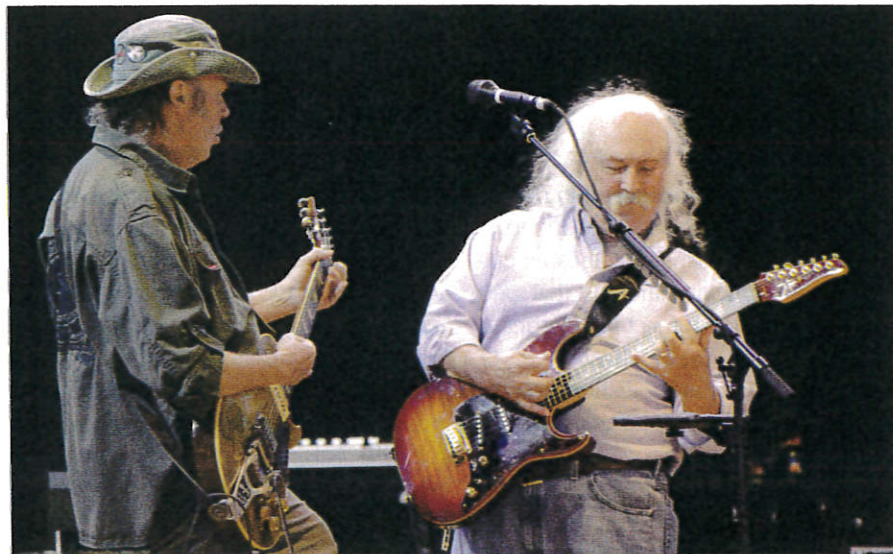


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LIFE ON A SCHOOL BOARD

Fighting for what you love

Dan Schlafer

Let's face it. Sometimes you have to draw a line in the sand. When push comes to shove, you have to fight for what you love.

David Crosby, of Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young fame, put it this way:

"I want to stand alone in front of the world and that oncoming tank

Like that Chinese boy that we all have to thank.

He showed us in a picture that I have mounted

Exactly what it means to stand and be counted."

Those of you who aren't into rock 'n' roll can turn to The Good Book for affirmation. Ephesians 6:13 states:

"...so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand."

A "stand and be counted" moment arose this past summer for the

Cumberland County Board of Education. It wasn't pretty.

Our county commissioners didn't begin to consider our budget until two weeks before school started in August, beginning our annual battle. Being fiscally dependent on folks who don't appear to put a premium on educating children has become a rancorous undertaking, to say the least.

Let me set the stage for you. Our schoolchildren have realized a net 1 percent increase in the property tax allocation for education from our county commission in the past 15 years. We've survived only because of increases in local option sales tax collection and growth. Folks from Michigan, New York, and Ohio flock to our seven retirement/golf communities because of our ridiculously low property tax rate. Although we currently boast one of the most meager assessments in our state, we rank in the

top 25 in assessed property value in Tennessee. Clearly, our ability to pay doesn't match our funding effort.

Against that backdrop, our school system was \$7 million shy of what providing a quality education for our children should have been. We were told to expect nothing more than "maintenance of effort" funding. That translated into a bare-bones budget, with increases in gasoline, diesel fuel, and utilities set to gobble up any plans for improving our financial balance sheet.

Our board dug in. I was one of seven of our nine board members who voted to delay the opening of school. With no concrete funding figure in hand from our county commissioners, classes were set to begin. Knowing the story that history had told, we refused to begin school, knowing we'd have to cut people and programs if their policy proceeded.

When the dust settled and the smoke cleared in late August, the community outcry was substantial. The struggle drew statewide media attention. Every single program in our school system saw a budget cut. The first cut we made was from our own line item. We reduced the board travel and voluntarily eliminated the life insurance benefit for board members—while the full health insurance benefit for our county commissioners remained in full force.

We closed our schools for two weeks. Do I regret our delay decision? Absolutely not! What's popular isn't always right. What's right isn't always popular.

Out of the fray has come a promise from the commission's budget committee to begin funding discussions in June. What will happen during this budget cycle is anybody's guess, but at least the sand isn't nearly as hot at that time of the year. ■

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