

Outgoing superintendent: 'I love what we've done'

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Luciano

By Ken Jackson
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The Osceola County School District has achieved great gains over the past three years, Superintendent Melba Luciano reported at Wednesday's State of the District Address at the Osceola County School for the Arts. And, with business and community partners lined up to assist students, teachers, administrators and partners going forward, she said the district will make great strides without her.

Luciano is retiring on July 31, meaning Wednesday's address was her final one. It was heartfelt, and the hundreds in attendance gave her a 20-second standing ovation at the end.

"Our vision has always been to outperform the other districts in the state," she said. "The only way to do it is to continue working together and believing in and loving our children. I love what we've been able to do."

She spoke about her successor, Debra Pace, who could not attend. Pace is a former county teacher, principal and district administrator.

"They did a national search, and found a local product," Luciano said. "From the moment she was chosen, we started talking every single day. I know she'll do a great job."

From March through July, Luciano will work on projects as a consultant. Pace will wrap up her duties in Brevard County and take her new position at the end of this month.

Luciano delivered a message that "We Are All Better Together," stressing the importance of public and private

sector collaboration.

"In 2012, we had 55,000 students, and now we're up near 62,000, with over 7,000 employees. Having that amount of growth and becoming so large, we have to work together," she said.

The number of district volunteers, at 17,884 entering this school year, is also up over 3,000 from 2012. Luciano also noted the district's 400 business partners. Through mentor programs like Bookmark Buddies (a literacy program), the curriculum-based AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program, and after-high school guidance plans like the Medical Pipeline Program and Vertical Articulation, the district can and has shown students that other people aside from their families and teachers care about their achievements. The district's graduation rate eclipsed 80 percent (80.6) for the first time last year, and Luciano detailed some reasons for it. The number of certified AVID and gifted teachers are up, and the number of STEM-saturated schools rose from two to 17 in three years.

The school purchased and outfitted the first STEM mobile lab, a 45-foot bus, in the country, and the new high school slated to open on Boggy Creek Road in 2018 will add an arts component to the science curriculum and be a STEAM-focused school.

All of that attests to the job the district does from K-12, but when Luciano said she heard that one in seven children reaching school age weren't prepared for kindergarten, the district acted and created

Osceolareads.com, a portal to Footsteps2Brilliance, a literacy program geared for age 4 and under.

Money is always an issue in the school system. While it's still tight, students wouldn't know it. The district now operates with a balanced budget after facing a \$7.3 million shortfall in 2012.

"There were no cuts in staff, sports or arts programs," Luciano said. "Even when it was bad, students were at our forefront."

Both the economy and the budget have recovered to the point that the district now offers the highest starting teachers' salary, \$40,100, in the seven-county area of Central Florida. And the district is slated to open its Employee Health Center, which will offer make free services with no co-pays, on Simpson Road by this summer. The clinic would help the 45 percent of district employees who do not regularly see a general physician, Luciano said.

Valencia College Osceola-Lake Nona President Kathleen Plinske said that the percentage of county students to enroll in college, the lowest in Central Florida, has steadily risen since the local 'Got College?' program started in 2011.

Through initiatives like Valencia Ambassadors, where current students and alumni serve as a de facto public relations firm for the college, and Campus Express, which arranges campus visits for current high-school students who might not have seen the Valencia campus, Plinske hopes the "seeds of possibility and opportunity" are planted in the minds of local high school seniors.

Valencia is adding associates of science programs in business, hospitality and criminal justice, and now offers short-term technical training in advanced manufacturing (its new Shady Lane institute officially opened Tuesday) and construction.

She gave an update on the Valencia Poinciana campus. Half the funding for construction is secure, and school officials are asking the Florida Legislature for an additional \$12 million. If that is secured, construction can begin this summer and the campus can open in fall 2017.

Luciano lauded the School Board for its interest in the success of the district's students. Board member Kelvin Soto, speaking for his cohorts, said it strives for collaboration.

"In Washington and Tallahassee, people are passionate about what they want but can't get along well enough to accomplish it," he said. "The board pledges to cooperate and work with our partners to advance our children's education."

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