

High school chorus was key experience for Hanna

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In 1979, Rocky Hanna was a freshman at Leon High School and he was struggling to find where he fit in. "I was somewhat of a social outcast when I was a ninth-grader," he recalled. "I was a kid with dark hair and dark skin, and people weren't quite as accepting of people who looked like me back in the late '70s." Seeking a safe place for social interaction and self-discovery, Hanna enrolled in the men's choir, directed by local music education legend Ray Kickliter.

"I was not a very talented musician or singer, but it was a wonderful way to express myself and to get in with a group. That chorus gave me an opportunity to meet other students and develop relationships."

Participation in the arts allows many students to find acceptance. Great arts educators foster a culture of empathy and compassion in their classrooms, and Kickliter was no exception. "Mr. Kickliter was amazing, he was a wonderful man, a mentor, and years later we became dear friends."

During their schooling, every one of



JOE RONDONE/DEMOCRAT
Leon County School Superintendent Rocky Hanna announces the Teacher of the Year during a schoolwide assembly in December.

the district's 33,000 students will participate in the arts. At any given time, 80 percent of them are enrolled in at least one and often multiple visual, performing or literary arts classes. Students seeking in-depth experiences can choose from an array of honors-weighted options or advanced placement, dual enrollment and college credit courses, which prepare them for higher learning or a career in the arts. There are currently more than 250 arts educators in the school district, and all of them affect the trajectory of their students' personal, social, cognitive and creative development.

Hanna experienced this firsthand, not only from his own involvement in the arts but also as a school administrator. "When I took over as principal at Leon, I realized how important arts education and those programs are to so many of our kids. We committed lots of resources to those programs because they were so important."

During his tenure, Hanna expanded Leon's arts curriculum and hired additional faculty members to meet the



demand. In 2009, his efforts were recognized with the Administrator of the Year Award, presented by the Florida State Thespians, a statewide theater education organization. "Those arts programs grew near and dear to my heart, as did those kids," Hanna said. "I was blown away by the talent. I would have to pinch myself looking at some of their art or going to some of their performances, just to remind myself that these are teenagers."

"Our arts programs allow kids to get up each day and go find themselves, not only as artists, but it gives them a sense of purpose and direction moving forward. Through the arts, kids are allowed to be creative and allowed to express themselves. They're not feeling that everyone is judging them or that they have some type of social standard to live up to. They can just be themselves and be embraced."

Recently elected as the superintendent of Leon County Schools, Hanna is focused on giving students all the tools they need in order to be successful over the course of their lives. One of the areas he plans to pay particular atten-

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tion to is standardized assessment and how it relates to arts education.

"With the over-emphasis of testing and the progress monitoring, the kids, unfortunately, have turned into data points. The other piece, the creative piece, is being pushed back. We have to get back to having a common-sense approach to education and also realize that every kid is not the same. One size doesn't fit all."

School arts education programs are uniquely suited to a pluralistic philosophy. Hanna's goal is to "create the renaissance student. There should be a well-rounded, holistic approach to an education." He affirmed, "as superintendent, I will not compromise or take a step back on Leon County Schools' commitment to arts programs. We'll find ways to expand what we're already doing."

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