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OUR VIEW: Sarasota County schools have been left with a mess

The Herald- Tribune Editorial Board

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Remember that bestseller, “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,” which reduced life’s complexities to a few simple rules?

Reading the Herald-Tribune’s coverage on the unfortunate result of the Sarasota County School District’s special education policies, we can’t help thinking about what children in this district should be learning in kindergarten, if they didn’t know it before.

- Play fair.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody.

According to education reporter Ryan McKinnon, the School Board will meet today behind closed doors to consider its legal options in a lawsuit brought by parents of a student who was transferred out of mainstream classes into Access Points, a program for mentally challenged students. The family’s attorney described this alternative schooling as “glorified babysitting.”

Notably, that swift and unannounced transfer in 2012 exempted the student from taking the state’s standardized test, FCAT. The scores from this annual test — and its 2015 successor, the Florida Standards Assessments — dictate the fortunes of individual public schools, even though each school is duty-bound to do everything possible for all students that cross its threshold.

It can be argued — and has been, repeatedly — that the state is not playing fair by imposing the same measure to very different educational environments. It would appear that, in response, some school administrators decided that they wouldn’t play fair either. In other words, they would cheat, elevating test scores by filtering the pool of students who sat for the test.

Now this local case — initially involving a student named DJ but potentially applicable to

some 113 students who may have been deliberately underschooled — has attracted the attention of inspectors from the Department of Education. It's an ugly story, getting uglier by the minute.

Today's topic at the School Board meeting, reportedly, is how best to contain the money bleed.

“The total cost of obeying the judge's order could easily be \$100,000,” McKinnon wrote, “but it's not that dollar amount that has district officials most worried — it's the potential cost of the more than 100 students who may have also been wrongly placed in the alternative curriculum.”

Ironically, this is the day on which the board was originally set to meet to determine the fate of its embattled superintendent, Todd Bowden. But that's a mess already swept off the table. What Bowden left behind here threatens to become a spreading stain, and the cleanup should not be left solely to the lawyers and the money people.

First and foremost, the question of how to put this right — to the extent these students' lost opportunities can be put right — should be decided by educators. It will mean paying tuitions at private institutions that can offer compensatory schooling, or coming up with something in-house that would demonstrably be even better for these children.

Again, the mess here is not the money — even though it's a nauseating amount of money. It's what we have done to these kids.

Once the cleanup begins, our school district must take the step where we say we're sorry. And part of that overdue apology should be a focus on preventing this from happening to more students in the future.

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