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Nov. 27, 2002

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USF St. Petersburg to Honor School Board Chair with Honorary Degree

Lee Benjamin, chair of the Pinellas County School Board, will be awarded an honorary doctor's degree during next month's commencement exercise for graduating students of the University of South Florida St. Petersburg.

Benjamin will receive an honorary Doctor of Education degree honoring his extraordinary lifelong contributions to the children of Pinellas County.

Commencement will be held at 2 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 15, at Mahaffey Theatre, during which 315 students are expected to receive degrees.

A biography of Mr. Benjamin is attached.

For more information, contact Buddy Baker at (727) 553-3458.

Biography of Lee Benjamin

From the classroom to the basketball court to the administrative office to the school board, Lee Benjamin has done it all. Encompassing his successive positions from coach and teacher to chairman of the Pinellas County School Board is his deep, broad, and sustained impact in ensuring that all children receive a high-quality education. As a longtime friend to the University of South Florida, he has established a lasting legacy through his leadership in developing a model for university-school partnerships.

Mr. Benjamin was a high school teacher and coach in Georgia before coming to Northeast High School in 1954 as one of the first teachers at that newly opened school. He rose from the ranks of coach and teacher to dean, assistant principal, and principal. While principal, Mr. Benjamin dealt with the unsettling changes brought about by the desegregation of all schools countywide, yet because of the respect he had established with all students and their parents, Northeast did not experience the unrest of other schools. In 1974, he was appointed one of the county's first area superintendents, where he oversaw the operation of more than 30 schools. He retired from that post ten years later.

In 1990, Mr. Benjamin was elected to the Pinellas County School Board. He has served an unprecedented four terms as chairman. In that time, he helped USF St. Petersburg develop partnerships with Rawlings and Campbell Park elementary schools and put the word "university" into the name of Palm Harbor University High School through this university's affiliation there. Additionally, he supported the implementation of character education into Pinellas County schools, using a program that originated in USFSP's ethics initiative.

Mr. Benjamin has been equally active outside the halls of education. He is owner and operator of Hilltop Day Camp in St. Petersburg. He is the director of Camp Kadima, which is sponsored by the Jewish Federation. He is a member of Temple Bai Israel of Clearwater and the Holocaust Committee for the state of Florida. He is a past member of the Civitan Club and Community Alliance. And he finished fourth in the nation in the Tennis Senior Olympics!

He has a bachelor's degree in physical education and a masters degree in administration and supervision, both from Florida State University.

Mr. Benjamin's accomplishments have not gone without notice. He has received education awards from Hadassah and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He has been named an outstanding educator for Pinellas County.

USF St. Petersburg's teacher education programs and access to school board services and resources are testaments to Mr. Benjamin's leadership. As Dr. William Heller noted in a letter of recommendation, "I think no one has been more instrumental in building bridges between higher education and elementary and secondary education than this gentleman. People talk about school-university partnerships; Lee Benjamin has made them a reality for USF St. Petersburg."