

Manatee River News

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RiverOpinion

For Once, Nothing to Make Fun About

Jeff Berlinicke
Staff Writer

This is going to be a nice column. It's not filled with cynical comments trying to criticize that which is wrong in Manatee County and the world. I like to make fun of things, but not today.

It's about public schools, one of the most criticized institutions of them all. There's an awful lot wrong with the public school system. You read about that in the papers every day. You hear about it from local television bubbleheads every night. There are gangs, there is violence, we had a plagiarism scandal at one of the East Manatee high schools this year, more than enough complaints about redistricting to report, and yet, there are some great things going on in public schools right here in East Manatee.

There are hundreds of teachers in East Manatee alone, making about the same amount of money in a year as a major league baseball player earns in one day. They hear the criticism and it hurts. Ninety-nine percent of them are doing a commendable job and work an awful lot more hours than they are paid for.

Look what they are turning out. For the most part, quality kids who are earning decent FCAT scores and giving back to the community. You hear about the guns and thugs running through school hallways, but since September, there hasn't been one time I have walked through a school hallway and felt threatened, even in some of the high schools that are considered "dangerous." Take a look at the story we have on Page 1 today about the kids at Witt Elementary who are fourth-graders doing community service work for free. I am not singling out the Witt kids, but I spent most of my career working as a sportswriter hanging out in the locker rooms of major league baseball players and NFL players and have yet to find more than a handful of athletes more articulate and well-spoken than the kids at Witt. Those kids weren't the best and the brightest. I called the teacher, Jamie Reagan and asked her for four or five kids who could describe the work they do in the community. I specifically asked for a few kids because, as any reporter who works with kids on a frequent basis knows that more than five kids at any interview has about as much organization as a prison riot. She put the names of every kid in her class and they were chosen at random. (By the way, I need to qualify something. For two years I covered the Tampa Bay Devil Rays by night and taught at a local kindergarten by day. I have experienced battles

with teachers, administrators and never want to try it again).

I spoke to the kids and they just exemplified what is right with schools, especially in Manatee County. At Palmetto Elementary, many of the kids use English as a second language. They have filled many of my notebooks with insight and good deeds they do for their schools. The same goes for Mills, Braden River, Tillman and dozens of other elementary schools that are only in the newspapers when something goes wrong.

It's the same with the high schools. At our newspaper, we cover four high schools - Braden River, Lakewood Ranch, Southeast and Palmetto. For every ugly incident you hear about on the front page, check out the schools section in any local newspaper, and not just this one. It's just that the achievers go on page eight and the bad apples are above the fold on page one.

It's not a perfect school system, but neither are the private schools, few of which we have in East Manatee.

But I would suggest you check out the back pages of the newspapers to see some of the good coming out of the schools. There's a lot there. Give credit to the teachers, especially to the middle school teachers who had to grovel for a pay increase in the past two months. Give credit to the teachers who unfairly have to sweat out FCAT results and spend their entire year working toward that small window in late February-early March when their school has its next budget on the line as a result of their success.

So that's the feel-good column of the year. Next week I can get back to making fun of things. By the way, there's a new Chinese buffet in Downtown Bradenton that still isn't close enough to our office, but at least it's something.



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