

# Give thanks for our heroes in county school district



**Your Turn**  
 Carol Butera, Teri A Hansen, Debra Jacobs, Roxie Jerde and Mark Pritchett  
 Guest columnists

Every year, magic happens. More than 47,000 of the most important people in Sarasota County come together for a complex dance that, for the younger members of this cohort, will help chart the course of their lives.

Forty-two thousand students flood the halls, classrooms and playgrounds of dozens of Sarasota County schools in what for some could be a pivotal year in their life's journey.

They are the precious and sacred charge of the 5,000 employees of the Sarasota County School District, dedicated people whose sole aim is to help make every one of those children as successful as possible.

This force for knowledge includes the superintendent and his trusted administrators who guide the district like a giant fleet, making sure the slower ships are protected by their stronger peers. They always keep an eye on the weather. They plan an extremely long voyage and the best routes, though always heading for the same place.

Principals nudge along their individual schools like great ships, making sure the crew's morale is strong and that they have all the tools they need to sail – and that the delivery of the ship's critical services to passengers is effective and seamless. Not every captain sails in the same way, but that is the beauty of this art: shoring up weaknesses and playing to strengths.

Teachers are resolute sailors. Most are simply drawn to the sea – in this case the wavy expanse of learning – by a passion some find hard to describe. Teachers make all other professions possible, and in this work they only chart one course: student success.

As we approach Thanksgiving, we are so very thankful for the people who make this miracle happen every year, every month, every school day.

It has not been smooth sailing for much of the last three years.

The COVID-19 pandemic – still with us though less disruptive than when that storm was most strongly raging – tested the mettle of everyone in our district, including our students. They were buffeted by waves that forced them to learn in different ways, and not always in an ideal setting.

Principals and teachers were forced to rethink the way they sailed – sometimes switching to an entirely different ship – and that proved both worrisome and exhausting.

There were more insidious threats along the voyage of the last three years – threats that nevertheless had real world impact upon our precious teach-

ers and students. Though they didn't always get enough rest or find enough time to take care of themselves, they survived and thrived, despite all the powerful headwinds both real and imagined that continue.

COVID and the loss of learning time made themselves felt, but the Sarasota School District, as it almost always has because of the skill of its employees and the staunch support of the community, performed above the state as a whole and ranked high in many subject areas.

In further proof of the dedication and skill of the district's employees, Sarasota County maintained its "A" grade for the 2021-22 school year, continuing a streak that dates back to 2004 when the state first started assigning grades. That is 18 years of continued success.

Sarasota County was one of only 14 counties in Florida to achieve an "A" rating, and it tied for fifth as the most successful of Florida's districts. We are thankful that all the hard work of our district staff and students continues to pay dividends – and we look forward to more success.

Another storm recently battered our district, this one literal and not figurative. Hurricane Ian did considerable damage to schools in south Sarasota County, but once again our district admirals and captains and sailors leapt into the fray on behalf of their passengers and others.

School leaders spent many sleepless hours staffing schools that doubled as shelters. And when the storm passed – and through a heroic effort – they were able to open even heavily damaged schools within two weeks. That is lightning speed for those of you who remember past storms in our region.

Teachers, including some who had lost their homes or seen them damaged, hardly lost a beat.

And there was an outpouring of support for our teachers from the community – because we all know how important our educators are, and we wanted them back in front of their students as quickly as possible.

We are so thankful for a district that places such a premium on its teachers. And we are so thankful for a district that performs minor miracles to get its educators back aboard their ships.

Charles Dickens wrote, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

We have never been prouder of a group of students, teachers, support staff, principals and administrators than those who have endured the tumult of the last few years, which have truly been the best and worst of times. They are heroes, and we all should be thanking and supporting them. They were heroes before the pandemic and all that followed.

We should all remember them on this upcoming day of thanks, and we should count them among the multitude of blessings that we enjoy in this special community.

*Carol Butera is CEO of William G. and Marie Selby Foundation. Teri A Hansen is CEO of Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation. Debra Jacobs is CEO of The Patterson Foundation. Roxie Jerde is the CEO of Community Foundation of Sarasota County. Mark Pritchett is the CEO of Gulf Coast Community Foundation.*



Fruitville Elementary kindergarten teacher Kari Johnson talks to her students before a school event. Johnson was named Sarasota County's 2020-21 Teacher of the Year. Community members Carol Butera, Teri A Hansen, Debra Jacobs, Roxie Jerde and Mark Pritchett write, "We are so thankful for a district that places such a premium on its teachers. And we are so thankful for a district that performs minor miracles to get its educators back aboard their ships."

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