

## District to shuffle east Gainesville elementary schools

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Published: Monday, February 23, 2015 at 3:27 p.m.

For years, Alachua County has poured money and resources into east Gainesville schools that continued to underperform after it seemed like all the stops had been pulled out.

In Title I schools, school days and summer programs were extended and schools received reading and math coaches, after-school tutoring, additional teacher training, more technology, social workers and other enrichment programs to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars in state and local funding each year.



Elizabeth Hamilton/The Gainesville Sun  
Alachua County Superintendent of Schools Owen Roberts.

But the schools are still struggling, so it's time for change, Superintendent Owen Roberts told parents and community members in east Gainesville on Monday after announcing a plan to shuffle students and resources at three elementary schools.

Starting in August, Duval Elementary will be repurposed as a dedicated early childhood education center, serving pre-K, kindergarten and Head Start students from Duval, Rawlings and Metcalfe elementary schools and the Fearnside Family Services Center.

Students who would be enrolled in grades 1 through 5 at Duval in the 2015-16 school year, or who are living east of Waldo Road in the Metcalfe zone, will move to Rawlings Elementary, which will begin the new year with a fine arts magnet program.

A global education magnet emphasizing foreign languages, study of other cultures and social responsibility is projected to open to students at Metcalfe Elementary in fall 2016.

Roberts hinted at the restructuring during a December presentation detailing his impression of the school district in his first 100 days in office and a five-year improvement plan.

At the top of his list: Creating valuable educational opportunities for all students, but especially those living in poverty, as in the neighborhoods served by the three elementary schools.

As of 2013-14, the district spent an average of \$7,995 on each public school student.

Because of the extra resources in place, per-pupil spending was 23 percent higher at Duval, 26 percent higher at Metcalfe and 33 percent higher at Rawlings.

"You have to ask yourselves," Roberts said. "What do we have to show for it?"

Since 2009, Duval has lost more than half of its students and Rawlings has lost nearly a third.

Roberts believes at least part of the reason for that is Florida's school choice program, which allows families with students enrolled in F-rated schools by the state to transfer their children to schools with higher ratings.

He also believes distrust in the public school system leads families to send their children to

charter schools.

“Charter schools are not doing any better job than is happening in the public schools,” he said, but there’s a belief that charters are inherently better than the public school option. “That is an issue that is impacting some of our eastside schools.”

Currently, 233 students are enrolled at Duval Elementary and 246 are enrolled at Rawlings. Both received F grades from the state for 2013-14.

Both have the capacity to hold at least twice as many students.

Metcalfe, with 437 students, was a C school last year.

The magnet programs at Rawlings and Metcalfe will provide better and more varied opportunities for students living in east Gainesville, and also draw students from other parts of the county, Roberts said.

Early childhood education has been a major focus for the superintendent, who has been working with schools to implement computer programs that build cognitive skills in children from an early age.

Research shows that high-quality pre-kindergarten improves student achievement all along, and helps close the achievement gap between students in poverty and their wealthier peers, he said.

“What we want to create here is a quality center that will have impact on a large number of students,” Roberts said.

Meanwhile, taking Head Start students out of the Fearnside Center will allow the facility to return to its original purpose of providing medical and dental services, job training and parenting programs.

Transportation will be provided for all students who are moving to a new school next year than the one they’re zoned for this year.

Roberts said the reconfiguration will save the district money in the long run, and short-term costs to upgrade facilities won’t make a major impact in the annual budget.

He will present a more detailed outline of associated costs at the March 17 School Board meeting.

He also doesn’t expect any teachers to lose their jobs as a result of consolidating Duval and Rawlings.

Alachua County Public Schools sent letters home to parents on Friday to alert them about the changes, then held meetings with the community on Monday night at the three elementary schools.

At Duval, the dozen parents who attended were optimistic about the changes, even if they were sad to have to move their children out of a school that’s been such a landmark in the community for decades.

“Our parents went here,” said Jametta Owens, whose son is in fourth grade at Duval but will transfer to Metcalfe next year. “(But) we have to do something ... change has to come.”

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