

# Schools committed to student excellence

Guest Column

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## Submitted

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OAK RIDGE, Tenn. —

I was one of those people who arrived in the mud of 1943 to a house on the corner of Tennessee Avenue. I walked on the boardwalk along Tennessee to Elm Grove School and lost my lunch money between its cracks. When I was lucky enough to have a dime, I walked to the neighborhood drugstore -- now Big Ed's -- and ordered a cherry coke at the soda fountain. I still love cherry cokes.

Like all children, I lived my life, no questions asked. I was aware of the war because of rationing and long lines, but not aware of Oak Ridge's role in it. I was aware that my Dad no longer worked at Y-12 after the war, and saw that he was excited to be teaching math and science at Oak Ridge High School. I was aware that he attended classes at the University of Tennessee in the summers and I noted the card table set up in the living room of our 'B' house, where my mother typed endless pages with carbons on something she called his "thesis."

I had no idea how extraordinary it was in the '40s to have a school system where every teacher at every level was required to have not just a college degree, but a graduate degree.

In junior high, I went to the thrilling Oak Ridge High School football games on Friday nights. For me it was seventh grade at Robertsville and eighth grade at the "old Jefferson" -- which was really the old high school since we had just built a sparkling new high school on Providence Road. That new high school was recognized nationally as a new, open, modern architecture for education. I couldn't wait until I got to that high school. As it turns out, my dad beat me there. He was the principal, and continued to be for the next 20 years.

There was an enormous sense of community pride in our high school. From great numbers of National Merit scholars, to ambitious musical theater productions, to numerous athletic achievements there was an expectation of excellence. In my senior year, we became the first high

school in Tennessee to become racially integrated. While there were some who objected strongly to that decision, some ugly midnight phone calls and a cross burned in our yard, my Dad said publicly and privately that integration was the right thing to do; that the community would support it and there would be no real problems. He was right.

The legacy of innovation that marked the creation of the Oak Ridge school system under Alden Blankenship, the search for the best teachers in the nation, the ongoing expectation of staff, faculty and community that we would settle for nothing less than the best was something I lived and breathed both as a student in the school system and a child of a family dedicated to education. I supported the campaign for a leading-edge new high school because I saw it squarely in that tradition and I believe that it was, if anything, more important for the Oak Ridge of today than the Oak Ridge of yesterday.

One of the clear missions of Oak Ridge's school system has been to provide opportunities to all students no matter what their aptitude and skills. On the academic side, for example, we have developed a truly remarkable Senior Thesis Program that pairs math students with researchers at ORNL. Recently that resulted in winning first place in the prestigious Siemens Competition in math, science and technology. We have an AP program second to none in the country. Not only do our students who take the national AP tests score higher on average than almost any other school, our teachers lead the way as the College Board's test developers and graders, mentors and teachers of other AP teachers.

Our athletic programs have provided a platform for our physically talented students. Students and coaches together have won more state athletic championships than any other high school in the state. Our Linden physical education teacher was the first elementary school teacher ever to be elected as president of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education and Dance.

Our Oak Ridge schools' Preschool was the first school-system sponsored preschool for 3- and 4-year olds in Tennessee and has operated for 40 years. We have a waiting list that far exceeds capacity.

At an early age, our school system offers students an opportunity to discover their musical talents. The system currently has more than more than 600 students playing instruments in grades 4 through 12.

We should be justifiably proud of the education system we have created, but we don't have the

luxury of resting on our laurels. We have tremendous challenges ahead at the national, state and local level

As a nation, we need to provide students with a greater ability to think analytically and an ability to grasp technology in every job from truck driving to scientific research. We must inspire and open the path to creativity in the arts to innovation in solving the world's persistent problems.

Today, as a state, we have to face up to a hard reality. We have set our educational standards at low levels and defined a spurious proficiency in standardized testing. In the next few years, as we are required to match national standards and demand more rigorous courses of all our students -- not just those who want to achieve -- we will have to alter our beliefs about how good we are and we will have to find new ways and new ways of funding a different kind of education.

As a town, Oak Ridge is challenged with dramatic changes in demographics; many students are without family support for education and without the desire to achieve. We are challenged with loss of sales tax revenues and challenged because we have no unity of vision. These challenges are tied together and both have a moral imperative that speak to Oak Ridge's tradition of expecting excellence.

In our town as in the nation, few things are more important than equipping our children to have a successful life -- even to the point of reaching out to help those who seem unwilling to help themselves. In our current economic environment with little retail and few popular entertainment opportunities, as well as a troubled housing stock, Oak Ridge's demonstrated commitment to excellence of education is one of the few things that gives Oak Ridge a distinctive edge as prospective residents seek a place to live in the East Tennessee region. We are talking about our future and in order to make it a good one we must now pay attention and provide support in a way we never have before.

Pat Postma is a long-time resident of Oak Ridge.

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