

Chalkboard

By

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As I booted up Jason's PC Sunday night to work on my Monday deadline for the *Chalkboard*, I was torn between subjects of the heart and of the mind. My heart sought to express the feelings I have had this week concerning the terrible tragedy and loss our community has experienced with the loss of two special individuals. My mind said to focus on the present, not the past; to stay focused on the future of our school district.

I finally chose the latter because I decided I knew of no words that could be said by me on the former that have not already been eloquently spoken by those most affected.

Regarding the issues of the mind, I attended a meeting at the Decatur School District last Saturday initiated by Senator Kim Hendren. Mr. Ray Simon, Director of the Arkansas Department of Education, was present to answer questions regarding this legislative's session most pressing issue- school consolidation. I use pressing because the state is under an Arkansas Supreme court mandate to reform public education in Arkansas to ensure that all school children have access to an adequate and equitable education.

What set the wheels of this meeting in motion was an action by the Decatur administration last week. In the face of an uncertain future for their district, they offered to allow high school students and their siblings in the lower grades the opportunity to transfer to Gentry or Gravette next school year. This action was not and should not be construed by anyone to indicate that the Decatur School District plans to consolidate. In fact, the message is clear that Decatur currently plans to have school next year. I will hypothesize they merely wished to allow the parents, the major stakeholders at anyone's school, to be part of the decision making process.

To understand the complexity of the situation a person would need to be familiar with the tenets of the court mandate and with the myriad of bills that have been spawned to address that mandate. In addition, a person would need to understand the mechanics of the political process. I confess to not being an expert in any of the above.

While not an expert, I can see bits of the puzzle falling together. A long overdue adequacy study is being conducted by "outside" experts. Part of that study will be to determine what is an efficient school district and a component of that definition will be the ratio of the number of students to

the number of staff. To that thought, add the concept of the State Board of Education approving the change from 30 to 60 units that must be taught each year. To that, add the possibility that the state minimum teacher salary schedule will be increased to a level competitive with neighboring states. Stir into the mix minimum higher school facility standards. Finally add up the cost to do all of the above. I believe the bottom line will be that the state cannot tax its citizens enough to support 310 school districts.

Using that type of thinking, a Gentry and Decatur consolidation seems to make sense. A combining of the two districts would yield approximately 1800 students which would seem to be sufficient to meet whatever teacher to student ratio that might be devised.

A combining of the land areas would result in a district of approximately 140 square miles. This would still be a smaller geographical area than is currently served by the Siloam Springs or Gravette School Districts transportation departments.

A combining of the assets of the two districts should be enough to generate sufficient revenue to meet whatever the new requirements would be. There is even a possibility of bonus “consolidation” funding from the state level.

Is there a down side? Of course there is. Some staff members would lose their jobs, as it will not take the full staffs of both districts to serve the combined student populations. Some students might be on a bus ten to fifteen minutes longer than they currently are now. (Gentry buses now go east almost to XNA; that same distance north would roughly reach Gravette.)

In a new district, the fine traditions of both the Gentry Pioneers and Decatur Bulldogs athletic programs would have to give way to the beginning of a new tradition with a new logo and perhaps new colors. In many minds this would be a hard pill to swallow.

So would it be worth it? I hope so because the reality of the situation seems to be that neither the Decatur nor Gentry School will be able to exist independent of the other at some point in the future. If that is the course that must be followed, as dictated by powers higher in authority than local school boards, and if it does mean the students receive a better education, then it will be worth the cost.