

WILL SOUTH LAKES HIGH CLIMB HIGHER?

By William Nicoson

By schools are communities known. Ask any real estate agent. Home buyers may not appreciate walkways separated from roadways, but, in choosing their place in the sun, they care a whole lot about the quality of their kids' education.

South Lakes High School is a defining asset of Reston. No one beyond the closed circle of teachers, administrators, students and parents can ever know how such a complicated institution as a high school really works or fails to work. But there has been speculation that the initial promise of South Lakes has somehow been dissipated.

In 1980 South Lakes had the highest number of merit scholars among the high schools of Fairfax County. Since then, a number of Reston scholars have decamped to enroll at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology. Last year's record on Standards of Learning (SOL) tests was disappointing. This year's preliminary SOL report is better, but lags somewhat behind Herndon High on most subjects. Rumors of less than perfect order in corridors and classrooms have circulated.

A new principal, Realista Rodriguez, arrived at South Lakes a year ago with high hopes for improvements. Since then surveys show that staff morale has risen, and parent involvement in the educational process has increased. A campaign to improve safety and security has led some visitors to notice "fewer students in the halls". Now Ms. Rodriguez proposes to focus attention on improvement of South Lakes' academic record.

I attended the graduation exercises at South Lakes on June 21st. I heard speaker Robert E. Simon, Jr., point out that among 35 nations, we rank 14th in math testing and 25th in science testing, but 1st by a margin of 40% over our closest competitor among 12 developed nations in compensation paid to corporate CEOs. Simon was vigorously applauded. Students generally appreciate iconoclasts, but – who knows? – maybe, having tested less well than hoped, they were pleased to be in good company, or maybe they were happy to anticipate generous future compensation however they tested.

But one thing was clear about these students. Their respect for excellence extended beyond the commencement speaker. They applauded with enthusiasm the scholars among them who were selected for honors and listened attentively to students chosen to address them. Sure they batted around a few beach balls during doldrums, but high spirits are not consistent with perfect decorum.

In short, my impression is that a school spirit exists at South Lakes which will help Ms. Rodriguez improve whatever needs improving. Some community groups are also pitching in. The Greater Reston Chamber of Commerce has sponsored Senior Ethics Day, and Sallie May has

funded a summer program for Freshmen and will support SOL remediation efforts. A Reston Foundation for Education has been proposed by long-time resident and lawyer Dan Vitiello, which would bring together on its board of trustees the Presidents of Reston Association, Reston Citizens Association and the Reston Chamber with Principal Rodriguez. That's a powerhouse board which would understand the importance of its mission to protect and improve one of Reston's greatest assets.

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