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Our Opinion: Montford is new blood in District 6

Powerful education advocate is needed in the Senate

For years, classroom teachers and public schools have been shortchanged by the Florida Legislature, regardless of ever-present reassurance by political figures that education of our children is foremost on their minds.

Even the most cursory understanding of the state budget in recent years will show that public schools have never been given the resources to enact the high standards that give lawmakers and state education officials bragging rights.

Without proper resources, it's empty talk. With high standards but no willingness to pay the freight, school districts are left with just another unfunded mandate — something all levels of local government know too well.

This next Legislative session, when the state budget may be as much as \$6 billion short, our schools are going to need an advocate who can appeal to both sides of the aisle and present a persistent, coherent argument for preserving our public schools.

In the race to fill Senate Seat 6, which serves all or part of 11 counties in North Florida, we believe the best advocate is Bill Montford. A longtime superintendent of schools in Leon County, former Leon County commissioner, and now chief executive officer of the Florida Association of District School Superintendents, he has a strong history of influencing policy on behalf of teachers and students.

In many ways, he and Curtis Richardson, his challenger in the Democratic primary, have a great deal in common.

Mr. Richardson has been a school psychologist in the Gadsden County schools and served on the Leon County School Board in the 1990s before his election to the House of Representatives, where he served for eight years before being term-limited out of office two years ago.

During candidate interviews with the *Tallahassee Democrat's* editorial board, the two men disagreed on very little. They especially see eye-to-eye on the wrongheaded approach taken in Senate Bill 6, a Republican-backed bill to cut teacher tenure and tie merit pay to classroom gains measured strictly by student test scores. It failed last session but is expected to rise again in 2011.

But while Mr. Richardson has established valuable relationships with constituents in Leon and Gadsden counties, those same constituents will need their new senator to have not only strong alliances statewide, but also the ability to build bipartisan consensus when negotiating the future of Florida's public schools.

Mr. Montford supports giving schools the leeway necessary to best implement the class-size amendment instead of using the rigid numbers under current, unfunded law.

He contends that Florida's tax structure must be revised to find the funds for not only schools but also a plethora of other state needs, including the ability to recruit and retain skilled state employees. He says a critical review of tax exemptions would force legislators to be honest about what they want for public schools, and what they're willing to do to pay for this investment.

Mr. Montford, a native of Blountstown, is candid about the work force and economic needs of District 6, too, saying, "We'd be up a creek without the prisons" in North Florida. His vision for turning around the State University System, which he calls the state's "most under-utilized resource," is in critical need of a knowledgeable champion.

With a proven track record for effective leadership as a local education leader and deep knowledge of the issue that is the No. 1 investment our state can make, Mr. Montford offers a solid choice for Democratic voters of District 6.

The winner will face unopposed GOP candidate John Shaw in November.

Editor's note: The *Democrat* offers candidates whom the Editorial Board has not endorsed a 300-word rebuttal to be submitted as soon as possible to letters@tallahassee.com.
