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COMMENTARY

## Eliminating sports is one of many hard cuts Orange's school board will face

Mike Thomas

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Why all this fuss over eliminating school sports in Orange County?

We can't afford them.

Nobody wants to raise taxes.

So dump them.

And then we can move on to whacking the AP biology teacher at Winter Park High.

The easy cuts are long gone.

We've gotten rid of reading coaches, smaller classes, teaching positions, classroom computers, field trips and so on and so forth.

Thousands of kids are getting less of an education. But as long as we can't see it, who cares?

Now it's time for the hard cuts, the ones we can see.

The plan to save \$15 million this year and more than \$5 million a year thereafter by flipping high-school and middle-school start times in Orange County caused a major ruckus.

Cut something else!

Then there was a plan to save \$10 million by closing several small elementary schools.

Cut something else!

An earlier proposal to save more than \$7 million by cutting sports didn't even get off the ground

Cut something else!

What else?

We could cut the salaries of all administrators. That is a popular idea. It would save \$4 million.

What else you got?

Because even if you make all the above cuts, the school district still is \$80 million in the red next year.

The disputes you see now are skirmishes compared with the battles ahead.

The chasm confronting board members is so wide and bottomless that they have been frozen into inaction.

The search goes on for that mythical \$100 million line item that can be painlessly eliminated. It doesn't exist.

This leaves a long list of small, very painful cuts, all of which have their own constituency. If decisions are based solely on the uproar meter, our schools and kids are in deep, deep trouble.

The news that reading coaches were being cut barely made a ripple.

But messing with the football coaches is causing a tidal wave.

I would argue this is a case of misplaced priorities.

But it's also no surprise.

This is a state that measures the quality of its universities by the rankings of their football teams.

We have the most under-funded colleges in the nation, with only the University of Florida barely cracking an annual list of top national universities.

But who cares? The Gators just passed Florida State by winning their third national championship.

Eliminating high-school football would cut off their farm system.

I heard a local football coach on the radio this week predict there would be an increase in the crime and dropout rate if we stopped sports. If kids are staying in school -- and out of jail -- only to throw a football, what does that say about their future once they get out of school?

Are they going to work only if their employers have a football team?

Schools serve a number of functions. Educating kids is the only one that is mandatory.

Yes, sports teach teamwork. Kids learn that hard work produces results. They learn how to perform under pressure. They learn the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. At least in the case of football players, they delay the onset of obesity.

All this is very important but secondary to education. There are all kinds of sports leagues outside of school, but very few art and music leagues. Preserving small neighborhood schools is more important than preserving basketball, even if the crowd turnout at a board meeting says otherwise.

I think we should fund our schools at a level where they can both educate kids and allow them to participate in sports.

But I am a minority.

Florida's voters approved Amendment 1 to cut property taxes. Gov. Charlie Crist is up in Tallahassee concocting more amendments to gut school funding.

They will pass.

There will be more cuts.

This is what the people want. So why all the whining about football?

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