

TRUE PERSPECTIVES SEMINAR – Octo 19- Public Schools

On October 19, SIRC hosted a seminar on the issue of public schools in Chatham County. Panelists were:

:



Rick Muller

CFA, Chatham Capital Group, Inc.



Christy Edwards

Executive Director of Horizons Savannah



Shawn Kachmar

SCCPSS Board Vice President and local attorney

Rick Muller led off with a financial analysis perspective from an expert in the private sector, used to penetrating where successes and setbacks exist in an enterprise. He quickly noticed how the education establishment in Savannah has grown a bit bloated, while meaningful evaluations are sorely lacking for the tons of extra funds poured into the system more than \$100 million per year adjusted for inflation.

And, given the declining public student population, per student spending is up over 60% in nine years. The Chatham County School Superintendent salary is in the top 1%ile in the US, and the top 20 other employees are in the top 6%.

ESPLOST began some 15 years ago and pumped over \$1 billion into infrastructure, on top of the almost half a billion dollars a year in teacher compensation. Prior to 2008, and the first ESPLOST, infrastructure spending needed bonding, and spent less than \$100 million over five years.

Sorely lacking are metrics of comparison to see if those dollars are having a meaningful effect on the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic.

Help

Help for Students

Next was the overview by Christy Evans, a representative of the Horizon Group, whose mission is to get into the details of how disadvantaged students of meager means might succeed in getting a basic education. (Recall that over 60% of Savannah's public school students are close the poverty level.)

Horizon's initial venture into Savannah was with 230 students in four schools. Their emphasis has been on how poverty has had a profound effect on the ability to learn, which is very different from middle class kid approach school. Horizon is acutely aware of the famous Mazlow's hierarchy of human needs. You can't achieve learning success if you are failing at basic human need levels of safety and nutrition.

Especially harmful has been the trauma of the pandemic causing the removal of children from in class learning environment. Surveys have revealed that over 60% of students in the past year have had some thoughts about suicide, and 70% have despaired in thinking they can get help.

Part of Horizon's methods include individual discussions with students on how they feel about their plight. (The implication is that kids near the poverty level are not getting much help from a parent figure in the home.)

SEL is not CRT (Critical Race Theory)

Social Emotional Learning is an emerging popular theory on how "the contrast between a child's experiences at home and those in school deeply affects the child's psychosocial development and that this in turn shapes academic achievement." It could explain the widening gap in educational success between the haves and the have-nots. (Another explanation could lie in the poor learning success in the birth to three year-old gap in mothering skills that is being addressed in another Savannah venture of Parent University that stresses the efficacy of very early nurturing.)

The School Board

Shawn Kachmar, School Board Vice President, represents our District in , the County, and brings a management perspective that heretofore was not a strong suit on the oversight of the Superintendent. Return on investment analyses were foreign to them in evaluating new projects.

Yet, over 90% of the Operations budget is prescribed spending from state mandates. Thus this large bureaucracy is hard to control.

He has been concerned about rumors of introducing Critical Race Theory in the curriculum, but has been assured that only the state curriculum is used in Savannah. He has personally monitored on line classes this past year, while his daughter was given them at her school on Wilmington Island, and saw no evidence of CRT. He also is in contact with many parents and many teachers in Savannah, and they confirm no such incursion.

However, he is aware of the Superintendent's purchase, without Board discussion, of a potential new Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum from an organization known as Panorama that has ties to the Biden Administration, which is pushing CRT. Attorney General Merrick Garland's daughter is married to Panorama's founder. Panorama has close ties to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg.

Savannah also has a problem with school bus drivers, who threatened a strike, if they didn't get parity with some of the generous features of the teachers, e.g., access to their retirement program. Many students are enrolled in some of Savannah's charter school programs which requires busing outside their home district, and funding for that was curtailed during the pandemic.

A commercial driver's license (CDL) is needed to drive a truck, and there are limits if you are under age 21. (it would be a good thing to push for way more CDLs, given the backlog of containers at the port, that have limited transportation options right now.)

Q&A

First comment was on the fundamentals that do not seem to be stressed in public schools. You must read to learn, and too many are not reading at grade level. And other of the three Rs as well. Are the teachers in grade school not even versed in basic arithmetic?

Next was the observation that Savannah stayed too long on virtual learning, and some 260 students left for private schools, that did not have the same fear of in classroom teaching. Many may not return as they have developed some kinship with their new classmates. Did the School Board have a say in the prolonged virtual learning or was it the Superintendent's choice? And what role did the teachers union have in it.

Next, we need much more accountability and transparency with respect to the School Board.

Also, there is a fear that politics are creeping into the curriculum, if not overtly then tacitly from teachers who are too liberal.

There is also evidence that some teachers are "teaching to the test" to artificially boost test scores.

And what is the full story behind the County buying the Panorama system on SEL, Social Emotional Learning? Is that just a pretext for creating unrest by probing for presumed underlying racism?