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## School leader sounds legislative alarm



**Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeff Edison speaks to the people as well as to the County Commission during the Levy County Board of County Commissioners' meeting on Tuesday**

**Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison**

**© Dec. 20, 2017 at 3:07 p.m.**

**BRONSON –** Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeff

Edison told the Levy County Board of County Commissioners there are potential amendments to the Florida Constitution that are not good for the state.

Three proposals that the Constitution Revision Commission's Education Panel are proposing opposed by the Florida Association of District School Superintendents.

Edison gave the five County Commissioners a "press release" dated Nov. 30 from the Florida Association of District School Superintendents.

Florida superintendents of schools are not in support of the following three proposals:

- Elimination of Salaries for Elected School Board Members
- Appointed Superintendents of Schools Statewide
- Term Limits for Elected School Board Members

First readers who do not know about this commission yet, will want to see some historic perspective on that.

Following is information about the Constitution Revision Commission, as copied from its website.

The 2017-2018 Constitution Revision Commission (CRC) is the third of its kind in Florida history.

In 1968, Florida voters ratified three separate amendments rewriting significant portions of the Florida Constitution. One of those amendments included a provision requiring a CRC to convene and examine the Florida Constitution once every twenty years for possible changes, beginning in 1977. The first CRC convened in 1977-1978 and the second CRC convened in 1997-1998.

The 1977-1978 CRC, chaired by Sandy D'Alemberte, placed eight proposed constitutional amendments on the Florida ballot for voter consideration. None of the proposals were passed by Florida voters. However, proposals similar to the Commission's proposed changes were adopted in later years as part of the Florida Constitution or statute law, either by citizen ballot initiative or by legislative proposal.

The 1997-1998 CRC, chaired by Dexter Douglass, placed nine proposed constitutional amendments on the Florida ballot for voter consideration. Eight were passed by Florida voters. In 1998, CRC proposals required a simple majority to be passed by Florida voters (more than 50 percent). As of 2006, at least 60 percent of the vote is required to pass a constitutional amendment.

The 2017-2018 CRC, chaired by Carlos Beruff, held its organization meeting on March 20, 2017, and must complete its work by May 10, 2018, which is the deadline to submit its final report to the Florida Secretary of State. Since the last CRC convened in 1997-1998, Florida's

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population has grown by more than 5 million people and access to social media and the Internet has created an historic level of public input.

The substantive committees of the CRC are Bonding and Investments; Declaration of Rights; Education; Ethics and Elections; Executive; Finance and Taxation; General Provisions; Judicial; Legislative; and Local Government.

In presenting information about these three proposals, Edison said he did not come to the County Commission meeting to debate the three proposals that the FADSS is against, but rather to show how these matters relate to Levy County and the state as a whole.

Using some of the script from the “press release,” Edison noted that Florida is a vast and diverse state where “one-size-fits-all” mandates from the state are not the best method.

“As constitutional officers and ardent supporters of local control, superintendents fundamentally believe that the citizens in each local community have a better understanding of what is needed and appropriate for their community, and therefore should have the right to exercise local control in those decisions,” Edison said as he read the statement.

In regard to the 67 counties, Edison said there are 41 elected superintendents of schools. Therefore, more than half of the state has elected superintendents of schools.

In a telephonic conversation with Levy County School Board Member Chris Cowart on Wednesday afternoon (Dec. 20), he said there is a method for the people of Levy County to switch from having an elected superintendent to one that is appointed by the School Board. The people of this county, though, continue to want to be able to vote for the chief executive officer of the school system.

Edison on Tuesday said the one proposal that failed the first review was for the elimination of salaries for elected School Board members. Cowart on Wednesday said it has been tabled.

Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks said he believes that by changing the elected School Board positions to being volunteers rather than paid, and by having appointed rather than elected superintendents of schools, the network of interests that prefers charter schools, or some form of school other than public schools, are going to enjoy an advantage for their political purposes.

“It’s really a back door way to undermine the public school system,” County Commission Chairman Meeks said.

School Board members are paid salaries mandated by law. The range is between \$25,456 (Liberty County) and \$44,443 (Hillsborough County), depending on the school district size. With five School Board members in Levy County, the salaries alone are about \$125,000 a year.

Edison said it is his opinion that by not having an elected superintendent and by not paying School Board members, that will end local control.

In his telephone interview on Wednesday, School Board Member Cowart said he sees this as an extension of a belief expressed by Florida House of Representatives Speaker Richard Corcoran (R-Land O’ Lakes, Dist. 37), who is said to have noted on Twitter that he believes state leaders know more about what is good for local government than the people in local government.

Edison, in regard to giving an example of local control, said there is a proposed amendment to require the start of the school year to be no sooner than seven days before Labor Day. Edison said he sees this as being influenced by Orange County, and other counties where tourism is the key industry.

By controlling the start of the school year in this manner, Edison said, it helps the tourist industry keep school-age workers for a period of time when they need them.

Edison said he does not see this as an appropriate Florida Constitutional amendment. Edison said the start of the school year should be decided by local leaders rather than an amendment to the Florida Constitution.

Another proposal, he said, reverts the regulation of charter schools to a state level, rather than at the county School Board level. Right now, charter schools in Levy County (and the other

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66 Florida counties) are regulated by the local School Board. This amendment to the Florida Constitution would change that to the state level, if it gets on the ballot and if the voters then approved it.

In answering the question about this being part of a move to have more charter schools and less public schools, Edison said to look at the person sponsoring the proposed actions for voter to choose.

He also said he believes that if some of these issues reach the ballot, that the majority of Floridians will vote in favor of them, because they will see it as a method to reduce taxes – and not consider the broader impact that will have on schools.

As for the person who sponsored these bills, Commissioner Erika Donalds introduced all three proposals the FADSS opposes.

She is the wife of State Rep. Byron Donalds (R-Naples, Dist. 80). Rep. Byron Donalds is seen by some as a man who goes along with Speaker Corcoran as far as the state taking away local control.

Erika Donalds is a fourth generation Floridian from Tampa. She attended Florida State University and graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Science degree in Accounting, and later, earned a Master's in Accountancy from Florida Atlantic University), according to information on the CRC website.

She is a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) and a Chartered Global Management Accountant (CGMA), according to information on the CRC website.

Erika Donalds currently serves on the Collier County School Board, the CRC website noted, a position she was originally elected to in 2014.

Erika Donalds is Chief Financial Officer/Chief Compliance Officer and Partner at Dalton, Greiner, Hartman, Maher & Co., LLC (DGHM), an investment management firm, according to information on the CRC website.

She was a founding member and Past President of Parents R.O.C.K., “Parents’ Rights Of Choice for Kids,” a non-profit focused on uniting parents and providing representation for parent and student interests on state and local education issues, according to information on the CRC website.

She also served as a founding Advisory Board Member for Mason Classical Academy, a Hillsdale College public charter school in Collier County, according to information on the CRC website, which might be to what Edison refers in regard to the charter school influence.



**Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeff Edison and Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt are seen in the audience before Edison spoke at the podium.**

Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt said people can voice their opinions via letters, emails and phone calls to the members of the CRC.

One method to start being involved with the CRC's actions is to visit this website

<https://www.flcrc.gov/about/getinvolved>.