

Up Close and Personal:

An Interview with FADSS 2017-18 President Broward Schools Superintendent Robert Runcie

As the newly installed president of the Florida Association of District Schools Superintendent (FADSS), what are your priorities for the organization and what do you want your legacy to be?



Robert W. Runcie

We are facing our most challenging moment in public education in Florida as signaled by HB 7069. The key lesson from what is happening in our state legislature and the federal government is that we must work to proactively create a compelling vision of public education for the 21st century rather than just reacting to the annual playbook of the State Legislature.

It is time for our school boards, superintendents, teachers, school district employees, parents, PTAs, unions, business leaders, ... everyone who has a stake in the success of our public schools ... needs to come together and fight for the future of our children.

We must stay focused on doing what's right for our children. Remember, that when our kids win, we win.

What do you feel is the most pressing issue facing public education as a whole?

We need to redesign public education and the teaching profession to better prepare our students and nation for the emerging challenges of the 21st century including globalization, technology and climate change.

We must professionalize teaching – address the quality of teacher preparation programs, significantly improve educator compensation, and treat our teachers as professionals rather than lower-wage, unionized factory workers. In Florida, we need to move toward the national average on per pupil funding. Florida currently allocates \$7,300 per student while the national average is over \$11,000 per student. We need to be smarter with how we spend the money we have but we will also need to increase investment in children and teachers to be competitive.

You have stated: “The battle for quality education is the social justice cause of our time. If you believe that every child has the right to a quality education, then there is no more important work than providing the right leadership to dramatically transform public education in this country.”

To that end, what factors need to be in play to "dramatically transform public education" and ultimately increase student achievement?

A few thoughts on this. First, we must strive to achieve equity in access to programs and resources for all students regardless of socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, or zip code. Second, highly effective teachers and administrators must be deployed to where schools are struggling the most. We must put our most talented people where there is the greatest need.

Finally, we must create the environment where students can be successful. This means shifting our mindset to fixing the environment and not the student. This is a change in perspective - away from fixing the student and toward being about improving the environment, and giving students the opportunity to demonstrate the competencies and assets they already have. Similarly, we need to move from assessing just students toward also assessing environments.

Conversely, what barriers do you think contribute to the erosion of public education that ultimately hinder progress towards equitable education opportunities for all students?

Public education has been hacked. By this I mean that those with access to large amounts of money – private interests – are going after the \$800 billion that is spent in this country on K-12 education.

All students deserve a high-quality education, regardless of whether they attend an innovative district school or a charter school. Achieving this goal requires a level playing field between innovative district schools and charter schools.

The debate about charters, which make up about 10% of public school student enrollment, is misplaced. It is a distraction from the larger issues of adequate per pupil funding, professionalizing teaching, closing achievement gaps, addressing the impact of poverty on children ... issues that impact every child regardless of what type of school they attend.

What is your proudest accomplishment as a superintendent?

Two things in particular stand out: rethinking school discipline and increasing student achievement.

In the 2011-2012 school year, after Broward County was identified as the state leader in the number of school related arrests, Broward County Public Schools set a goal of developing approaches that would keep students in classrooms and out of courtrooms. Through a collaborative effort, starting with the local NAACP chapter and extending to several other key community, law enforcement, juvenile justice and social services organizations we created a shared vision to improve student conduct and adult responses to student behavior. Since then student arrests have declined by 65% and behavior referrals have declined by 38%. Also, 90% of the students in the district's behavior intervention program called PROMISE have not had repeat offenses. We are now recognized as a national model for rethinking student discipline.

The next big area success is our progress on student achievement. In 2016/17, 96 percent of our district schools earned an A, B, or C with the majority of those schools maintaining or increasing their letter grade. We reduced the number of district schools earning a "D" or "F." Only two schools remained an "F" compared to 10 in 2016 and 24 in 2015. Graduation rates are at their highest level in many years. We are trending in the right direction. The credit goes to our teachers, administrators, and 32,000 employees who work tirelessly each day to give our kids a quality education experience.

Any additional comments & thoughts you would like to share?

I believe that my story - immigrant, low-income economic status; first in family to graduate from high school; moving on to graduate from one of the most prestigious colleges, Harvard College; and having a successful business career - is a testament to the power of public education to transform lives and realize the American dream. So this work is personal as I'd like to leave a legacy of closing achievement gaps, improving graduation rates and post-secondary success, and giving kids the same opportunities I had.