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MIAMI-DADE SCHOOLS

Carvalho promotes bond issue

· Speaking to a crowd of business leaders, Miami-Dade schools chief Alberto Carvalho urged support of a November bond-issue referendum.

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From improved academics to greater financial stability, Miami-Dade's school district is in the midst of a remarkably positive turnaround, Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho told a group of business leaders on Thursday.

And that success story of local public schools deserves to be rewarded, Carvalho said, in the form of a \$1.2 billion bond issue that will be before voters in November.

Carvalho's speech to the Beacon Council, Miami-Dade's economic development agency, was the latest step in the district's public-relations blitz leading up to the all-important Nov. 6 vote. Earlier in the week, Carvalho spoke to a homeowners' group in Kendall, and a slick, district-produced promotional video for the bond issue is being played for parents at school Open House nights.

If approved, the bond issue will pay for physical renovations to aging schools as well as technology enhancements across the district.

"This is an investment that will dignify and honor the way kids live, the way kids learn," Carvalho said Thursday, while promising that every school in the district would benefit in some way.

Noting that half the county's schools were built in the 1950s, Carvalho said research shows that the condition of students' learning environment has a direct impact on their academic success. Carvalho also told the story of North Dade Middle School, a school that had to be hurriedly evacuated in 2010 because it was in "near-collapsing condition."

Demonstrating the district's financial need was perhaps the easy part, but Carvalho also tackled the two bigger hurdles the referendum faces: justifying what amounts to a slight tax increase during tough economic times and assuring the public that the bond money will be spent wisely.

On the tax increase side, Carvalho emphasized that the impact to homeowners would be minimal: The owner of a home valued at \$185,000 would pay no more than \$9.70 in additional annual property taxes during the first two years following approval. Future years' tax burdens would be similarly modest, Carvalho said.

Carvalho also pitched the job-creation benefits of school construction work and technology improvements (an estimated 9,200 new jobs during the first two years), and pledged that private-sector businesses would be tapped for all that spending.

"You see, we're educators, we do a very good job of teaching kids math and science and reading and writing," Carvalho said. "We cannot build schools...we do not do a great job at installing technology. That's your job."

When it comes to spending the bond money wisely, Carvalho acknowledged that a prior school district bond issue, launched in 1988, suffered from financial mismanagement. But Carvalho cited those problems as part of a larger troubled past for the district — a past that he said has been left behind during his four-year tenure as Miami-Dade's schools chief.

In that time, Carvalho said the district has boosted its once-meager financial reserves by 3,000 percent, improved its credit rating even in the sour economy and shed its administrative bloat considerably. The number of employees earning six-figure salaries, Carvalho said, has been reduced from nearly 800 to about 360.

Academic achievement has also risen substantially, Carvalho said. He recalled that nine historically low-performing schools — Little Haiti's Miami Edison Senior High among them — were once targeted for closure by the state because of poor test scores. These days, all nine schools have achieved an A or B grade from Florida's Department of Education.

"We can be trusted with educating your kids," Carvalho said, arguing that this trust should extend to the bond issue. "The record is solid. The time is now."

So far, no significant organized opposition to the bond issue has surfaced, and a pro-referendum political action committee, called Building for Tomorrow, has been formed. That committee on Thursday announced its leadership team — featuring heavy-hitters such as philanthropist Adrienne Arsht, former Miami Mayor Manny Diaz and former Miami Heat star Alonzo Mourning.

At the Beacon Council, the largely supportive audience of more than 100 people included Ricardo Cookson, a parent of two children at Miami's Ada Merritt K-8 school. Cookson is part of a group of parents at the school who took it upon themselves to raise money to install smartboards — today's digital interactive version of a classroom chalkboard. The fundraising drive has so far paid for 20 new smartboards, though Cookson admitted he has been frustrated at times that the school district couldn't afford to buy such items on its own.

Should the bond issue pass, that may change, and Cookson said Carvalho's message of a new-and-improved school system should help persuade voters.

"Banks don't have any trouble giving money to a credible company that does good work," Cookson said. "It's the iffy ones that you sort of balk on."



CARVALHO