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Pomp & Circumstance for Everyone

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES ARE AT AN ALL-TIME HIGH, BUT COMMUNITY EFFORTS CAN TAKE EDUCATIONAL ACCESS TO NEW LEVELS



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

One of my first memories of attending a graduation ceremony was in May 1977. It was a month before my fourth birthday. My grandfather on my mother's side, Richard F. Merrill, had earned his master's degree in business administration from the Crummer Graduate School of Business at Rollins College in my hometown of Winter

Park, Florida.

I remember sitting on the shoulders of my Uncle David and being prompted to shout "Yay, Pop!" at the top of my lungs, despite the sober request from the officiant that applause be held until the end of the ceremony. Quiet admiration may have been appropriate for most of the students walking across the dais to be handed their diplomas. Pop, how-

ever, deserved something better, considering all that he had accomplished up until this point.

After an idyllic childhood in Vermont, Pop graduated from high school and enrolled at the University of Vermont to study engineering and accounting. His studies were disrupted when he enlisted in the U.S. Navy and was deployed to Pearl Harbor shortly after the Japanese attack, but he

“[My grandfather’s] commitment to furthering his education at an age when some men would be considering retirement set an important example.”

eventually completed an undergraduate degree.

Marriage, employment, and relocation to Florida with the Martin Marietta Company (now Lockheed Martin) followed. It was a solid career that provided the income needed to raise five children through the 1950s and the turbulent events of the '60s and early '70s. His commitment to furthering his education at an age when some men would be considering retirement set an important example.

My grandfather’s accomplishment was special, yet it did not overshadow similar achievements in my immediate family. In the hallway of my childhood home, my own father’s diploma as a member of the University of Central Florida’s first graduating class hung right next to my mother’s commemorating her graduation from the Gordon Keller School of Nursing in Tampa.

The message was clear: Pickerings were expected to graduate from high school and

college and, if possible, pursue a graduate degree. All of which I am proud to say I have accomplished.

This year, my elder son, Colin, continues this family tradition of high school graduation and college education as he earns his diploma from Vero Beach High School and enters California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo’s College of Agriculture, Food, and Environmental Sciences.

“Yay, Colin!”

My wife, Stephanie, and I are very proud of Colin for all that he has accomplished. When I look back on what it has taken for this young man to reach this milestone, I am in awe.

Just a few years after Colin’s birth, my first wife, Debby, passed away. The loving kindness of family, friends, colleagues, and many others ensured that Colin and his sister, Olivia, despite the early trauma of losing their mother, would be supported to live healthy, prosperous lives.

Stephanie’s eventual arrival, our marriage,

her adoption of Colin and Olivia, and the addition of a third child, Grant, nearly guaranteed it. Together with Colin’s hard work and perseverance, this is what it has taken for the Pickerings family to contribute to two important indicators of health and prosperity for our community: high school graduation and college access.

According to David K.

Moore, superintendent of schools for Indian River County, in 2021 the county’s high school graduation rate reached an all-time high with 95 percent of eligible students earning a diploma. This is one of the highest graduation rates in Florida, improving by more than 15 percent since 2015. These improvements are reflected among students



The college-bound Pickerings: Olivia, Grant, and Colin

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“We have the wherewithal, the know-it-all to feed everybody, to clothe everybody, and give every human on Earth a chance.”

– R. BUCKMINSTER FULLER

from every race and ethnicity represented in the School District of Indian River County.

Despite ongoing challenges to increase performance in early indicators such as third-grade reading proficiency, eighth-grade math proficiency, and attendance, Indian River County’s improving

high school graduation rate demonstrates a strong commitment by our community to do whatever it takes to help our high school students to achieve.

In Colin’s case at VBHS, this commitment came from many highly capable and extremely dedicated teachers of honors and advanced

placement courses, along with steady guidance from veteran counselor Jacqueline Loughry. Beyond the resources needed to succeed in advanced courses, Colin also received exceptional support to gain valuable leadership and career experience through music and after-school employment.

Findings from the most recent Indian River County Community Needs Assessment, combined with updated data and information available through Indian River Community Foundation’s online database, suggest that educational attainment is one of the most significant predictors of future earnings, life



John Thornton, current chair of the CLIMATE Task Force

The School District of Indian River County convened a task force in November 2021 to seek recommendations for growth in accordance with the district’s strategic plan. The CLIMATE Task Force consists of parents, grandparents, representatives from nonprofit organizations, businesses, and other community members. The group was charged with using academic data to recommend solutions to ongoing challenges to achieving “equity and excellence in each school within the system.”



According to Kyra Schafte, district coordinator of equity, one subgroup focused on strategies to increase minority student access to advanced coursework, such as Advanced Placement courses, dual or concurrent enrollment in classes that provide college credit, and International Baccalaureate courses. Based on its review of academic data, the group recommended that additional scaffolding be put in place for students as they transition from fifth to sixth grade, including parental support, peer mentoring, and a speaking series showcasing adults with varied educational and career pathways.

By proactively intervening at the middle school level, the plan aims “to change the trajectory of access” and set more students on a path that leads toward postsecondary education and rewarding careers.



VBHS Director of Bands Page Howell with Colin Pickering

expectancy, and health outcomes. At higher levels of education, our neighbors have greater opportunity for jobs that pay a living wage, offer health insurance, and pay for more than just the basics of life.

Colin, Olivia, and Grant will all be fine. They have everything they need to succeed. Unfortunately, that is not the case for every student in our schools. In a community with such abundant resources, however, it really should be. It can be.

As I learned from serving on SDIRC’s CLIMATE (Convening Leaders in Maximizing Access to Education) Task Force over the past school year, improvement is still needed when it comes to ensuring that all students have the opportunity and support systems they need to set

them on the vital pathway toward college and career success. With more than half of all Indian River County residents living either in poverty or just

one paycheck away from it, promoting more access to advanced courses, career and technical training, and post-secondary education for all—especially minority students—is more important now than ever.

Futurist Buckminster Fuller’s words from more than 50 years ago emphasize this point today: “Think of it. We are blessed with technology that would be indescribable to our forefathers. We have the wherewithal, the know-it-all to feed everybody, clothe everybody, and give every human on Earth a chance. We know now what we could never have known before—that we now have the option for all humanity to make it successfully on this planet in this lifetime. Whether it is to be Utopia or Oblivion will be a touch-and-go relay

race right up to the final moment.”

The highly capable leadership at SDIRC, the dedicated principals, administrators, teachers, and other school staff deserve the entire community’s support to focus on the most important elements of our students’ academic success. They cannot spell success, however, without “u.” Parents, students, and other community members must be part of this solution today and not contribute to a problem that has already shown its penchant for infinite regress. If not, I am afraid it might be turtles all the way down. The class of 2022, however, with all its achievements and triumph over serious challenges in the past few years, has given me hope and inspiration otherwise. ☼



Proactive intervention at the middle-school level can set students on a path toward post-secondary education and successful careers.