

Big ideas for education

Local
stakeholders
offer bold
strategies
to improve
our schools

Read their thoughts,
forged by diverse
backgrounds and
viewpoints, on Page A6

By **HOWARD BUCK**
Columbian staff writer

The leader of the largest school system in Clark County believes there should be 210 school days a year, up from the current 180.

Students should log seven hours each day, instead of six. Teachers should spend another 30 days in training and get only four weeks off.

A counselor who fights to keep borderline students from joining the dropout ranks thinks no high school should have more than 800 students.

Too bad 10 of our local high schools are twice that size.

WASL tests? No Child Left Behind? Ditch the testing rigmarole, says a former principal who teaches juvenile offenders. Focus on personal growth and drop arbitrary measures of

semesters, quarters, even grade levels, he argues.

Education in the 21st century is a confounding blend of tired institutionalism, ham-handed regulation and a struggle over time, money and commitment.

Federal and state law, rigid labor contracts, social change: All can leave students, parents and educators frustrated.

We asked some front-line, veteran teachers, counselors, parents and students to envision a far different reality:

What if they could wave a magic wand, slash through red tape and convention, and remake our schools?



If they ruled the schools...

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John Deeder

Evergreen Public Schools superintendent since Feb. 2006

■ **Bio:** Deeder, 61, has two grown children who attended Oregon schools. He began his career as a sixth-grade teacher, then was a high school teacher, counselor, principal and assistant superintendent in Astoria and Gresham, Ore. He was named Evergreen's curriculum director in 2002, then deputy superintendent.

■ **Where he's coming from:** He says more rigor, with more high school math and science credits, are needed to keep U.S. students world-competitive. Even students not headed for college should possess these marketable skills. Teachers, parents, administrators must pull their weight.

Big ideas

1. Eliminate all tenure protections for educators. Boost incentives and pay to draw more high achievers into teaching.
2. Lengthen the school day from six to seven hours and the school year from 180 to 210 days.
3. Teachers should work 240 days, including 30 days in training and curriculum development.
4. Reform teacher certification so every K-12 student has a strong literacy teacher AND a strong math teacher, every day.
5. Pay for mandatory, full-day kindergarten and optional preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds.
6. Hold parents accountable for child's attendance, and their own attendance at school conferences.

What's holding us back

Tenure reform would have to come at the federal level. But, "I think it's probably too hot."

Longer school days and years, full-day kindergarten and certification standards are state issues. They require big bucks and shifting priorities, such as pushing sports back one hour, dropping summer leisure a notch. "It's not a pipe dream. That's something this state should get serious about."

A major early-learning campaign is required. Students without access fall "way, way behind. And many of those children are the ones who don't catch up."

Teachers and parents must step up. "We can't legislate to people how to be parents, but I wish we could get across to them the correlation between their involvement and their kids' success."

Jena Bodell

Skyview High School senior, taking Running Start classes at Clark College.

■ **Bio:** Bodell, 18, will receive an Associate of Arts degree in June, then study theater education at Central Washington University. She attended Alki Middle School. Three siblings also took Running Start.

■ **Where she's coming from:** Partially home-schooled, she has skipped certain tests and courses, so she asked friends for collective feedback.

They frown on standardized tests and long hours spent "memorizing the WASL." They don't like being force-fed so many math, science and English credits, and they want



JANET L. MATHEWS/Columbian files

Earl Ford: Faith-based and civic partnerships can lift minority students, parents.

more Skills Center vocational options.

Big ideas

1. Cut back homework that is often busywork and has little to do with tests or the class. As a freshman, Jena had a teacher-basketball coach who drew up plays while students had to solve problems on their own, with no lecture or questions.
2. Extend classes to two hours and switch days, more like college. Teachers and students would get more done. Teachers say 50 minutes isn't enough for all the material.
3. Teachers need to be more strict: Nice, but strict. College instructors don't let you get away with missing a test or homework; they will lower your grade. That's much better motivation.
4. Don't let students slide by. To some students, the "No Child Left Behind thing" sounds like "You can fail all you want, and still graduate." While some students really struggle and try to learn but still fail classes, other students seem not to even try, yet get to continue.
5. Require student involvement in diversity clubs, or gay/straight alliances. There still is a lot of discrimination among students, especially at mostly Caucasian Skyview.

What's holding us back

Tradition at high schools is the chief hurdle to changing to two-hour classes or switching class days. It also means sports can overshadow the diversity of the student body, which can foster discrimination.

Some teachers are hired only because they are good coaches. Others "have just given up" on the structure and discipline they had in college and fail to keep students accountable.

Steve Friebe

One of four classroom teachers at the Clark County Juvenile Justice Center

■ **Bio:** Friebe, 59, has two grown children, the youngest a graduate of Mountain View High School. He taught basic education to adults in Michigan, then worked at alternative



STEVEN LANE/Columbian files

Jena Bodell: Teachers need to toughen up, so students don't slack off.

high schools in California and Everett. He then spent 18 years as principal at Pan Terra (now Lewis and Clark) High School in Vancouver.

■ **Where he's coming from:** He tried to create individualized student options at Lewis and Clark, based on flexibility, creativity. He chafes at the "equal treatment of unequal" in teaching or testing students.

He cribbs from British anthropologist Ashley Montagu, who wrote, "What we don't understand is that we need to grow up into children, not adults" — traits such as curiosity, humor, imagination and open-mindedness should be emphasized.

Big ideas

1. Each student should have a personalized education plan — for academics, social skills, future plans, from start of school through graduation — reviewed three or four times a year.
2. Abolish arbitrary time measures such as quarters, semesters, etc.

3. For that matter, abolish grade levels. Why 12 finite levels? Teachers should help students improve, wherever they are.

4. Keep classrooms to 12-15 students, maximum.

5. "Justice" should replace "equity" when it comes to staffing. Schools with high needs should have many more teachers and assistants.

What's holding us back

Once near the top, Washington is so far behind in school funding. It's going to cost more money, but you either pay for it now, or pay later, such as prison costs.

It's an entire community issue when 25 percent of students drop out. Many kids need an option. "We need to sit down and get absolutely serious about what we're going to do with troubled kids."

Effective alternative schools are highly organized, based on trust and personal responsibility. Students can thrive, once they figure that out. We must shake the pop culture bias against being smart.

Earl Ford

President, Vancouver branch of NAACP; natural resources staff officer for Gifford Pinchot National Forest.

■ **Bio:** Ford, 56, has two children who graduated from Evergreen and Fort Vancouver high schools; a third is a senior at Heritage High. He's spent more than 30 years in the U.S. Forest Service, the last 15 years in Vancouver.

■ **Where he's coming from:** He says we desperately need to involve communities of color in the education of their children. That means groups whose vested interest is future economic success for their children.

Give parents hope, and through them, their children. If you train a student to be a carpenter or a mechanic, his math skills will go up because he's excited. There has to be something at the end for them.

Big ideas

1. Provide state funds for after-school and weekend math, science and reading programs at minority faith-based and civic organizations.
2. These could include parents who want to improve their own reading, writing, math and science skills, or provide a separate adult literacy program.
3. Get vastly underrepresented minorities more involved in the Skills Center or similar vocational programs.

What's holding us back

Resources and partnerships. "There's a lack of money, and there's a lack of vision among educators. They don't have the cultural awareness to intersect, or to access, communities of color in an effective way."

There are teachers and principals intimidated by minorities. Parents are often ill-treated.

"It takes leadership. I have reason for hope, I have seen people make an effort to reach out." But more is needed.

"Here's a program (Skills Center) that takes kids and prepares them for family-wage jobs, but the children that are most in need of that hopeful message aren't represented."

"Way too many teachers, especially in elementary schools, haven't been held accountable to teach everything they're supposed to teach."
-John Deeder



"When I look at my friends, they get away with skipping class, missing tests, failing tests, not doing any homework, and they still get to move on with D's."
-Jena Bodell

"We have to have partnerships. I believe Mr. Bush's faith-based initiatives had so much promise, but we didn't get out and get the work done. I don't see any other way for the schools to be successful. They don't have the resources to do it by themselves."
-Earl Ford



"The same people who gave us the mess that followed (Hurricane) Katrina also gave us No Child Left Behind. Why would any citizen of this country allow such a travesty?"
-Steve Friebe



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