



Journey
to
Excellence

by
Malcolm
Thomas

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Political advertisement paid for and approved by Malcolm Thomas,
Republican for Escambia Superintendent of Schools

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By Malcolm Thomas

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**This book is dedicated to all
teachers who dare to make a
difference in the lives of their
students.**

Journey to Excellence

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You never know when a moment and a few sincere words can have an impact on a life.

Zig Ziglar

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Thanks for your efforts to make sure all my i’s were dotted and my t’s were crossed.

Dave Barnes and I met at a campaign event. After listening to my story, he was the first to propose writing a book. Thanks for believing enough to make the suggestion.

Introduction

My ABC's...

I shall pass through this world but once. Any good, therefore, that I can do or any kindness I can show to any human being, let me do it now . . . for I shall not pass this way again.

Etienne De Grillet

All of my life I have been blessed. All I have ever attempted to accomplish is to work hard, set high expectations for myself and always treat others the way I expect to be treated. Throughout my life, I have been fortunate to be recognized by my friends and colleagues for doing the very best possible work regardless of the endeavor.

In the early part of 2008, I began to consider seeking the office of Escambia County Superintendent of Schools. Running for elected office poses considerable personal and professional sacrifices. Consequently, I had to find answers to the most fundamental questions: Why should I, Malcolm Thomas, run for Superintendent? What would I want to accomplish if I were

elected? Seeking answers to those fundamental questions, I have reviewed and reflected upon both my personal and professional past, including my values and experiences. This intense personal analysis of motivations and career accomplishments, coupled with the enthusiastic encouragement of colleagues I know and respect, convinced me to seek this office.

This book is divided into two sections. The first section will give you an up-close look at who I am, where I came from, why and how I became an educator and my educational experience. The second section will outline my vision, goals and specific plans for a better Escambia County School District.

I believe that the best indicator of one's future success is what one has done in the past. An examination of my past will reflect my journey toward excellence. After you have read this book, I think that you will see that I have the *Ability, Background, Competence, Dedication and Experience* to lead the Escambia County School System as Superintendent.

Part I

The Journey Begins

An Early Start...

Perseverance is not a long race; it is many short races, one after another.

Walter Elliott

My family had very little money when I was growing up on the north end of Escambia County. With four boys to feed my father held two jobs. He served as a minister to a small church and worked for Golden Flake Potato Chips Company. Two paychecks still were barely enough to provide for my family's needs, but he and my mom filled our home with values and love, things that money can not buy.

We were always looking for a bigger house with cheaper rent. My family's limited resources caused us to move frequently. As a result, I attended four different Escambia elementary schools. Entering elementary school at P. K. Yonge, moving on to Scenic Heights, transferring then to Pine Meadow, I finally finished my primary education

at Jim Allen. When we found a house in Cottage Hill, Florida, that was big enough and cheap enough, we were able to stay put and grow some roots.

As I grew older, I learned to adapt and solve problems without money and to think creatively to find solutions. If I wanted something extra, I would work for it. I would do an odd job here and there, maybe a little trading, whatever it took to earn honest cash for what I needed. Early on in life, I realized there was a big difference between what I wanted and what I needed. Even today, I ask myself this important question before spending money on extras: Is this something I want or something I need?

My parents and my faith instilled high moral standards that became the cornerstone of my life. The training provided by my parents and Sunday school teachers established anchors that sustain me still. My father used to say, “Son, if something is worth doing, it is worth doing right.” Doing the right thing, caring for others and setting high standards for myself have been principles that have guided me through the years.

The sixties and seventies were growth years for Escambia County as

new communities inched northward from the city while many of the established communities like Ensley, Beulah, Gonzalez, Cantonment, Cottage Hill and Molino remained stable. Thus, many of my friends from elementary school continued to be my classmates through high school graduation. My Cottage Hill roots allowed me to attend Tate High School for grades seven through twelve.

At Tate High School...

Luck is a dividend of sweat. The more you sweat, the luckier you get.

Ray Kroc

I was the oldest of four boys, and my mother had always been a stay-at-home mom. Our family's income was always limited, and with four sons close to the same age, buying back-to-school clothes simply was not in the budget. We always had plenty of clothes, but they were hand-me-downs.

As my brothers and I entered our teenage years, the clothes we had were not ones that we probably would have chosen had we been given a choice. Plus, since we were all close to the same age, we could interchange our clothes. We laugh now about the joke that the best-dressed for school on any given day was the first one up and dressed. Although I was the oldest, I was not the largest of the boys, meaning that I often wore my younger brothers' hand-me-downs.

Little did I realize as I entered high school the impact that my secondary education would have on me for the next decades of my life.

In ninth grade, my first year of high school, my shyness prevented me from being included in the popular social circles. As a student, I respected my school and teachers and was a normal, well-behaved student. I was never singled out by a teacher or the school and asked to do a special project or undertake a leadership task of any kind.

Little did I realize what a transformation I would undergo during the tenth grade. No longer would I be the unassuming timid little boy growing up in Cottage Hill. As a ninth grader at Tate High School, I had remained the shy son of a preacher, wearing hand-me-down clothes and sitting in the back of the classroom. Then one day, at the beginning of my sophomore year, an inspired teacher, Mr. Micky Rigby, recognized that the student in the back of his classroom had potential. And “that has made all the difference.” Because of a teacher, my transformation had begun.

Mr. Rigby encouraged me and inspired me to participate in an Optimist Club speech contest. He even bought and paid for, from his own modest salary, my first brand new suit. It was his inspiration, combined with his teaching skills which eventually empowered me to

be elected Student Government President in my senior year. He saw more in me than I did myself. He encouraged me to join the speech team where I learned to organize my thoughts, deliver effective presentations and become confident in my abilities. I excelled at speaking and won many contests, changing my life forever.

His encouragement was instrumental in my being selected as a Youth Delegate to the Paris Peace Talks to discuss the POW-MIA situation with the North Vietnamese Ambassador. I have never forgotten what Mr. Rigby gave me and have realized first hand how much teachers make a difference!

When I reflect, it was during those days that I learned there are two types of people in the world: "...those who create change, and those who are created by change." I made a conscious decision to join the first group. By creating positive change, you make a difference in the world and leave it a better place than it was before. I realized that with the right attitude and effort, almost anything is possible. Mr. Rigby's belief in me had empowered me to reach higher, to stretch myself and become a better person. When I became the student government

president, I learned to be a leader. Today when I think back, Mr. Rigby was the inspiration for my entering the education field. I wanted to help students overcome difficulties. I believed there were many students like myself; all they needed was a dedicated teacher to encourage them to succeed and accomplish their dreams.

The Love of My Life...

What a grand thing, to be loved! What a grander thing still, to love!

Victor Hugo

Tenth grade was a banner year for me. Something else happened that year that would forever change my life. I met a girl. Not just any girl, but Sandra O’Gwynn, a friendly, vivacious blond who always had an opinion about everything. In amazement, I watched the ease with which she flowed like a brook from one social pool to another. I was smitten. At the time, many people thought the relationship that Sandra and I had was a simple teenage romance, but to me it was a seismic event that could be measured on the *Malcolm Thomas Richter Scale*.

Perhaps because I was a year older than Sandra, she spent time with me; by the winter of my sophomore year, I took pride in calling her my girlfriend. However, she was too young to date, and I had neither a driver’s license nor a car. Our romance was restricted to sitting near each other in the school cafeteria and talking while waiting for classes to begin each morning. Occasionally, there

might be a quick rendezvous “hello-goodbye” after school on the way to the school bus. Young love was simply beautiful and electric!

The romance continued to blossom until the end of the school year. Then in a telephone conversation during the summer break, she told me she did not want to be my girlfriend any longer! I was devastated.

The break-up, however, taught me a valuable lesson: never lose hope. This was a pivotal moment when I realized a critical life lesson that would influence all of my major decisions for years to come. Events alone cannot dictate the outcomes for your destiny. Instead, your responses and reactions to events shape the course of your life.

I maintained a friendly and respectful relationship with Sandra. My reaction paved the way for a chance encounter three years later that reignited the romance.

I still remember proposing in the Mariner Mall parking lot. Many people reading this book will not remember that Pensacola had a mall at the corner of Fairfield Drive and Mobile Highway. I do not remember if she ever answered the question – I do remember that she

immediately began to make plans for a wedding. On June 8, 1973, Sandra and I exchanged vows that we continue to keep. This year marked our 35th wedding anniversary.

There is an old adage that “Behind every successful man is a successful woman.” Sandra’s version of that old saying is that “Behind every successful man is a **worn-out** woman.” I could never have experienced my successes without her. She has been both a rock to lean on and my greatest cheerleader.

And Then There Were Four...

Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.

John Wooden

Anyone who has ever been a parent knows that mere words are inadequate to describe the experience of parenthood. It is awe-inspiring, scary, frustrating, and rewarding. Rearing children requires both the art and science of parenting. For Sandra and me, the positives of parenting definitely outweigh the negatives. We are the parents of two wonderful daughters, Rhonda and Rebekah. Since there is no instruction manual that comes with a child, Sandra and I tried to instill in our daughters the values that we had been taught and had been useful to us in our lives. Since those values had served us well, we felt that they would also serve our daughters. In addition to modeling good morals, we always tried to be consistent in teaching values of respect, courtesy, and kindness. With pride, I can say we succeeded. Both

daughters, now grown up and married, make me a proud father.

Rhonda, the oldest daughter has given us three wonderful grandchildren, McKenzie, Shelby and Cady. McKenzie and Shelby are old enough to attend Escambia County public schools, and Cady will be starting soon. So, yes, since they represent the third generation of Thomases attending our schools, I do have a vested reason for being Superintendent. My granddaughters are students here too; so, if we are offering the best possible public education, then my granddaughters will reap the benefits.

After college, Rhonda elected to become a teacher as I had done. Perhaps, *selfishly*, I would like to think it was my influence; realistically, it was because she had always observed how much I loved my teaching and my students, and she has emulated it. She is becoming a veteran teacher and enjoying her chosen career.

My younger daughter, Rebekah, chose to pursue a career in the business world and is employed by Philips Medical Systems where she has become successful in the world of marketing. Though not a classroom teacher, she conducts training for physicians and other medical professionals. In reality,

Rebekah also teaches, albeit not in a traditional classroom.

What more could parents want than to have children who were able to pursue their dreams because they were given a good educational foundation in their public schools? We and our daughters were provided a good education in Escambia County schools. We want a good educational system for our granddaughters as well as for all students--present and future.

Learning with Uncle Sam and more...

Individuals don't win. Teams do.

Sam Walton

I served three years in the United States Army, starting with basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. The rest of my tour of duty was spent at Fort Campbell, Kentucky with the 101st Airborne Division, a time of additional learning and transition. Viet Nam was the motivating force behind the training. Military duty has a unique way of accelerating the process of growing up. In the Army, I moved from boyhood into manhood. During my time in the Army, I continued to develop my leadership skills. I learned much about working within a unit and the importance of teamwork in getting a task done. I began to understand how motivation and the desire to achieve often allowed platoons to perform at a higher level than most would believe possible.

After my tour in the Army, I entered the business world and spent time building houses. The construction industry enabled me to develop additional skills which I would draw upon later in

life and my educational career. Budgets had to be maintained in order to protect the profit margin – which represented the livelihood for my family. Clarity of communication meant that the homeowner, the homebuilder and all the laborers understood the interrelatedness of timelines and procedures. Having a systematic plan and following it insured that the foundation was poured before the roofers were called in. *Measuring twice and cutting once* prevented costly mistakes. The end result was a tangible product, a house that would be someone's home. My success was measured by the homeowners liking the house, the sub-contractors being paid a fair wage and my family reaping the benefits of the profits I had made.

The Missing Piece...

Life becomes harder for us when we live for others, but it also becomes richer and happier.

Albert Schweitzer

Building houses was purposeful and financially rewarding, but somewhere in my innermost being something was missing. Continuing to reflect on the influence of high-performing teachers on my life, I was drawn back to education-- my true calling! After many discussions with Sandra and much personal soul searching, I left a successful homebuilding career and entered the much less lucrative, but much more fulfilling world of teaching. I have never regretted the choice!

After earning a degree at the University of West Florida (UWF), my dream became a reality when I accepted a job as a special education teacher at Tate High School. I loved teaching and wanted to continue improving my skills. So, I earned a Masters degree at UWF. While at Tate, I became the **Escambia County Teacher of the Year** and was selected as a finalist for Florida Teacher of the Year!

Teaching special education students during the day, I also tutored students in mathematics after the school day was over. I have now completed twenty-eight years serving Escambia students as a teacher, specialist, coordinator and administrator. I have worked in many capacities at the district level, but I still find time to tutor students every week. Tutoring has kept me directly connected to teaching. When I left my classroom at Tate High School in 1987, I made a vow that I would *continue* to make a difference in students' lives through teaching. I have kept that vow. I still teach!

Beyond the Classroom...Why?

Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.

Theodore Roosevelt

Being selected as the Escambia County Teacher of the Year in 1985 was a great honor, a moment that caused me to reflect about the joys of the teaching profession. But, as I accepted the award, in my heart I recognized that I was simply a representative of many outstanding teachers who were also working to make a difference for students inside Escambia County classrooms.

As a special education teacher, I had a close look at what makes a classroom work and how to get students excited about learning. Yet, there is another element in education that is equally responsible for academic success: the administration. Without strong, positive, accountable leadership, no school is able to perform well.

Having excelled in the classroom, my reputation as a professional teacher, a hard worker and a person who could get things done caused the administration at the district level to seek me out to

become a district administrator. They convinced me that I could improve students' lives exponentially by helping to train other teachers to do the things that I had been doing. This logic is why I moved into administration.

At the district level I moved up through the ranks, serving as a staffing specialist, data specialist, program coordinator, and director. In each position, increased responsibility was given to me, and I improved both my own skills as well as the department to which I was assigned.

Currently, I serve as the Director of Evaluation Services which provides services to every school in the district. When I first accepted this position in 2003, the primary responsibility of the Director was to supervise the logistics of the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT), which had been implemented in 1999.

At that time, the students' scores on the FCAT were kept on a mainframe at the district level and were not available to individual teachers in the school. Each year, the teacher had the responsibility to teach the student but had very limited information about the student's strengths and weaknesses.

That situation seemed to me to be like trying to fly an airplane without the ability to see the instrument panel. Yes, you may be able to see out the window, weather permitting, but you have no way to definitely determine your altitude, fuel level, speed, direction and other important considerations.

With a secure password, it is now possible for every teacher in every school to access the students' scores from any computer at school or at home. When preparing lessons, teachers are able to see the skills that students have mastered and the skills they need to improve. They can now see the “teaching” instrument panel.

Since I have assumed the Director of Evaluation Services position, my supervisory roles have expanded to include Guidance Services, Health Services, Psychological Services, Audiological Services, School Social Workers, Media Services, District Textbook Inventory and State/District Testing and Evaluation. These experiences have allowed me to implement and fine tune many of the practices and principles outlined in this book. By creating a winning team attitude, I have learned we can overcome any obstacle. By practicing accountability

on all levels, we rise to the challenge and deliver better service, create innovative solutions and change the direction of our school district. By setting standards, tracking results and providing transparent accountability, we can significantly improve the education for students in Escambia County.

Observing the system through such wide-range perspectives has given me a more comprehensive understanding of the total system. I have been able to understand both the strengths and weaknesses of the school system. In addition, this viewpoint has allowed me to recognize problems in four major areas:

- student achievement,
- discipline and safety,
- low pay for employees, and
- transparency and accountability.

The recognition of the problem areas led me to develop a vision for our school system which would make each of these areas better.

Part II

The Journey Continues

More than Just a Job...

Few things can help an individual more than to place responsibility on him, and to let him know that you trust him.

Booker T. Washington

I am an educator, not a politician. There... I have written it down for everyone to read! It is important to me that you understand my position from the start. When people approached me about running for the office of Superintendent, I was excited about the opportunity to effect change, but not enthusiastic about starting a campaign. Many friends encouraged me, and I began to see the possibility. I told these friends in the beginning, “My greatest fear is that I will be a candidate left standing all alone.”

That has been an unfounded fear. The support and encouragement I have received from teachers, principals, support employees, community leaders and former students have created some of the most humbling moments of my life.

However, it was not until my colleagues organized an informal exploratory meeting that my fear was dispelled. On February 29, 2008, the group arranged for a meeting to be held at Asbury Place on Ninth Avenue. It was there that I began to understand fully just how much people believed in me. When I arrived, the meeting room was full of people. “Malcolm – Take A Leap of Faith” read a huge banner hung across the room. The place was packed... standing room only, and I was humbled. Gathered were dedicated and passionate teachers, school administrators, support staff, community leaders, parents and former students; these were people I had worked with over the years, and that night they were enthusiastically supporting me and urging me to run for Superintendent. For almost an hour, they came to the podium to tell why they believed I should run for the office of Superintendent of Schools. What a way to start a campaign! That event touched me deeply and has become a major highlight of my life.

That night reinforced many lessons my parents tried to instill in me as a child. If you treat people right, if you are always willing to lend a hand, and if you contribute without regard for

who receives the credit, there comes a time when all that you have paid forward yields great dividends. I never gave expecting to receive anything in return; however, in 2008, many of the people whose lives I have touched over my career have stepped forward to contribute to my campaign.

Throughout the campaign, the level of grass roots support has been amazing! I understand people are supporting me because they believe I can help them build a better school system. While this support is both humbling and empowering, it increases the sense of responsibility I feel.

The Vision...

If we continually practice filling our minds with thoughts of faith, hope and gratitude, it will eventually crowd out our fears.

Norman Vincent Peale

My vision for a better school system includes the following elements:

- **Children** want to attend,
- **Students** achieve to the best level of their abilities,
- **Employees** are proud to work for the system,
- **Local employers** can hire from a large pool of applicants better prepared to enter the work force, and
- **Taxpayers** see positive returns on their investments.

As Superintendent, I want to empower students, teachers, administrators and support personnel to set high expectations for themselves and to work toward achieving them. At the same time, I want to encourage parents and the community to become more involved in

making our schools better and for them also to set high expectations and work toward achieving them. I believe that when we are all unified and working on the same goals, we will be successful.

I have outlined my plans to realize this vision for two reasons. The first reason is to give you an opportunity to examine the plans, and the second is to start a dialogue that will bring the best ideas forward, thereby creating even better success than my plan alone. It is through our combined participation that the best is yet to come.

People often say, “We could improve the school system if we had enough money.”

If you ask those same people “How much money do you need?” the most common answer is “I don’t know – I just know we don’t have enough.”

Thirty-five years ago when Sandra and I were thinking about marriage, we asked “Should we wait until we have enough money?” Once we were married we asked, “Should we wait to have children until we have enough money?” If we had waited until we had enough money to support the marriage and children, we would be single and childless!

The truth is there will never be enough money and resources for education, but money is not always the solution. When we acknowledge that fact, we can begin to let our imagination fuel dreams that can be turned into a new reality.

Dreams are more often realized when they are directly connected to the will to pursue the dream in the face of adversity. Our district faces many obstacles in our quest to create better schools. Whenever there is an obstacle, we cannot give up on the quest; rather, we need to design a strategy to overcome the obstacle. Obstacles may be optical illusions. Frequently, a different perspective is all that is needed. When faced with adversity, the ability to make the best choice is critical as we continue to keep our eyes on the goal: better schools for our students.

Sometimes the difference between success and failure is not a lack of resources but a lack of will and perseverance. Many people spend more time and energy trying to circumvent problems rather than trying to find solutions.

A few months ago, I had the opportunity to speak to a university

graduate class. All of the students were aspiring educational leaders. During our conversation, someone in the group asked, “How do you make sound decisions?”

I answered, “Generally, I use three basic tenets:

1) Be creative. Always look for an angle that will allow you to view the problem and solution from a non-conventional point of view. Always consider different perspectives.

2) Remain connected to common sense. Frequently, in institutional decision-making, common sense gets lost. The best way to insure that decisions are grounded in common sense is to discuss the idea with the people who are on each level of implementation. Actively listen to their concerns about how the proposed action will impact them and ask for their suggestions.

3) Be determined to stay the course. Once the decision passes the common sense test and support of stakeholders has been obtained, then remain steadfast and determined until the goal of the decision has been reached. Sound decisions may be derailed because of a lack of resolve and determination to

stay the course in the face of obstacles. It always seems easier to back down or quit.

Education encompasses many complex problems, but I hold the firm belief that simple solutions still work. A superintendent must work on many issues simultaneously. An effective superintendent needs a team of dedicated professionals committed to a common vision and goals. Although teambuilding may sound simple, it is a complex undertaking and does not happen overnight.

The only way to improve is to understand fully what needs to be improved. Therefore, the first task is to establish a review process that identifies strengths and weaknesses in our system. The review process must include input from all areas of our county: teachers, administrators, staff and community leaders. Capitalizing on strengths and eliminating weakness are tantamount to the improvement process.

The second step is to set appropriate goals based on findings. Does this mean that every issue will be addressed immediately? No. Instead, goal-setting includes prioritizing the findings in order to begin making a plan

for improvement. Prioritizing allows the most important issues to be addressed first. A quarterly review of all identified issues will be conducted and adjustments made as needed.

The next step is to begin implementation. Each principal, department head, and leadership team will develop a plan of action with timelines and benchmarks. These plans will be monitored and the results made public. **We will become a *can-do* organization with a plan of action and accountability.** By monitoring progress, we can make adjustments along the way, insuring that we reach our goals. This is not rocket science but solid business practices that are used by highly effective companies. We need to bring this focused accountability to education in order to deliver a quality product to our customers: The Students!

To make these changes, we must have strong leadership. I will not ask anything of my staff that I will not do myself. Since every school district employee is evaluated, I too will be evaluated by the employees whom I supervise. My report card will include both areas of strengths and areas in which I need improvements. My grades and

progress will be public and transparent, keeping me focused.

Can you see the vision? It is a *revolutionary* idea for a public institution to embrace these concepts, but I know these practices work; implementing them will energize the whole organization and improve our service on all levels, taking our progress to new heights.

Where We Are...

*There are many ways of going forward,
but only one way of standing still.*

Franklin Roosevelt

Some troubling facts identify significant challenges to our educational system.

- Almost one fourth of adults in Escambia County are functionally illiterate.
- Eighteen percent (18%) of our beginning kindergarten students are not able to recognize more than a single letter of the alphabet.
- The number of Escambia County's middle and high school students suspended from school is much higher than the state average as reflected in the following chart:

Students from the total enrollment who served out-of-school suspensions:

School	Escambia	State
Elementary	5.0%	3.0%
Middle	22.6%	14.2%
High	20.6%	12.0%

Data from 2006-2007 school year. Data obtained from the Florida Department of Education web site: <http://roi.fldoe.org>

- Approximately one fourth of our high school students do not graduate.
- Forty percent (40%) of Escambia County's high school graduates do not attend college, nor do they seek post-secondary training.

These statistics alone are daunting. However, there are additional reasons for our community to be concerned.

- Escambia County public schools have experienced a declining enrollment over the past ten years.

- Poverty is also widespread. In Escambia County, 59% of students receive free or reduced price lunches. [*http://www.fldoe.org/eias/flmove/escambia.asp](http://www.fldoe.org/eias/flmove/escambia.asp)
- Average teacher pay in Escambia County ranks **below** that of Santa Rosa and Okaloosa Counties as well as the state average.

Challenges that arise from these disturbing facts require innovative and revolutionary solutions. These challenges are systemic community problems which require a multifaceted approach.

Imagine not being able to read the instructions for operating a microwave. Imagine not understanding the instructions for a medication you have been prescribed. Imagine not being able to read the ingredients for a recipe.

In the 21st century, Escambia County's literacy deficit is unacceptable and must be overcome. We, as the school district, can lead the way with programs for adults that are run in collaboration with school and community agencies, like the United Way, ECARE, Wee Read and various service clubs.

We need to work with these and other community and faith-based organizations to bring literacy resources into the local neighborhoods where they are needed. One simple action that we can take is to make our facilities available to community organizations.

Together we can develop a system that could have a significant, lasting impression on our community. Our educational efforts should not stop at the 12th grade. We need to look at the whole community and use our talents and skills to foster change for the better.

We must remember that the school system is a reflection of the community, and we must lead the way toward improvement in our future. When Escambia becomes a high-performing school district, everyone will benefit: our students, the community, the area's economy and each of our lives. We can do this together, if we put away politics and focus on improvement!

*It is amazing what you can accomplish if
you do not care who gets the credit.*

Harry Truman

In addition, increasing pay for better employees will require both local and legislative efforts. Being more transparent and accountable to the public about decisions and policies is an area on which the school district will have to work. I believe that the **combined efforts** of school and community will overcome our challenges. Please note that the emphasis is on the words **combined efforts**. Alone, neither the school system nor the community can overcome these challenges.

In all these areas, I promise to set the standard and to work cooperatively and diligently with those who have the best interest of our students at the forefront of their efforts.

Better Student Achievement

They say the world has become too complex for simple answers. They are wrong.

Ronald Reagan

Positive change starts with a deliberate pursuit of excellence in our schools. While every candidate who has ever run for the office of Superintendent has promised the pursuit of excellence, few have delivered.

Excellence cannot be left to chance! At times we accidentally stumble onto excellence; however, accidental excellence is not good enough when talking about quality education!

In Cottage Hill, there is a saying: “Every now and then, even a blind hog can find an acorn.” The problem with accidental excellence is that it cannot be sustained nor can it be replicated and passed on to others. When excellence is achieved through deliberate means, the path is well-marked, and new generations of teachers and students can follow the trail to achieve excellence.

Leaders will be developed. We will actively seek and begin to train

future leaders within the system. Current leaders (principals and department heads) will participate in continuing education components which insure their leadership skills are up to date and that they possess the skills and knowledge required for moving the school district toward excellence in student achievement.

Transforming low-performing schools...

Those who say it cannot be done should not interrupt the person doing it.

Chinese Proverb

Low-performing schools are being transformed into higher-performing schools all across the country, and Escambia County has made some progress in this area; but we need to do more. Paramount to greater progress in changing low-performing schools to high-performing ones based on the Florida accountability system is a committed, consistent and concerted effort.

Improving low-performing schools can be accomplished if we adhere to the following guidelines:

1. Insuring that strong leaders who feel the urgent need to change are in charge,
2. Focusing on improving instruction by using data to set goals, changing instruction to meet the goals, monitoring progress and creating real time adjustments to classroom instruction,

3. Providing visible improvements early in the process to show the school community that progress is being made,
4. Assembling a committed staff that will remain with the school over time (including administrators, teachers, and support personnel).

In addition to these guidelines, school reform and restructuring is all about what teachers do in their classes. It is vital that restructuring efforts are carefully aligned with teaching and learning. True restructuring requires time for school staff and community leaders to internalize the revised system and gain the skills necessary to make the shift. Often, unrealistic timelines create situations where progress is more symbolic than effective.

As Superintendent, I will provide leadership which balances the need for results with the resources and time available. High standards of performance should be the norm throughout the school district. If we know what works and how to do it, why not implement those practices throughout all schools? Our current method does not provide a formal mechanism for sharing best practices.

While many educators share ideas with their colleagues at the school site, few are shared system-wide. Many good ideas to solve problems relating to academic achievement are generated at schools; however, they are not always shared with all, particularly, low-performing schools.

Standardization of best practices...

It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

Eleanor Roosevelt

Standardization of best practices is used very effectively in the business community; it also can be used in the school system. As Superintendent, I will promote and support standardized practices that can be implemented in all schools.

However, the Superintendent must not impose top-down solutions with unrealistic timelines. Solutions demand adequate time for changes to be internalized.

Increased student achievement is significantly affected by the role of the building level administrators. In order for the administrators to be more effective, they need to have more local control over their schools, including their budgets. With increased control, each school will be able to customize according to their demographic needs.

Empowering principals means that major financial decisions concerning their schools are made by them. It makes no sense that all major financial

expenditures are handled at the district level only. Individual school-level administrators need more control in order to meet the demographic needs of their individual schools. When principals are given more autonomy, they can make localized adjustments which will enable them to deliver significant results.

Because Escambia County has a high mobility rate, many students attend a number of different district schools in one year. Consequently, it is imperative that we develop and implement a common scope and sequence, created by a consensus of teachers, for students at all schools in the same course/grade.

Principals and teachers must be committed to following the order of instruction so that when children move from one school to another, they will not have gaps in their learning. Without a common scope and sequence of learning, followed by common assessments, the system creates fragmented learning. With no standardized framework and teaching sequence, we guarantee failure for many students.

A standardized framework will not prevent teachers from utilizing their own special talents. Rather, it will simply provide them a specific order in which

skills should be taught. Teachers are free to be as creative and innovative as they wish to be in teaching skills. Again, this is a simple and good practice that has not been used uniformly or effectively in our district.

Using the FCAT...

Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.

Henry Ford

Our school district, like all the other districts in the state, evaluates student progress by using the FCAT as a measuring tool. Because emphasis placed upon the test has clouded the purpose for teaching skills, “the tail has begun to wag the dog.” By that expression, I mean many educators become so entangled in teaching to the test that they deny students the opportunity to learn the skills.

You have read that even as an administrator, I have continued to teach. With pride I can say, every student I have continued to teach and tutor has passed the FCAT. **Never** do I teach to the test. Instead, I teach the skills. Consequently, students pass the test because they have learned the skills that were being tested.

I am reminded of a story about two farmers, Ed and John, who lived on adjoining farms. Each farmer bought a steer to raise and sell at the annual county fair. Both the farmers’ steers were approximately the same weight when they were purchased.

Ed was careful to feed his steer a carefully selected blend of grains for his particular breed. He insured that his steer had access to clean water and a place to get out of the elements during bad weather.

John, on the other hand, fed his steer any feed that was on sale, let the steer drink out of a polluted farm pond and did not have a shed to shelter the steer from the elements. But he expended a hefty sum of money to purchase an automatic scale. He put that steer on the scale daily, carefully weighing and recording the steer's weight. Sometimes he looked across the fence and looked at Ed's steer, which seemed to be looking healthy and rapidly gaining weight.

"Only one thing to do," he thought, "I will weigh my steer *twice* a day."

The weighing took so much time that John sometimes forgot to replenish the feed in the trough. Many days John's steer did not eat enough to maintain his weight, much less make any gains.

When time for the county fair rolled around, John had daily detailed weight records for his steer, which would make an auditor proud; but he was disappointed that the steer weighed only

six hundred pounds and did not win a ribbon.

Ed's steer, however, won the blue ribbon, weighed over nine hundred pounds and was sold for two dollars more per pound than John's steer.

Obviously, Ed had done what he was supposed to do, but John had spent both his time and money on the wrong thing.

So it is with the FCAT. We have become so obsessed with giving the test that we have forgotten the purpose of the test, which is to measure the skills of the student. **If we teach the *skills*, students will learn. If we teach the *test*, students may not learn the *skills*.** By teaching the skills, teachers are empowered and become free to employ creative tools that make learning fun and relevant.

***Relevant and rigorous
curriculum...***

*To raise the expectations of others, we
must first raise the expectations of
ourselves.*

Robin Crow

With the rapidity of technological change in the 21st century, as never before, our public education institutions must address curriculum changes that will prepare students for occupations, professions or careers that do not exist today. In addition, we are also obligated to provide them traditional skills in math, science and language that will serve as useful tools for navigating their futures. All our curricula must become both rigorous and relevant in order to prepare our students to live and compete in a shrinking world.

Challenging our academically advanced students...

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

Martin Luther King Jr.

In our efforts to insure that all students learn to the best of their abilities, the academically advanced students are frequently underserved. Programs differ from school to school. Many different programs exist, but a standardized delivery model is not currently in place. The result is that too often unchallenged advanced students get bored, get lazy, or get in trouble. In order to provide an equitable education for them, we need to accelerate them to the level of their academic abilities, not to the level of their chronological peers.

In some cases, grade-skipping is appropriate, depending on the social and emotional maturity of the child. However, single subject acceleration should be promoted at all levels. Acceleration as an intervention is strongly supported by decades of research but is largely ignored in most schools.

We also need to set up a system that encourages academic risk at the high school level. For example, many high school students often enroll in average classes where they can easily make an “A” and protect their Grade Point Average (GPA). We need to change grading scales so that advanced classes are rated on six points instead of four points – this change would mean that students could take an advanced class and make a “C” while still receiving the same weight for GPA as an “A” in the average class. Then students will challenge themselves and achieve a much deeper and richer education.

High-performing students should have increased opportunities to receive college credit while attending high school. The school district’s partnerships with Pensacola Junior College and the University of West Florida should be strengthened so that more students can explore opportunities. Online classes can provide additional coursework not currently offered within the school district and will allow students to pursue courses in which they have an interest.

Focusing on Career Exploration...

It's kind of fun to do the impossible.

Walt Disney

Forty percent (40%) of Escambia County high school graduates will not attend college nor seek post secondary training. The school district has not adequately addressed the needs of these students. Students are graduating with no marketable skills and end up in minimum wage jobs or unemployed. To address these issues, we need to focus on career exploration beginning in the middle school grades.

Although every student in our schools will not pursue a college education, we continue to routinely promote a traditional academic track throughout our system. Instead, we must offer curriculum opportunities that lead to industry certification at the high school level.

These programs enable a student to begin working toward a career as early as their first year of high school. We need to create community-focused programs like the Gulf Power Academy at West Florida High School of Advanced Technology, and the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical Academy in Okaloosa County.

Programs such as these equip students to enjoy careers that enable them to earn wages above the minimum. Far too many of our students are not prepared for successful employment upon graduation, and this situation must change.

Students should graduate with both academic and work force skills. **Students should learn so they are prepared to earn.** Currently, our school district graduates 76% of our students, meaning that approximately one student out of four will not graduate with their classmates. Many of these students can be helped if we provide educational opportunities focused on work force development. When the system offers little that is relevant for them to learn, many students vote with their feet and exit without completing high school. When we begin focusing on career goals and interests beginning in the middle schools, we will identify these students and deliver an education that they can use to enjoy a better life. These are not radical ideas, but rather simple obtainable solutions that make sense for our district.

Imagine our schools with committed principals, teachers and staff who set instructional goals based on real

time data. Imagine our schools using best practices and sharing results throughout the system. Imagine our building-level principals assuming more ownership when they have greater control of their budgets. Imagine relevant and rigorous curricula which prepare all students for their choice of either advanced study or immediate employment.

These “imagines” can become realities. With the collaboration of passionate professionals, anything is possible!

I am proposing a common sense approach which includes personal accountability. This approach makes companies successful and allows them to stand out in their areas of expertise.

This approach can also make our school system an example of excellence. The shift in our priorities and emphasis has to start at the top. Can you see how such a shift will empower people and increase student achievement?

Better School Safety and Discipline

Once you learn to quit, it becomes a habit. The harder you work, the harder it is to surrender.

Vince Lombardi

For the past ten years, the Escambia School District has experienced a declining enrollment. For many families, the choice to send their children to private schools or to educate them at home is directly connected to safety and discipline in schools.

We must improve the safety and discipline in the public schools not only to prevent declining enrollment but to insure better quality instruction and academic achievement.

There are a number of key elements to improving school safety and discipline. The first is a new approach to discipline.

All schools will be required to develop and implement a school-wide discipline plan. This plan can and should be customized to the needs of each school community. The plan will be published and posted in each classroom, so that all students, teachers and parents in that school will know the

rules and the penalties for breaking those rules. Everyone will clearly understand the expectations for behavior and the consequences of noncompliance.

Additionally, we will ask community leaders – including law enforcement and faith-based leaders – to help resolve neighborhood discipline problems. Many discipline problems in our schools are the result of disagreements which begin in the home or the neighborhoods and spill over into the schools.

A public/private coalition will help stabilize many communities, allowing our students to focus more on education when they are at school. This approach will need some fine tuning, but I believe it can make a significant difference in changing the culture and minimizing disruption during the school day. The standards will be set with help from the neighborhoods, and those who break the rules will be disciplined. Again this program is simple, straightforward and accountable.

Creative consequences will need to be developed. Schools have lost many of the effective consequences of the past. When I was a student, the threat of three licks from the principal's paddle was

sufficient to keep my behavior in line. No, I am not recommending a return to corporal punishments (although I have spoken with many during the campaign that suggest this as an option). I am suggesting that consistent enforcement of fair and equitable consequences for the breaking of established rules must be a priority in every classroom in every school.

One of the few consequences used by schools today is out-of-school suspension. However, this practice has become ineffective in deterring inappropriate student behaviors. As a matter of fact, the Escambia County School District suspends students at a rate almost double the state average as was indicated on a previous chart. When students are suspended from school, they are given failing grades for all subjects missed during the suspension period.

Don't misunderstand my resolve for dealing with serious behavior incidents – there are some actions committed by students that absolutely demand they be separated from the general population. For the serious infractions, there must be consequences that match. In these instances, discipline must be swift and sufficient to insure the

safety of the school environment.

Several of our high schools receive low grades due to the performance of students in the lower quartile. It is no secret that the lowest performing students are likely to be the ones that are chronically absent and are more likely to be suspended from school. Here is a profound statement – so simple that everyone can see the truth in it: If a student is not present in the classroom, that student has a difficult time keeping up and learning.

Community services, on-campus work detail and in-school suspension are among some of the options that might be more effective in changing student behavior for many of the minor offenses. In-school suspensions can allow for students to receive instruction not only in subject matter but also in how to behave within the accepted standards.

As Superintendent, I plan to establish clear expectations including a student disciplinary plan. School personnel, religious and community leaders will be asked to help develop this plan. Furthermore, we will seek greater parental input and support in both the development and implementation of a better discipline plan.

Training for school administrators, faculties and support personnel will focus on prevention. Intervention strategies will be clearly defined and consistently applied.

As schools improve their ability to provide clear standards for discipline, great dividends will be realized in student achievement. The school district's journey toward excellence **requires progress** in the area of discipline and safety.

Better Pay for Better Employees

*Education is the most powerful weapon
which you can use to change the world*
Nelson Mandela

After the 2008 legislative session, Florida ranks behind states like Alabama and Mississippi in per pupil spending. This is our reality, and we need to take positive steps to keep good teachers in our district.

My experience over the years has taught me that good teachers are more focused on having administrative support for curriculum and programs over increased salary. No one goes into education for the money, but rather a love for students and a passion to teach. Do not be mistaken; we must pay teachers well. They deserve a fair living wage.

In addition, we must develop programs that reward exceptional employees in ways other than just additional money. At the same time, we must work with employee organizations to establish procedures for effectively dealing with low-performing employees.

On the financial front, we have been competing with both Santa Rosa and Okaloosa counties for the best teachers in the past five to ten years; and now, with Florida's cutbacks, we also must be concerned about Baldwin County, Alabama.

I believe that we can keep many good educators if we create the right culture, a culture that rewards excellence and creates an environment of empowerment. If we purposefully recruit high-performing teachers and support them, they will stay. What we cannot offer in wages must be offset in environment.

The best teachers will always be drawn to the best teaching environments. Good teachers like to teach. Good employees want to be effective and make a difference in their students' lives. Together, we can give employees an opportunity to do that right here in Escambia County when the system is able to

- Improve employee selection and retention,
- Purposefully recruit high-performing employees,

- Reward and recognize the high-performing employees that make a difference,
- Work with the employee organizations to establish the process and procedures for dealing effectively with low performers, and
- Stop the practice of moving low-performers from school to school.

Better Transparency and Accountability

*A person who never made a mistake
- never tried anything new.*

Albert Einstein

Throughout this book I have outlined many ideas that can take our school district to new levels of greatness. Yes, greatness! I believe it is possible. We cannot spend our way to a better school system. Any significant change will come from a paradigm shift in our culture and system of operation. Positive change starts with a deliberate pursuit of excellence. As Superintendent, I will address the major areas listed below. I have touched on many of them earlier, but I feel it is important to create a list of goals to which I can be held accountable. Here are my commitments to the students of our school district:

1. Evidence-based Leadership

Leadership begins with the Superintendent. An objective accountability system will be created with behaviors aligned to goals and values.

2. Leadership Development

Leadership training will be provided and required for all current and aspiring school leaders. Leaders who make a positive difference in their schools will be sought out, nurtured and recognized.

3. Standardization of Employee Behaviors

To achieve lasting results throughout the system, all employees must be made aware of and expected to follow consistent professional behaviors.

4. Individual Accountability

To require accountability demands that responsibility and control be given to decision makers as close as possible to the level of implementation. When we take ownership of our areas of responsibilities, *we shift from an owner versus a renter mentality.*

5. Recognition of Those Who Make a Difference

In addition to school leaders, other employees who make a positive difference in their areas will be sought out and recognized.

6. Stakeholder Satisfaction

Starting at the top and working down to the school level, evaluations will include the input of students, parents, teachers, educational support personnel, school administrators and district staff.

7. Continuous Improvement

We will create and nurture a process for continuous improvement which focuses on quality and results.

8. Service Recovery

When things go wrong, we will create a process to follow and establish clear lines of communication between the public and the school district.

9. **Public Recognition of Excellence**

We will communicate what is right with public education in Escambia County through various media.

10. **Quarterly Scorecard**

Improvement must be measureable. The public will have access to a scorecard that shows the progress that is being made toward the goals.

To accomplish these goals, we will have to make changes at many levels. First, we must **reorganize the budget** and make it functionally efficient. Today's economy has made everyone, individually and collectively, face a budget crunch. This crunch requires us to make changes in order to survive.

Because budget cuts have been made in many different areas in the past few years, we have a **piecemeal model** with no clear direction or focus. This model makes it difficult to function and must be changed.

We must align the budget with our vision. We cannot cut the budget randomly, and we must spend our revenues in the most cost-effective manner possible. The budget reorganization must include the following actions:

1. Eliminate unnecessary duplication in programs and services.
2. Spend less on non-instructional programs and services.
3. Streamline bureaucracy.
4. Maximize flexibility (decentralize budget decisions).
5. Insist on scientific proof that programs are working.
6. Capitalize on economies of scale.
7. Shop competitively and wisely.
8. Examine big-ticket items for return on investment.
9. Conduct compliance, performance, energy and utilization audits.
10. Maximize technology.

Will this happen overnight?
No, of course not. But we will **begin** this process, ultimately creating a new

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Will this happen overnight?
No, of course not. But we will **begin** this process, ultimately creating a new

structure that will lead to efficient and effective spending. Nothing will be sacred when it comes to reviewing our budgets and expenses. We need to put our money on the front line, giving teachers the tools and equipment to teach children in the best way possible.

Incentives to save and come in under budget will help eliminate the “spend it all” mentality that currently exists within our budgeting process. Under the new budget system, principals and department heads will have more responsibility for their budgets.

Our new system will provide real time data to monitor spending more wisely throughout the year and help save money. We will harvest money-saving ideas from stakeholders and develop incentives to reward those who can create cost-saving strategies.

Schools will benefit with extra revenues that can be spent to enhance the educational experience. When a school saves money, it will not be punished the next year by getting less (as is done in our current system). Instead, schools will be awarded the savings to be used the next year, thus promoting long term planning.

When this practice is implemented, everyone who has a stake in the school has incentives to save in all areas and put money to better use.

Are you beginning to see the vision? Are you ready for our district to move to a higher level? Can you see the possibilities that are going to be created for our students?

All these ideas, and many more we have not begun to imagine, will become realities when we change our culture to a transparent, accountable program we can all support.

Funding will be one of the greatest challenges facing every school district in Florida over the next few years, but together we will meet this challenge. Transparency and accountability to Escambia County residents are necessary to insure that taxpayer monies are being used as cost-effectively as possible in meeting the needs of our students. Accountability will begin with the Superintendent. I will walk the talk.

Making It Work...

We must become the change we want to see in the world.

Mahatma Gandhi

To accomplish the goals set in the areas of student achievement, safety and discipline, employee pay, and transparency and accountability to taxpayers, we will have to make changes at many levels.

I will set up a transition team that will focus on the question: What administrative and support structure is required for a school district of 42,000 students? Led by a group of volunteers, the transition team members will be selected based on the following criteria:

1. Expertise in various areas of our education system
2. No personal gain or loss through the reorganization process

This team will seek input and assistance from all stakeholders. Ideas from varied sources will be valued and welcomed. The team will be tasked with reviewing, reporting and establishing a

structure that is aligned with our needs, vision and goals.

If you believe that the best days of our school district are still ahead of us, join me in making this vision a reality. Together we will create an outstanding school system: a system where the students want to go to school and all students achieve to the best of their abilities; a system where employees feel valued, feel ownership and are well-paid; a system where local businesses work cooperatively with the schools and are confident that qualified and trained employees can enter the work force upon graduation; and a system where taxpayers realize a positive return on their investment.

I will collaborate to provide leadership, service, and support for all learners through the following actions:

- Provide, promote, and support environments that result in world-class learning.
- Secure and develop resources (human, fiscal, and informational) that support and promote the district's mission.

- Develop and maintain an organization based on trust, teamwork, communication, commitment and competence.
- Optimize customer satisfaction.

I have come a long way from my rural upbringing in northern Escambia County, but this I still know: we all want the best for all our children. The biggest part of their success and happiness begins with a good – no – an **excellent** education. Let's make this happen for each and every student. They deserve it!

Wrapping Up

Every man is enthusiastic at times. One man has enthusiasm for thirty minutes; another man has it for thirty days. But it is the man who has it for thirty years who makes a success in life.

Edward B. Butler

*Identifying the next leader for the Escambia School District is not easy. You must examine the prospects to make the right choice. While you are examining the candidates this year, here are a few characteristics you might consider:**

1. Leadership in the past. The best predictor of what an individual will accomplish in the future is what that person has accomplished in the past.

2. The capacity to create or catch vision. When leaders talk to people about the future, they want their listeners' eyes to light up and for them to feel the 'fire in the belly'.

3. A constructive spirit of discontent. Some people would call this criticism, but there's a big difference in being constructively discontent and being critical. Leaders feel the

unscratchable itch. Satisfaction only comes by moving forward.

4. Practical ideas. Not everybody with practical ideas is a leader, of course, but leaders seem to have instincts which allow them to identify which ideas will work -- often referred to as an ability to think linearly. Leaders have the vision to see the end and then connect the dots to move the organization toward the goal.

5. A willingness to take responsibility. Leaders will bear the work load. Leaders never ask subordinates to perform tasks they aren't willing to take on themselves.

6. A completion factor. In the military, it is called "completed staff work." The half-cooked meal isn't what you want. Leaders will see the task through to the end.

7. Mental toughness. No one can lead without being criticized or without facing discouragement. Leaders will set high expectations and goals.

8. Peer respect. Peer respect doesn't necessarily reveal ability but can show character and personality. Peers have observed past performance and are often able to provide insight into drive and motivation.

9. Family respect. The family's feelings toward someone reveal much about his or her potential to lead. Leadership begins in the home.

10. A quality that makes people listen to them. Potential leaders have a “holding court” quality about them. When they speak, people listen.

* Adapted from
Fred Smith, LEADERSHIP JOURNAL; Fall
1996, Vol. XVII, No. 4, Page 30

Words to Live By

If

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
‘ Or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
And - which is more - you’ll be a Man, my son!

Rudyard Kipling

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