

Residents Weigh Measure To Split School Districts

By MICHELE SAGER msager@tampatrib.com

Published: Feb 18, 2006

TAMPA - Some parents and community leaders who long have dreamed of more control over local schools are finding hope in a bill in Tallahassee.

Joint resolutions introduced in both chambers of the Legislature aim to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot in the fall to allow counties with more than 45,000 students to split districts. The new districts would have at least 20,000 students.

For residents in communities that often feel ignored by the Hillsborough County school district, such as New Tampa and Temple Terrace, the bill brings new possibilities. New Tampa parent Terry Wolford said it would mean local residents would have power over their local schools.

"We wouldn't have representatives running our schools that don't live in the area or hardly come to the area," she said. "We would finally have some say."

But Freedom High PTA President Carol Henderson said residents should be cautious with such a bill.

"I think we would really need to take a look at this proposal and see if it would mean real benefits to our district," she said. "On the surface, I don't know if I see any."

Since Hillsborough County could be split into as many as nine smaller districts under the bill, Henderson said that could mean nine school boards.

"That's more money going to administrators and less to schools," she said.

Temple Terrace Mayor Joe Affronti, who spoke in support of the bill in Tallahassee, said smaller districts would mean fewer layers of management now found in Hillsborough, the ninth-largest district in the nation.

Affronti recently held a town hall meeting on the issue and said Temple Terrace schools have too many incidents of crime and their test scores are not high enough. He said if Temple Terrace were its own district, schools could be closely monitored and wouldn't fall through the cracks.

However, Ken Adum, director of the Temple Terrace area schools, said smaller doesn't mean better. He pointed out that Temple Terrace alone wouldn't meet the criteria to become its own school district.

About 5,000 students attend the schools in Temple Terrace and King High, which is just outside the city. That means Temple Terrace still would be linked with other communities, possibly ones with even lower-performing schools.

"And you've got to ask yourself: 'Do you have the tax base to support your own district?' " Adum told city leaders.

Since his meetings, Affronti has toned down support for smaller districts, saying he is willing to work with the school district to make Temple Terrace schools stronger.

State Sen. Victor Crist, R-Tampa, said he understands that communities want to make their schools stronger but said there are better ways to do it.

"I think the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office is the perfect model of how to do it," Crist said.

Crist was referring to how the sheriff's office has split the county into districts. Each district has a headquarters in that district and operates in those communities. When it was pointed out to Crist that the school district already does something similar with districts and area director offices, Crist admitted he wasn't aware of that system.

"I didn't even know that, and that's a problem," he said. "Maybe the focus should be on getting the information out to parents about these offices."

Affronti doesn't believe the system with area directors has worked. He noted that he has met with the area director for Temple Terrace or school board representative Jack Lamb only a few times during his seven years in office.

Lamb said communication is a two-way street and said the city stopped inviting him to school improvement task force meetings. Lamb is against smaller school districts because of his observation of other small school districts in the country.

"You may have a district with less than 5,000 students that has a five-member board," he said. "That's a lot of money going to administrative costs."

Lamb said larger districts also mean more buying power when it comes to textbooks, construction and equipment, which means savings. Also, larger districts often hold more clout with state leaders.

The legislation that would put the issue before voters in November would have to pass through many House and Senate committees and be signed by Gov. Jeb Bush before becoming law.