

Public Education Network Sarasota Launches First Partnership Meeting to Address Collaborative Advocacy for Public Education

Editorial by Pamela Hart, Ph.D., & Jill Lewis-Spector, Ed.D.
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Citizens are asking why there is so much acrimony on the Sarasota School Board in the once tranquil community and why the grassroots organization, Public Education Network Sarasota (PEN-Sarasota), is needed to protect the A-rated school district in Florida. There is ample explanation.

For the past two years, citizens have observed numerous decisions made by the Sarasota School Board that were eroding the reputation of Sarasota Public Schools. It began with differences of opinion about children and staff wearing masks as the nation endured the Covid pandemic. Just-installed School Board members fired the popular and successful Superintendent Brenden Asplen without cause, followed by an assault on freedom of speech and the establishment of an unrealistic book-banning policy. Board responses to legislation from Tallahassee created an unsafe environment for black and brown minorities, LBGTQ+ children, and staff. There was an alarming sense of fear occurring among teachers and administrators as policies were established. Classroom libraries disappeared or were covered over; children were denied access. Books were removed from school libraries.

One Board member urged hiring of an unqualified, inexperienced company originating from Hillsdale College to conduct a districtwide improvement plan. Citizens rallied against this and won, but they did not succeed in their effort to prevent the passage of a religious for-profit charter school: The Classical Academy. The school Board has also been complacent, never advocating against the passage of Florida's universal voucher system that drains significant taxpayer dollars from our public schools to send children to private schools, including religious schools.

The Sarasota School Board has ignored citizens' concerns and seems more than willing to accept whatever harmful policies are imposed on our district's public schools. Multiple organizations have spoken at school Board meetings to no avail, and the Board has become increasingly partisan. Public Education Network Sarasota now brings together these organizations to amplify our voices and strengthen our resolve to stop the erosion of public education in Sarasota.

As a nonprofit, nonpartisan 501(c)(3) grassroots organization, we will address citizens' concerns and join forces with other nonpartisan organizations for the betterment of Sarasota's public schools. We launched our first informational event on April 10, 2024, and invited organizations to learn more about how we can inform the community and amplify their voices. While each organization will continue its individual work, there are advocacy initiatives that, undertaken together, will be more forceful. We will work alongside each other to strategize, and we will share our knowledge and experience to preserve, maintain, and enhance public education for ALL students in Sarasota County.

As Margaret Mead reminds us, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

There will be a second informational meeting (in person and on ZOOM) on June 12, 2024, from 1:00-2:30 p.m. Interested nonpartisan organizations should contact PEN-Sarasota Chair, Dr. Theoni Soublis, at Theoni@pensarasota.org.