All too often, Florida policymakers advocate for performance-based pay for public school educators but fail to focus on supplying the funds for such a plan.

You have heard the propaganda that our education system is failing our next generation with low standards, weak accountability, inflated grades and the list goes on. But ask: “Who has had control of the education agenda in Florida for the past decade?”

In 2010, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 736, which encompassed many reforms taking away due process for new teachers, which essentially means that, at the end of each school year, regardless of a stellar performance evaluation, a new teacher can be fired or, to use the current term of art, “nonrenewed.” Any teacher hired after July 1, 2011, will forever after be hired on a year-by-year basis.

Where is the job security in that? Equally important, where is the promise of continuity of programs of high-quality instruction for our students? This same piece of flawed legislation mandated the development of a performance-based pay system yet failed to provide any additional funding to school districts whose budgets were already tightened to the last hole in their belts, due to a major recession. If policymakers truly believe the data from current research in education, that the teacher is the single most transformative force in education, then they need to adequately invest in making sure that a well-trained, highly effective teacher occupies every child’s classroom in every school throughout Florida every day of the school year.

In Leon County, we have consistently been recognized as one of Florida’s top-performing school districts when it comes to student performance, closing achievement gaps and innovation. But how do we rank when it comes to supporting and rewarding teachers?

• Despite comparable teacher experience to other districts, this year the Leon County average teacher salary is ranked 52nd out of 67 districts in the state: $41,411. By comparison, Leon County administration salaries rank 19th.
Since 2007, teachers in Leon County have dropped from a state salary ranking of 30th to 52nd, with a $2,802 decrease in average salary.

A first-year teacher makes $35,548 on the current salary schedule, a teacher with 10 years of experience makes approximately $3,300 more, while a 20-year veteran makes approximately $8,500 more than a first-year teacher.

Department of Education statistics show that about 50 percent of teachers who begin a career in education leave after 10 years. In Leon County, the attrition rate is 65 percent within the same span.

The loss of effective and experienced educators from DROP alone will be about 240 teachers in the next two to three years.

I share these facts not to place blame but to suggest to policymakers at the local and state levels that today’s educators are more engaged in the hard work of solving problems and educating today’s students rather than in winning rhetorical arguments that do not impact teaching or learning. These facts signal a nationwide failure to provide all students with experienced and effective teachers.

All indications are that our state is recovering from a recession that froze employee compensation at every level in order to keep our classrooms adequately staffed. Now is the time for policymakers to invest directly in paying teachers a competitive salary. Teachers already are disadvantaged by laws that have missed the mark, creating practices and systems that fail to identify and support the best and brightest in our profession regardless of whether they have been assigned to teach on the north, south, east or west side of town.

Leon County school officials have an opportunity this year and beyond to commit to the creation of a progressive pay system that supports, respects and adequately compensates those who choose this rewarding career. Fortunately, there are steps that Leon County School officials can and must take to improve quality and equity for all students, particularly their most vulnerable populations. Invest in students and invest in teachers so that each year students are equipped with teachers who are ready on the first day of school and will be around for many years to come.

David Worrell is a high-school teacher at the Success Academy at Ghazvini Learning Center and president of the Leon Classroom Teachers Association. Contact him at david.worrell@floridaea.org.
Summary:

Columnist David Worrell addresses the issue of teacher pay. He particularly points to the Leon County teacher salary index indicating the drastic drop in teacher income over the last 7 years which declined from a pay scale that ranked 30th out of 67 districts in 2007 to 52nd out of 67 districts in 2014. Meanwhile, Leon County administrators’ salaries rank 19th out of 67 districts. He suggests that a school district that is continuously recognized as one of the top performing districts in the state does not take the necessary measures “to support[ing] and reward[ing] their teachers.” Combine these facts with Senate Bill 736 passed in 2010 by the Florida Legislature, Worrell believes that lawmakers have neglected to recognize the importance of the role of the teacher in the classroom. Additionally, he suggests that most newly hired, recent college graduates will leave the teaching field within 10 years due to the problems that currently exist. These issues include the removal of tenure for teachers and the low pay teachers receive.

It must be added that Worrell does not suggest all gloom and doom for the state’s teachers and students. He offers suggestions to districts, particularly Leon County where he is employed as a teacher, that will offset some of the negative occurrences of the past 7 years. His suggestions include investing in students and teachers “so that each year students are equipped with teachers who are ready on the first day of school and will be around for years to come.”
Connection to Essential Question:

The essential question for this article is: How can one person make a difference, positively or negatively?

Worrell’s article speaks to a series of influences ranging from his decision to write this column to the decisions made by school board members and lawmakers. If one reads the information included about Worrell at the end of the column, the reader will know that Worrell is a teacher for the Leon County School District and current president of the Leon Classroom Teachers Association. By writing this column, one person, in this case, Worrell, is making several differences. First, he is advocating for his colleagues by providing pertinent information that most readers do not know. If Worrell can positively influence a few people who are decision makers in the school system or in the legislature, the impact this will have on teachers will be one that might attract the best educators and convince others to remain in the classroom. This commentary may also positively influence others when they go to the voting polls. In the upcoming race for Governor, the topic of education is a “hot topic” as candidates vie for votes through the promise of more money to school districts and the reevaluation of student testing. The latter plays a significant role in teacher performance pay, evaluations, and the likelihood they will be rehired. Just how much of a difference will Worrell and this column make in Leon County? Only time will tell.

Literary Strategy:

The title of this column and the facts the author chose to use are evidence Worrell is an advocate for teachers, most notably in the Leon County School District. Worrell uses phrases such as lawmakers “fail to focus on supplying the funds” to support his dislike for teacher performance-based pay. In stating this at the beginning of the column, Worrell sets a course that will guide the reader to the understanding that he is not in support of the legislation that has passed since 2010 and the decisions that have been made that stem from the new laws and guidelines. Additionally, Worrell’s use of quotation marks around the word nonrenewed emphasizes his view that he does not agree with the legislators who voted to end the practice of offering tenure, continuing contracts, to teachers after 4 years of teaching in the school
system. Words such as “flawed legislation”, “mandated”, “failed to provide” are included in a paragraph that discusses job security and the inadequate, in his opinion, policy that resulted in the end of tenure.

Worrell carefully considered the facts he uses in providing evidence that supports his viewpoint. One such fact is that Leon County teacher salaries rank 52nd out of the 67 school districts and is another fact that supports his viewpoint concerning the attrition rate. The term attrition rate means teachers entering the career of education leave for a different type of job before they retire. The attrition rate, according to the Department of Education, is 50 percent; however, Leon County's attrition rate is 65 percent within 10 years of beginning teaching. Supplying this statistic solidifies his viewpoint leaving the reader no doubt as to which side of the fence Worrell stands.

Personal Response:

I have always seen both sides of this coin when it comes to the discussion of tenure. I do not believe it is right to keep someone as a teacher who is ineffective in that position. On the other hand, I do not believe it is right that a very effective teacher, without tenure, can lose a position with absolutely no reason given. Why would someone ever want to become a teacher knowing there is absolutely no job security somewhere along the line? In my opinion, the strong desire to teach will be the only reason future educators will be drawn to this profession. Of course, those are the teachers we want, but will they stay, or will we lose them to attrition?

Leon County teacher pay is a different matter. If they are 52nd in the state, we must be either 51st or 53rd depending on the new contract. Salaries have never been a reason to become an educator. Perhaps it never will be a reason. To quote an overused saying, “It is what it is.”