

The League of Women Voters hosted a Conversation with Dr. Wysong at the Lakewood Ranch Library on October 24th, which featured questions from both the League and the public.

There was a question about partisan school board elections prior to Dr. Wysong's arrival.

Dr. Wysong was commended for a successful first year and he discussed the similarities with Seminole County, from which he came, and the importance of the district having a solid Strategic Plan in place, which made it possible to not have any destabilization despite the change in leadership with the results that every metric was up across the board.

? The district has lost 8 days of instruction due to hurricanes so far this year. Will this need to be made up?

Dr. Wysong said they had received a memo before the storm came that there were no plans to issue a waiver for the minutes of instruction or high school credits for graduation requirements. He explained the complex process of calculations, giving the example that each school is different as some high schools have two lunch periods and some have three so they have different class lengths. The district loses state funding if they don't check the boxes for both minutes and credits. The 8 days represent 5% of instructional time. He also has two collective bargaining units to work with to agree to whatever decision they make and that takes time. He said it a decision would be announced at the next School Board meeting on the 29th.

? Who pays for staffing when schools are used as hurricane shelters? Does the district have to budget for hurricane shelters? Will they be reimbursed for this?

Dr. Wysong said the district documents time and efforts differently in such circumstances. Staff are paid by the district, then the district seeks reimbursement from FEMA. This may take 2, 3, or 4 years to recover, so they have to budget for that. They had 1,400 pets sheltered for Milton, and at two schools in particular, this made for quite a mess. The district has to turn around the school sites quickly, so they hired a deep cleaning company for this and will submit such expenses to FEMA as well. Due to certain federal bureaucracies, some expenses may be denied. And this is why they have to have room in the budget for shelters.

? What can you tell us about the referendum?

By state law, as an employee, one cannot advocate but only give information. Millage funds stay in Manatee and help with early literacy supports, safety and security and the hardening of school campuses, and if it is renewed, some funds would go toward athletics for K-12, not just for high school athletics. Charter schools receive a proportionate share of millage funds. And salaries will remain competitive with surrounding counties.

? There is a lot of growth in Manatee County, which presents a challenge. How do we get ahead of that growth so our schools are not over capacity as soon as they open?

Dr. Wysong explained how calculations for school demand used to be done and predictions were quite accurate but school choice, which he very much supports, changes things significantly because it is

very challenging to predict parental choice behavior. He mentioned a district in south Florida that has around 50,000 open seats, which could fit our entire district, and so we have to consider the other side of the coin. Those empty seats cost the taxpayers a lot of money and could result in schools having to be closed, which is a painful and very unpleasant process for everyone involved. There are open seats in west Bradenton schools more so than in east county, which tend to be full. A potential solution is to redraw lines or bus more students to the west, but families tend not to like that either, and it means more time for students on buses.

? It was recently decided to change Harvey Elementary to a K-8. What are the advantages of a K-8 configuration?

Dr. Wysong said many families find it more convenient, it keeps siblings together longer, helps reduce bus traffic on roads, and it helps foster a better culture in the middle school age ranges. Older children are taught to model good behavior for the younger students and this affects the culture of the whole school. Other school models, such as private and charters, were quicker to offer this option and this appeals to families.

? Regarding books being removed from classroom libraries and media centers, the League's position is that there have always been ways for a parent to have a say over what their child reads, but one person should not have a say about what all other children can read. Why hasn't the district put in place a way to challenge the decisions made to remove books?

Dr. Wysong said there is nothing in state statute about reconsideration procedures. Another Florida county is undergoing a process of putting some books back on shelves so he anticipates there will be a discussion with the Department of Education that may affect other districts. In the meantime, he wonders where the cycle ends, and how much time and energy do we want to spend on this, possibly to the detriment of the district's priorities. He has clear instruction from the School Board that there should be a focus on early literacy as that has been shown to reduce the need for remediation in later grades, which would save taxpayer money down the line. Some counties have instituted very complex committee processes. We need to consider the unintended consequences of a cycle of challenges and challenges to the challenges.

? A question was asked about Seminole County and what happened there after the millage was not renewed.

Dr. Wysong explained that was a programming millage for four years, and did not include any teacher supplements, so it was not comparable to the millage in Manatee. He said some of the programs had to be cut, and some that were wildly successful had to be moved to the general fund, which in turn meant other programs were cut.

? Other questions included: how many open seats there are in the district, whether the district would be interested in partnering with Selah Freedom to teach about sex trafficking, how millage funds are distributed among low-income and non-Title IX schools, question about the district's relationship with developers and land acquisition for schools, and about third grade retention practices and if there is an alternative assessment that can be used in place of the FAST or STAR testing.

Dr. Wysong met with individuals after the meeting and he and his colleague, Kevin Chapman, made arrangements to follow up with individual's concerns.

The League wishes to thank Dr. Wysong for his time to come out and meet with members of the community for this conversation as well as all those who joined in and asked questions.