

Is the New School in Orange Beach Leading to a School Split?

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It may seem obvious to those who look. Orange Beach is perfectly positioned to have an independent school system, divorced from the constraints of the Baldwin County Board of Education (BCBE).

In a stroke of negotiated genius, Orange Beach Mayor Tony Kennon closed a deal with BCBE, ensuring they take on millions of dollars worth of construction debt, providing a new High School/Middle School for students in Orange Beach with no increase in local-property taxes. The city did transfer land to BCBE, giving them clear title to the property the school will sit on. This new campus is the final catalyst for a school split in Orange Beach.

As with all politicians, there is a hidden cost to partnering with the City of Orange Beach. The Baldwin County Board of Education is expected to make administrative concession, accommodating Mayor Kennon's vision. He will be disappointed, leading to a split of irreconcilable differences.

Kennon said, "I expect to be treated differently, I expect them [Baldwin County Board of Education] to listen to our community [me]. The school [Middle School/High School] that we're building is a gem for them to show off," according to a report by John Mullen on the OBA Website (<https://obawebsite.com/oba-news/2018/orange-beach-school-questions-to-be-presented-to-county?showall=&start=1>).

BCBE is not going to let Orange Beach tell them how to do their job, providing the excuse for Orange Beach to file for separation, severing ties with Baldwin County, and forming an independent school system.

Orange Beach tried twice before to found a school system. Once in 2007 and once in 2014, but both failed massively. This time the initiative will succeed.

Mayor Kennon will have more influence over the school board in an independent school system, finally getting what council has always wanted for Orange Beach, tattooing their guidance on the lives of future generations through a finely tuned curriculum of academics, sports and after-school programs. This will take the worry off the shoulders of working parents, because their kids will be in supervised care from sunup to sundown.

Prayer and The Pledge in standalone after-school programs are elements local parents will not oppose; having independent after-school programs is the only way this works. "Organized prayer in the public school setting, whether in the classroom or at a school-sponsored event, is unconstitutional. The only type of prayer that is constitutionally permissible is private, voluntary student prayer that does not interfere with the school's educational mission," according to a report on adl.org

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(<https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/religion-in-public-schools/prayer>).

By example Gulf Shores City Schools will show how effective independent-minded programs can be, allowing Orange Beach parents to see how they can improve alternative education. Administrative differences will be pointed out, underlining the idea for independence. Perhaps more home-schooled children will come back, because of Orange Beach's after-school model.

Orange Beach must first demonstrate the short comings of the Baldwin County Schools, pointing again to how well an independent school system like Gulf Shores targets the unique needs of local children in a way generic, county-wide education never can, like marine biology, oceanography, or religious studies.

Political interests will start to align, pointing out the discrepancies, and shortcomings of the county system. A groundswell of concern will rise, pleading for help, leading to discussions, therapy and divorce.

"I would hope Gulf Shores would go ahead and help us [Orange Beach] move forward so both city and county schools can move forward," said Mayor Tony Kennon. "We [BCBE] need to hire administrators, coaches, and ... it's frustrating and unfair to the parents who are in limbo." according to a report in al.com (<https://www.al.com/news/2018/12/orange-beach-families-to-state-where-are-we-going-to-school-next-year.html>).

The Baldwin County Board of Education and the Gulf Shores City School Board could not find common ground, negotiating the school separation, requiring the Alabama State Superintendent of Education to step in, settling the dispute.

"Gulf Shores High School students living outside of the city going into grades 11 and 12 will remain at the school. Next year's 10th graders will have the choice to stay at Gulf Shores High School or to attend class in Orange Beach," said Dr. Eric Mackey, Alabama's State Superintendent of Education, according to a report by Fox10News (https://www.fox10tv.com/news/plan-for-students-announced-ahead-of-gulf-shores-school-split/article_71e9d748-0305-11e9-ad73-73c37836cfe0.html).

The possibility exists that students attending Gulf Shores City Schools from Orange Beach and Ono Island will be required to pay tuition, "Gulf Shores City Schools shall retain the right to formulate an Out of District Policy at their discretion," said State Superintendent Dr. Eric Mackey, according to a report in mynbc15.com (<https://mynbc15.com/news/local/gulf-shores-city-schools-gets-formal-preliminary-determinations-from-state-superintendent>).

This Out of District Policy ruling is leverage for Gulf Shores City Schools. Precedent already exists for student applications, vetting, and tuition payments in Satsuma, an independent school system, according to a report on Satsuma City Schools web site (<https://www.satsumaschools.com/Page/1103>).

Kennon will be very disappointed if Orange Beach is saddled with a large tuition bill for its students, but you cannot expect Gulf Shores' taxpayers to foot the bill for Orange Beach's students. The Orange Beach City Council could volunteer to subsidize tuition, providing financial assistance to local parents, during the transition period.

The Orange Beach separation whispers have already begun, based on the premise that we can do it better.

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“I am not comparing Orange Beach schools to the county,” Kennon said. “I’m comparing Orange Beach schools to the best in the state. If we can’t be the best in the state, then we have underachieved. We have the ability, the financial wherewithal to be the best in the state. No one can hold us back. We have to as a community expect excellence, hold our kids to it and hold other parents to it. If we don’t demand excellence, if we don’t demand that we are the best in the state then we’re not going to get it,” according to a report by Crystal Cole in Gulf Coast News Today (<http://www.gulfcoastnewstoday.com/stories/orange-beach-parents-express-concerns-ahead-of-school-split,71219>).

Obviously Mayor Kennon wants to put his stamp on the way things are done. This will be impossible with the reins of power in the hands of the Baldwin County Board of Education. Sooner rather than later Kennon will announce Orange Beach is going their own way.

Orange Beach can afford to go it alone. In 2017 the city generated \$41.8 million in revenue, having \$25.1 million in expenses, leaving \$16.7 million in tax-free profit, bringing the city’s current reserves to \$49 million for a town of 5,600 residents, according to a City of Orange Beach public-records request.

The city has enough cash to buy out the Baldwin County Board of Education, taking over the Elementary School, Middle School, and High School. Council will finally get what it wants, an independent school system.

Should the city break away? Without taking on a crippling amount of debt, it seems pushing the kids through the county pipe is the path of least resistance. Many students have graduated from Baldwin County Schools going on to stellar careers.

The stage is set for a *coup d'état*, allowing the City of Orange Beach to take over from Baldwin County, installing its own surrogates on the school board, achieving council’s dream of excellence in education.

Let’s face it Baldwin County; the divorce papers are all but signed.

ENDS.