

The Role of Education and Sustainable Development in Orange Beach

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Executive Summary

I will argue the criteria-for-rejection has changed since the failed School Referendums in 2007 and 2012, simply because we added 3,500 jobs in Baldwin County at OWA. These new positions require educated, customer-savvy staff who can bring their employer value for his dollar spent. Orange Beach taxpayers should support these jobs for economic-development reasons, approving a 3-mil Special-Tax District for quality education, stipulating how the funds will be spent for schools on the island.

Essay

“Why is education important to sustainable development?” I thought.

Everyone automatically assumes a standard-American education is synonymous with having the tools for participating in society, working a job, bringing a skill set to that job, sufficiently armed to perform these duties at the highest level, being able to read, follow written instructions, reply to Emails and socialize with your fellow workers. All this is necessary for growing the economy.

“Education for Sustainability (EfS) is defined as a transformative learning process that equips students, teachers, and school systems with the new knowledge and ways of thinking we need to achieve economic prosperity and responsible citizenship while restoring the health of the living systems upon which our lives depend.”¹

Interpreting this global definition so that it applies to our geo-municipal location in Orange Beach, allowing for the fact that 3500 jobs² are being created in Baldwin County, factoring in a Special-Tax District³ for education is under discussion, recognizing schools, jobs and economic growth are integrated into inseparable parts, transforming Orange

¹ Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education, *Brief History*, Accessed January 24, 2017, <http://cloudinstitute.org/brief-history/>

² OWA Amusement Park, *Web Site*, Accessed January 24, 2017, <http://visitowa.com/vision/>

³ Baldwin County School Board Forms Special Tax District, *Baldwin County School Board Forms Special Tax District*, Accessed January 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hl0bisgpSog>

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Beach into a very prosperous community, provided the citizens buy into the idea of additional taxes for schools.

Orange Beach tried in vain, failing to form their own school system, having had no additional impetus like the present day influx of good jobs from OWA in Baldwin County, motivating the electorate to opt-in to sustain quality schools is still an uphill climb, arguing additional taxes did not make sense to the voters in 2007 and 2012.

In 2007, the island-wide School Referendum failed: “Both cities (Orange Beach and Gulf Shores) overwhelmingly requested a 7.5-mil property tax increase that would have funded a joint, independent school system in the two resort cities.”⁴

2007 SCHOOL REFERENDUM ⁵	VOTES FOR	VOTES AGAINST
ORANGE BEACH	586	1482
GULF SHORES	767	1611

In 2012, Orange Beach initiated another School-Split Referendum that failed. “Voters turned out in droves Tuesday, shattering a previous election record, to defeat a property tax hike that would've paved the way for an independent, city-run school system.”⁶

2012 SCHOOL REFERENDUM ⁷	VOTES FOR	VOTES AGAINST
ORANGE BEACH	928	1842

Understandably elected officials were gun-shy when approached by a citizen’s group led by Kevin Corcoran and Doug Warren, wanting to establish a 3-mil Special-Tax District on the Island to fund education, requiring yet another Referendum.

The difference between then and now is the unmistakable fact that 3,500 jobs are coming to the area, coupled with Auburn University’s Veterinary Medical Services in Gulf Shores (\$12 Million),⁸ creating more fuel for the economic engine, giving reasons for

⁴ BaldwinReport.com, *Beach School Tax Referendums Fail*, Accessed January 25, 2017, <http://baldwinreport.com/2007/03/14/beach-school-tax-referendums-fail/>

⁵ AL.com, *Beach school tax referendum fails*, Accessed January 25, 2017, http://blog.al.com/live/2007/03/beach_school_tax_referendums_f.html

⁶ AL.com, *Orange Beach voters soundly reject school split in record turnout*, Accessed January 25, 2017, http://www.al.com/news/mobile/index.ssf/2014/09/orange_beach_referendum_result.html

⁷ AL.com, *Orange Beach voters soundly reject school split in record turnout*, Accessed January 25, 2017, http://www.al.com/news/mobile/index.ssf/2014/09/orange_beach_referendum_result.html

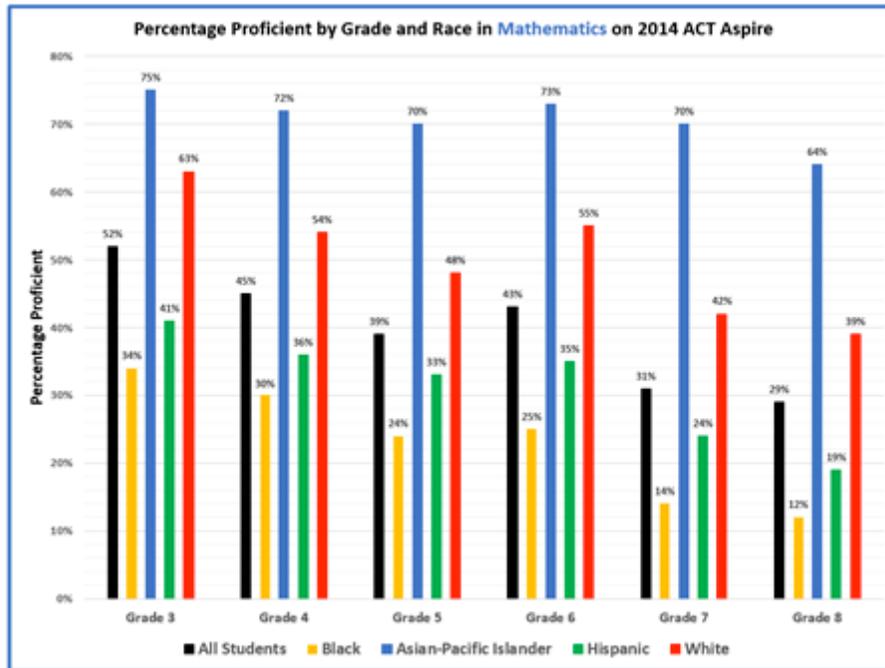
⁸ AL.com, *Auburn University to build new \$12 Million education complex in coastal Alabama*, Accessed January 25, 2017, http://www.al.com/news/mobile/index.ssf/2016/10/auburn_university_to_build_new.html

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increasing participation in local taxpayer-funded education, resulting in sustainable-economic development, because Baldwin County is the fastest growing county in the State.⁹

Levels of education for these jobs varies, but core studies start with elementary and secondary education:

The State of Alabama Data shows trends in Math and Reading:¹⁰

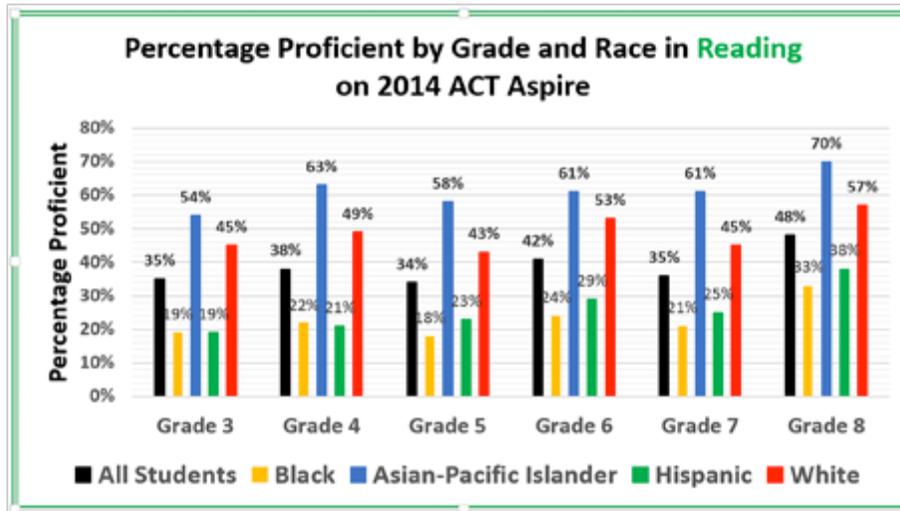


⁹ AL.com, *Why Baldwin County is the undisputed king of growth*, Accessed January 25, 2017,

http://www.al.com/news/mobile/index.ssf/2016/04/why_baldwin_county_is_alabamas.html

¹⁰ Alabama State Department of Education, *Accountability*, Accessed January 25, 2017, <https://www.alsde.edu/dept/data/Pages/home.aspx>

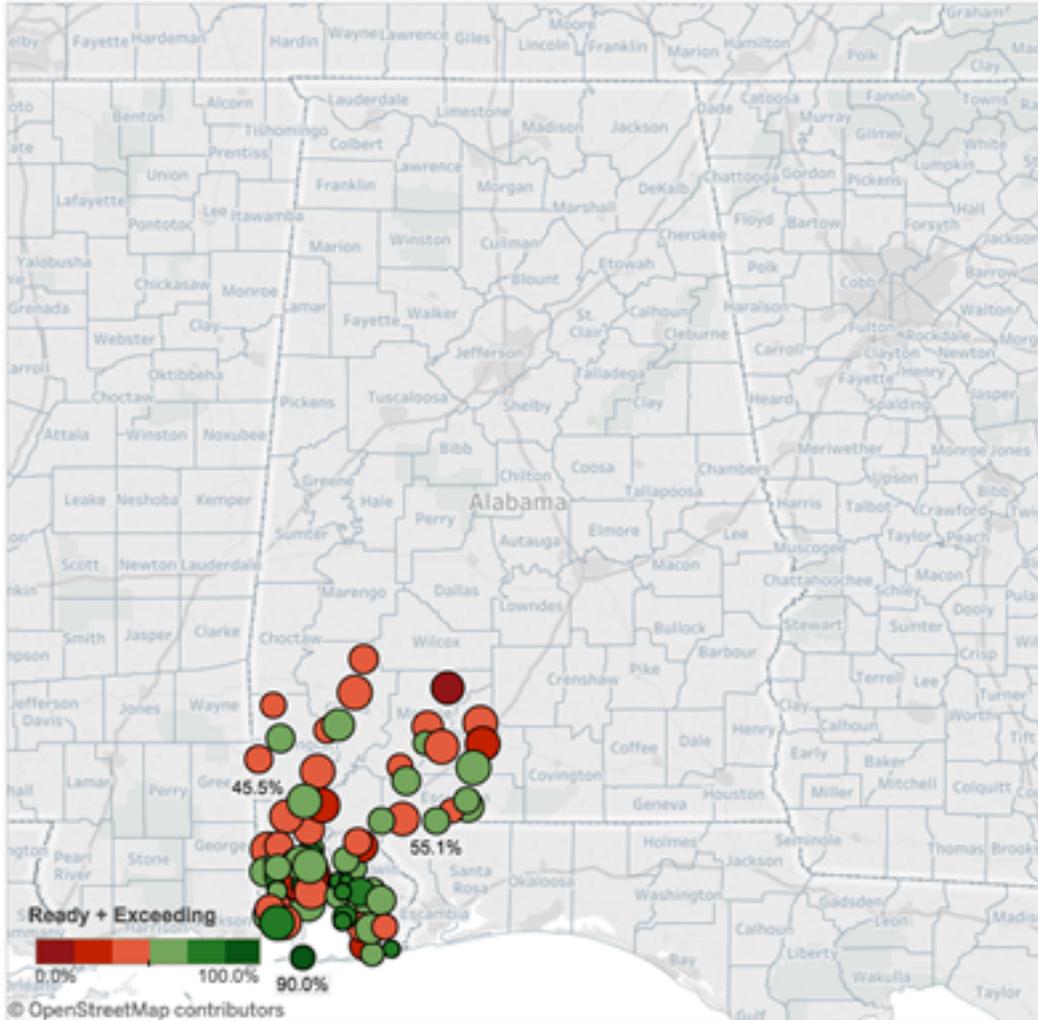
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Baldwin County Data for ACT Aspire Results, showing Orange Beach/Gulf Shores students are well prepared to enter the job market or go on the higher education:¹¹

¹¹ Alabama Department of Education, *Accountability Report*, Accessed January 25, 2017, <http://www.bcbe.org/Page/7776>

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SOURCE: Alabama State Department of Education web site, ACT Aspire results.

Paying a little more in taxes to increase the education system's productivity and increase economic activity, building on the positive results already generated, requiring capital infusion, as the county grows, having no space to accommodate additional students, wanting people to move here for their new jobs, investing in education is the best long-term measure for securing sustainable growth that taxpayers can make. But newly-minted employees will not relocate if the schools are perceived to be in financial trouble with no end to overcrowding in sight, needing to balance both sides of the equation where jobs plus schools equals sustainable development is the reality facing taxpayers and elected officials.

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Substantial amounts of money are needed for schools, recently the Baldwin County Commission granted permanent status to the one-penny sales tax, filling the Baldwin County Board of Education's \$38 Million budget hole¹², circumventing tax-payer approval.

Sometimes citizens will step-up to help the school system, notably to build a new High School in Elberta, donating 38 acres specifically dedicated for that purpose.¹³ Gulf Shores may receive land to build a High School, provided the details of the Special-Tax District¹⁴ can be agreed upon between the Councils in Orange Beach, Gulf Shores plus the unincorporated areas of Ft. Morgan and Ono Island.

A bilateral agreement between the two cities is slim with one side wanting no participation from the Baldwin County Board of Education on the District's Board of Trustees, seeing the Tax District arrangement as a bail-out for the county, insisting the Board have complete power over how the funds are spent, according to Mayor Tony Kennon.

I argue, the composition of the Board is important for the 3-mil Tax District, being able to bond for \$60 Million, proposing proportional representation by the amount of money each geographical element contributes to paying the debt from Ft. Morgan, Gulf Shores, Orange Beach and Ono Island, having a minimum of one-voting representative each. For example if the smallest-revenue generator gets one vote and the largest generates four times more revenue they get four voting members, requiring a super-majority (60%) to carry any initiative seems reasonable, ensuring the greater good is served.

"I am sick and tired of hearing about schools and taxes," he said. "I raised my family, paid my taxes and now I am retired. I'm not paying to educate someone else's kids."

This sentiment echoes through the communities in Orange Beach, evidenced by the failed School-Tax Referendums in 2007 and 2012. The fear is real in the hearts and minds of Elected Officials, knowing that education and economic development are inseparable, searching for a way to once again ask for taxpayer participation in a Special-Tax District, governed by a Board-of-Trustees.

"I cannot believe you want to go there again," she said, sipping her coffee. "Don't even think about another Referendum."

Opposition to any new taxes is baked into the genetic code of Alabamians, having a distaste for government intervention, liking things as they are, reflected in the very modest 4-mil property tax we enjoy in Orange Beach.

Convincing the electorate to underwrite education, spurring economic growth, supporting their property values will be difficult, perhaps impossible. It is not a task any Elected Official would take on without serious reflection, considering there may be a

¹² AL.com, *Baldwin School Officials praise tax deal*, Accessed January 26, 2017, http://www.al.com/news/mobile/index.ssf/2017/01/baldwin_school_officials_prais.html#a-6a883248-cb28-448e-ac26-aa7e92c24a8f

¹³ Local15tv.com, *Land donation could speed up new Elberta High School*, Accessed January 26, 2017, <http://local15tv.com/news/local/land-donation-could-speed-up-new-elberta-high-school>

¹⁴ Gulfcoastnewstoday.com, *County carries liability in special tax district*, Accessed January 26, 2017, <http://gulfcoastnewstoday.com/stories/county-carries-liability-in-special-tax-districts,39866>

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backlash against their local businesses, perhaps killing their chances for a political career of Public Service in Orange Beach.

Alternatively having the courage to try to convince the voters of the need to approve 3-mils for a Special Tax District for schools is the risk you take for success, combined with the fact that 3500 jobs are on offer at OWA in Baldwin County as the foundation of this argument, creating a once-in-a-generation opportunity for a giant jump in prosperity, perhaps bettering the quality-of-life for everyone.

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