

Chalkboard

By

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It would seem that the majority of the *Chalkboards* this year have revolved around the Governor's and the Legislature's plans to reform our educational system. In fairness, it should be noted the ruling of the Arkansas Supreme Court has necessitated the aforementioned parties' actions. Since you have been bombarded with the issue, you know I am referring to the Court's ruling in *Lakeview* where they judged public education to be both inequitable and inadequate.

It seems the session will wind down without a school consolidation plan being approved and signed into law. The only remaining question appears to be whether the legislature will adjourn and be called into special session in the fall to continue the battle or whether they will recess and reconvene in the fall to continue the battle.

Either way, it leaves those of us who are responsible for beginning our local school districts' plans for the next year in the same place, as we have been most of the session- in limbo. In many ways that is unfortunate but every cloud is supposed to possess a silver lining.

Regardless, planning for the new year will soon begin. The first step will involve the rehiring of staff for the next school term. At Gentry, certified employees, those requiring a license from the state to perform his or her respective job, are rehired in April. Classified employees are rehired in May. Both groups of employees are hired with a contract that is legally binding to both parties- the school district and the employee. Unless due cause exists, both parties can reasonably expect the other party to uphold its side of the agreement. I say all this to say the silver lining may be that if some future adequacy study finds Gentry Public Schools to be inefficient due to some yet to be determined staff to student ratio, and if such finding mandates that Gentry reduce the staff size, all employees can still be assured that their respective contract will be honored for the 2003-04 school term. Such would be a bit ironic as for the last 10 years our district has been working on reducing class size with the thought in mind that fewer students per teacher promotes more individualized attention given to the student. Interestingly we actually receive federal money, enough to fund one classroom, under the "old" Classroom Size Reduction Act to do that very

thing. I surmise the court's ruling has pushed Arkansas' educational pendulum in the opposite direction.

Another step that needs to be determined soon is what the contract will stipulate in terms of employee's compensation. I use "soon" because the Gentry certified salary schedule is viewed as a board policy, the district's Personnel Policies Committee needs and is also required to be afforded an opportunity for input into that policy, and that process requires two regular board meetings and thus requires two months. That timeline now means the regular April 21, 2003, and regular May 19, 2003 meetings.

As the district's superintendent I had hoped the consolidation issue would have been resolved before either of the above two decisions had to be etched in stone. I confess that I have been procrastinating. I have been doing so because it is easier to make good decisions armed with knowledge rather than speculation.

I always want to be able to recommend to the school board as "fair a raise" as our budget will allow; school employees are working for a living like those in any other vocation. The task will be more difficult this year with so many unknowns slated to be resolved in the next school term.

A third task that must be dealt with now is the restructuring of our school bonds. That is unfortunate also because our board has spent the last two years "refinancing" all our existing debt and has obtained some very good interest rates. But the Arkansas Supreme Court has ruled that excess debt service millage cannot be used to meet the Uniform Rate Of Tax of 25 mills each district is required. I have explained this in a past *Chalkboard* so I will only say here the school board is faced with having to ask you the voters for either a 6.2 mills Maintenance and Operating Mills increase or do an advance refunding of one of our five existing bond issues. The downside to this is that an advance refunding is projected to cost an additional \$300,000 to \$500,000 over the next 12 years.

The list of things to begin thinking about for next year goes on and on. Some are large decisions like the ones described above. Others are small in comparison. All have to be made in sufficient time to meet deadlines required by school law and to honor the concept that "Rome was not built in a day"; i.e. some tasks require time to complete and cannot wait to the day before students return to begin.

Bottom line- I think we can go ahead and bid a new bus next year with one of the specifications being having the name **Gentry** on the side.