide training and support from district leadership to move towards more relevancy in the classroom. Okaloosa teachers across the system and at all grade levels enjoy a growing level of success in the classroom because more students are actively participating and see the connection of learning to their world. These teachers benefit from extra tutorial support for students and the discontinuation of social promotion programs that have led to better-prepared students. School principals have control over their budgets, allowing them to make decisions that best suit the uniqueness of their school environment and community. Parents and community volunteers should serve as a quasi-board of directors for the school and consequently have more ownership

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in their children's education. Employers are enthusiastic about this model because it is better preparing students for jobs by matching classroom lessons with techniques and skills needed in the workplace.

It is commendable that the Pinellas County School Board and district leadership have endorsed the replication of the Okaloosa School's CHOICE Institutes Program to better serve our community through Pinellas County's Centers of Excellence (attachment B). However, to focus only on the career education portion of the Okaloosa model ignores significant portions of this amazing success story. These necessary additions include: decentralization and reallocation of resources to schools, discontinuance of social promotion, developing an effective school based management system, and a K-12 focus on relevant instruction that engages our youth.

### **Why should Pinellas County Change?**

1. Recent studies have revealed that everyday in America 7,000 students drop out of school – totaling more than 1.2 million this year. (Alliance for Excellent Education. (n.d.). *The Crisis in American High Schools*. Washington: Author. April 20, 2007) Pinellas County is no exception to this problem (see attachment C). Tracking the Pinellas County Public Schools graduating class of 2007 reveals that as 9<sup>th</sup> graders the class began with 13,607 students but only graduated 6,895 four years later.

2. Education has entered an era of greater financial competition. With an aging population the priority for health care and social security funding will demand larger shares of our government's budget. Having an expectation of yearly increases in government spending on education is not practical given this increasing competition for tax revenues. Combining the future competition for tax dollars with the fact that we are entering an anti-tax era further necessitates the importance of working smarter with our educational dollars. Reducing our drop out rate and making students more productive will add revenue to our tax base because students with high school diplomas clearly make more money than those who drop out. The average annual income for a high school drop out was \$17,299 in 2005—56% less than the \$26,933 average annual income for a high school graduate that year. (Alliance for Excellent Education. *The High Cost of High School Drop Outs*. October, 2007). In order to create more jobs and a stronger economy, we must curb drop out rates and increase student skills and performance levels.

3. There are proven models for increasing student performance through decentralization, reallocating resources and privatization. These models have successfully increased student performance without spending more. "Extensive research evidence [has shown] that decentralized school management in the context of clear goals for high student achievement and accountability for results is a viable and potentially powerful education reform strategy [which] must be accompanied by each school's control over its own budget." (Odden, Allan, *Financing Schools for High Performance*. 1998). Graduation rates in Victoria, Australia increased from 25% to 80% from the late 1960s to 1992, as the state decentralized its educational system and moved to a school-based management system that included new student performance standards and professional development standards. It is important to

note that not only Australia, but also the United Kingdom has converted to school-based management. It is not an issue of Pinellas County being too large to accomplish this task.

4. The United States is falling behind when compared to many other nations. Yet we spend more per student and have lower class sizes than most of these countries. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, approximately 25% of our students perform proficiently in math, reading writing, science and history. The center further states that if the U.S. is to be considered a world leader in education, it must reach a 75% student performance level. This cannot be done unless our schools work smarter and utilize better methods of instruction. Internationally, Florida does not compare well with top countries in the proportion of students who complete certificates or degrees. Florida falls behind the UK, Japan, Portugal, Australia, Switzerland, Denmark, Ireland, New Zealand, and France. (*Measuring Up 2006*)

5. Six years after high school graduation, only 14% of Florida’s students achieve a two year or four year college degree. Although a greater percentage of Florida’s students ultimately achieve a college degree, a greater concern is that there has been little regard for supporting student aptitude or directing our students to post secondary educational opportunities that match student interest with employment demand. Florida colleges have a graduation rate of approximately 50% and are producing too many majors that do not align with employment needs. This results in students graduating with debt and taking jobs that a high school diploma could have satisfied. Aligning curriculum with future job skills must begin in elementary grades if our children are to be successful in life.

6. Florida public schools receive grades under the state’s “A+” system. Schools are assigned a grade based upon student achievement data from the FCAT and other factors. School grades communicate to the public how well a school is performing relative to state standards, and are calculated based on annual learning gains of each student toward achievement of Sunshine State Standards, the progress of the lowest quartile of students, and the meeting of proficiency standards.

The table below illustrates the numerical conversion of the grades received by Okaloosa and Pinellas County Schools during 2006-2007. This table demonstrates that Okaloosa’s program is a model of excellence.

**2006 - 2007**

<b>Pinellas</b>		<b>High school (16)</b>	<b>Middle (22)</b>	<b>Elementary (80)</b>
<b>Average Grade</b>		<b>2.062</b>	<b>3.363</b>	<b>3.45</b>
<b>Accumulative Grade</b>	<b>2.958</b>			
<b>Okaloosa</b>		<b>High (4)</b>	<b>Middle (9)</b>	<b>Elementary (21)</b>
<b>Average Grade</b>		<b>3.75</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3.952</b>
<b>Accumulative Grade</b>	<b>3.901</b>			

## **Recommendations for implementation in Pinellas Schools:**

### 1. Know Your Customer

This model recognizes that tax-payers and employers are the customers of the educational system, and students, also viewed as customers, should become the beneficiaries of an education that leads to success in life. Student failure, or student dropouts should be viewed as a system failing its customers. If high school dropouts from 2007 converted to graduates, the state of Florida would see its economy increase by more than \$26 billion, while the national economy would see an increase of more than \$328 billion, over the lifetime of the graduating class. (Association for Career & Technical Education Issue Brief, March 2007)

Parents and employers should play a key role in advising the Superintendent and principals with making decisions to find remedies for the drop out problem. External resources should be employed to objectively evaluate customer satisfaction. Senator Gaetz visited 100 homes of students who had dropped out of school because he viewed them as Okaloosa's most dissatisfied customers. He also employed the use of community experts to objectively survey parents and members of the business community so that the County's schools could better serve its customers. Pinellas County leadership should follow Senator Gaetz's example and employ external resources to conduct an objective analysis of Pinellas County school's customers. Principals should involve parents by asking for input with program and budget decisions, which will lead to a more favorable environment in the school's community. Also, key to this model is the concept that the educators must be open to input from employers. For example, Okaloosa employers shared their intellectual capital on how to best prepare students for the workforce. Certifications and curricula, leading to employable skills, were brought into the classroom; curricula that included relevant examples for students that connected theory to practice. According to a study funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 88% of high school dropouts have passing grades. It also found that the number one reason students dropped out was that they did not relate to the curriculum because it was not relevant. The district office and schools need to aggressively approach curriculum with rigor and relevance and connect the theory of education to the relevancy of the real world. This will better enable our district to better serve its customer.

### 2. Reallocate Resources and Decentralize

Reallocating resources to schools and allowing principals authority over financial and budgetary issues will lead to higher performing students. The Okaloosa model, in its first year, shifted control of 90% of the money generated from taxes to individual schools, and the remaining 10% was managed by the school district for administrative costs. Allan Odden recommends schools receive 75% in year one, and transition over a period of eight years to controlling 89% of the budget. Parent volunteers with appropriate talents and expertise (i.e. accountants, attorneys, human resources directors) should be recruited to work with principals to build the budgets and serve as a quasi-boards of directors for the schools. This will give real meaning to parent and community involvement and bring a valuable parent/customer perspective to the planning process. School improvement plans should be presented to the Superintendent, Chief Financial Officer, and Chief of Human Resources for final approval.

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In Pinellas County, principals have little or no control over their schools' budgets; typically about 1% of a school's budget is left to the discretion of a principal and parents, principals, and faculty have minimal say over what takes place in schools. Holding principals accountable for performance but not allowing them the authority to link fiscal accountability to performance is detrimental to good management practices.

A one-size-fits-all educational program also stifles creative and more effective solutions better determined at a school based level. Allowing individual schools to select curriculum programs was an effective cultural change in Okaloosa. All principals have master's degrees and many have doctorates and are capable of understanding state standards, curriculum requirements and budgets.

Extensive research has been conducted by Dr. Allan Odden through the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research (WCER). This research has provided school districts with a blueprint for successful transition from a centralized management system to a school-based management model. It is the recommendation of this white paper that the Pinellas County Schools' Superintendent and School Board employ the methodology of Odden.

- Odden, Allan, & Sarah Archibald. (2001). *Reallocating Resources: How to Boost Student Achievement without Asking for More*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Odden, Allan & Carolyn Busch (1998) *Financing Schools for High Performance*. New York: Jossey-Bass.

### 3. Create and Enforce School Performance Plans

The Superintendent should assist principals with building an effective performance plan. The plan should allow principals to be the chief executives of their schools and give them authority and resources to get the job done. If the performance strategy fails, principals should be held accountable. In Okaloosa, principals were more effective when accountability for school performance was linked with budget decisions and accountability measures. This was an important change for Okaloosa Schools with an end result of thirty-two of the thirty-four schools receiving an "A" through the A+ Plan. Principals were involved in training programs that included district financial, management information, human resources and union representatives to help define their new fiscal and human resources management roles. The need to place a priority on training is well documented in Allan Odden's research. Pinellas County Schools leadership should not underestimate the importance of training and professional development, and realize that implementing a school-based management model will involve the entire school system.

### 4. End Social Promotions Which Set Students Up To Fail

Students who are not performing at grade level must repeat the grade rather than advance to the next grade without merit. Social promotion perpetuates mediocrity in our schools, allowing students and parents to believe that students are achieving standards which are not being met. Promoting or passing students who have not met the basics is a dishonest practice and often

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places teachers in a challenging environment, by creating a classroom with a wide disparity of academic achievement levels. This gap in student achievement within a classroom makes it difficult for teachers to accomplish what they do best—assisting students in learning. Social promotion gives parents and students a false expectation which generally results in continual student failure that cannot be reversed without excessive expense to taxpayers. Eventually, the child, schools, and the community pay the costs for a sub-prime educational deception called social promotion. Despite the fact that remediation programs have spent billions of tax dollars and grown during the past 30 years, the drop out rate has remained unchanged, and by some accounts has gotten worse. The end result of these programs has done more to categorize students as failures than keeping students engaged in learning. In order to improve, under-performing students need aggressive attention from teachers, parents and mentors. In Okaloosa, startup monies saved from school district decentralization were used to provide tutoring for failing students. Parents and principals working together were allotted a maximum of \$2,000 per student to hire tutors or to purchase other educational enhancements in order to bring students back to grade level. In Odden’s research allowing schools the flexibility to choose from a variety of proven staffing models led to an increase in student performance. Implementing the social promotion policy and other recommendations require the reallocation of resources, including down-sizing and decentralizing. If our school district leadership and School Board understand who the customer is, this change will be justified and expected.

### **Summary:**

Pinellas County has an opportunity to significantly improve the performance of our public schools. Adopting the entire proven model which Okaloosa has pioneered will help lead Pinellas County from 32<sup>nd</sup> to the number one school district in Florida. This is a goal worth seeking if we recognize students, parents, and employers as customers of our educational system. We must avoid the deadly “not invented here” syndrome as well as the assumption that what we are doing is already better than what Okaloosa has accomplished. **We may have individual school programs that out perform similar programs in Okaloosa, but the bottom line is - Pinellas County Schools is thirty-second and Okaloosa County Schools is #1 in the State of Florida.**

Another pitfall we must avoid is to claim that this cannot be accomplished without more money. Okaloosa cut waste and aggressively changed a status quo which had been failing them. This accomplishment was also achieved in the United Kingdom and in Victoria, Australia. It has been well documented in Odden’s research that this change can happen and will increase student performance. They stopped doing what they had always done which was providing them with a mediocre result. A shift in priorities and leadership expectations resulted in something Okaloosa never expected – a number one rating.

Passage of the Pinellas County School Board Referendum in January, 2008 by a 70% margin indicates that despite the current anti-tax climate, education remains important to our citizens. The positive reaction that Senator Don Gaetz has received from Pinellas community leaders is yet another sign that the community is poised to embrace a K-12 education model based on customer satisfaction. Tampa Bay is considered the economic muscle of our state in which the top economic constriction is the lack of a trained, technical workforce. It is increasingly important to continue to build and maintain strong partnerships with parents, employers and community leaders. The citizens of Pinellas County are

committed to enhancing public education. With community support, Pinellas County Schools will become the new model for Florida and the number one school district in the state.

*"If you want something you have never had, you have to do something you never did.  
If you always do what you have always done, you will get what you always got."*

## **Attachments:**

A. Okaloosa County School district has been widely recognized as a national model for educational reform. In October, 2007, Florida Governor Charlie Crist presented former Superintendent of Okaloosa schools Senator Don Gaetz with the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA), William L. Heartwell, Jr. Award for his contributions to Florida's workforce system and the development of the Florida Career and Professional Education Act. NASWA is a national organization composed of state administrators of employment and training services, labor market information and unemployment insurance from all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. This national award is presented to one person annually.

*Florida Trend Magazine* has recognized Senator Gaetz as the state's "K-12 education trendsetter" and national education and business journals have featured his innovative solutions, cost-savings measures, and the historic academic success of Okaloosa's schools and students.

Declared a national model for career education by the US Department of Labor, CHOICE is now being replicated in more than a dozen Florida school districts. Thousands of students are enrolled. The typical CHOICE graduate leaves high school with technical certifications awarded by industry and college credits worth over \$18,000. Many of these students had been underperformers or potential dropouts. CHOICE students are now doing better in math and as well in reading as the overall populations of their schools.

### **B. Centers of Excellence, How the Pinellas County School district is taking the Okaloosa Choice Institutes Model to the next level:**

The Pinellas replication of the Okaloosa Choice Institutes includes:

1. Embedding career and technical programs in every high school by 2010.
2. Establishing a certifying body that ensures corporate involvement.
3. Utilizing approved industry certification awarded to students and taught by industry certified teachers.
4. Certifying Centers of Excellence that will prepare students for high wage and high demand jobs recommended through Workforce Florida and the Haas Study.
5. Aligning post-secondary partners with Centers of Excellence.
6. Including weighted level courses for career education and directing students to Gold Seal Scholarships under the Bright Futures program.

### **C. Economic Impact of High School Drop out rate**

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, nearly seven thousand students drop out of school each day, totaling 1.2 million students per year who will not graduate from high school with their peers as scheduled

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education's "The High Cost of High School Drop Outs," October, 2007, there is a considerable loss in lifetime income for high school drop outs. The average annual income for a high school drop out in 2005 was \$17,299 compared to \$26,933 for a high school graduate, a \$9,634, or 56% difference.(U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006.)

If high school dropouts from 2007 converted to graduates, the state of Florida would see its economy increase by more than \$26 billion, while the national economy would see an increase of more than \$328 billion, over the lifetime of the graduating class.

	<b><u>9<sup>th</sup> Graders (2003 – 2004)</u></b>	<b><u>Est. Grad. Rate (2006 – 2007)</u></b>	<b><u>Est. No. Dropouts (class of 2007)</u></b>	<b><u>Total Lifetime Add'l Income if Dropouts Graduated</u></b>
<b>Florida</b>	263,565	60.5%	100,158	\$26,041,125,500
<b>US</b>	4,190,237	69.9%	1,265,016	\$328,904,058,340

A March 20, 2008 *New York Times* article cited that nationally only 70% of the one million students who start ninth grade each year graduate four years later. At this current 30% national drop out rate, more than 12 million students will drop out during the course of the next decade (2007 – 2017), resulting in a long term nationwide economic loss of \$3 trillion. (Association for Career & Technical Education Issue Brief, March 2007)

Numerous studies have documented the economic impact of dropouts which have negative consequences at local, state, national, and of course, personal levels to those impacted.

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education's Issue Brief in August, 2006, the impact of a five percent increase in male high school graduation rates would have significant effect on crime reduction and earnings, leading to combined state savings and revenue of more than \$506 million each year, and a national savings and revenue of almost \$8 billion each year. The five percent increase in male graduation would inject more than \$174 million into the state economy and nearly \$2.8 billion additional funds into the national economy.

	<b><u>Annual Crime Related Savings</u></b>	<b><u>Additional Average Earnings</u></b>	<b><u>Total Benefit to Economy</u></b>
<b>Florida</b>	\$332,386,028	\$174,243,833	\$506,629,861
<b>US</b>	\$4,939,917,909	\$2,799,523,519	\$7,738,541,428

A study conducted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found that 81% of dropouts surveyed indicated a stronger need to see the connection between school and getting a good job. High school dropouts complained that school did not reflect real-world challenges. More than half of respondents said that the major reason for dropping out was that they found their classes uninteresting and irrelevant. (Bridgeland, J., & di Iulio, J. 2006, *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*)