

Chalkboard

By

Dr. Randy C. Barrett, Superintendent
Gentry Public Schools

The last five *Chalkboards* have dealt the issues surrounding the *Lakeview* trial and how the Arkansas Supreme Court's ruling will change the face of education in our state. This series has been my attempt to make you aware of the "Why's", "What's", and a few "Who's".

Next week the legislators will convene in a session in which "fixing" education will be a top priority. Their goal will be to originate a system that will be both adequate and equitable with regard to the state's children. Theirs is a Herculean task. A price tag for a "fix" has been estimated at \$1,000,000,000 plus.

Perhaps therein lies the real problem. In Arkansas, where would an extra billion or so dollars come? According to an Arkansas Labor Department publication (*Labor News*, Vol. 24, No. 3, Fall, 2001) quoting the 2000 Census, our state's median household income was 48th in the nation at \$32,714. Some other quotes said, "17.47 percent of Arkansans live at or below the nation's poverty level. This is the sixth highest rate in the country...25 percent of Arkansas' 680,000 children under the age of 18 live in homes below the federal poverty level...only an estimated 17 percent of Arkansans (graduate college) with a bachelor's degree or higher."

Hmmm? I wonder if anyone has noticed the possible correlation? Our educational system ranks about the same level nationally as does our median household income. No surprise here, that spot is nearly at the bottom. Let's trot out a few numbers from <http://www.census.gov/statab/www/ranks.html>. Teacher salary-45th. Personal Income Per Capita-47th. Resident Population 65 Years Old or Older- 9th. Unemployment Rate-= 17th. By and large, we are a state of, academically speaking, uneducated, poor people.

Bull, you say? Got your dukes up? Put them down if you do. I am not being critical of anybody or anything. I am proud of my home state and the people who live within its borders. I have made it known many times in prior columns that there are many types of education a person can earn that has nothing to do with ivory towers. I believe I have noted several times that my father, a very wise and good man, was a high-school dropout. But the statistics do tell a overall story, a Catch-22 type story, of a cycle of minimum wage careers generating meager conditions in areas of the state

contributing to scanty state revenues contributing to insufficient funds for education contributing to minimum wage careers.... well, you get the idea.

Which brings to mind the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg? Restated, did a lack of a quality education system cause Arkansas to become a poor state or did Arkansas being a poor state cause the educational system to become “inadequate and inequitable”? Trying to answer that may be as unproductive as debating whether or not Adam had a navel.

I will offer this final thought before turning the focus of future ***Chalkboards*** back to local issues. There is not going to be a “quick fix” in changing Arkansas public education because there is nothing inherently wrong with it that is not a product of the global environment in which the schools exist.

We are all cognizant of the saying about “putting a pig in a silk dress” and what it means. “Fixing” the microcosm of Arkansas public education without “fixing” the macrocosm of Arkansas economics will be equally successful to the pig analogy unless everyone in the state is committed to the idea that the reason to change the microcosm, at whatever cost, is to change the macrocosm. Else, calling the hogs in Arkansas may take on a whole new meaning as the lawyers gather at the wallow.