

# Chalkboard

By

Dr. Randy C. Barrett, Superintendent  
Gentry Public Schools

I trust that you enjoyed the principals' and Mr. Moore's "guest" Chalkboards. As much as such articles have the power to convey, the five Chalkboards gave a good summary of how our students are performing academically. The portrait painted by the five "Masters" was that of an average to above school district.

These articles compared to recent newspaper headlines in which Gentry and numerous other school districts were listed as "troubled" and "sub-par" should have left you discerning readers wondering about the apparent contradiction. In attempting to explain this paradox, I must fall back to an example that I can understand.

Imagine lining up the students of some grade, shoulder to shoulder, across one goal line of the football field. The students are informed to sprint as fast as possible to the other end of the field. The crack of the starter's pistol sounds and off they race. The athletic types lead the pack, the student in the wheelchair brings up the rear closely behind the short, pudgy child (In my mind's eye that pudgy child is me in 1960).

Each student's time is kept separately. Then all the times are ranked fastest to slowest. Then these times are compared to the same grade level of all other Arkansas students who have taken this same test. Then the scores are assigned the four categories of really fast, fast, not so fast, and trudging along (Advanced, Proficient, Basic, Below Basic).

The scores get published in the newspaper so parents can compare how well their school matches up with neighboring districts. An edict comes down from some government Track & Field agency which says "Your school district must train all those students who were not so fast or merely trudging along so that next year when we time the students who are one year behind them, all the students in that class will be really fast or at least just as fast. Forget that this is a different class. Forget that some of the students are tall, some are short, some are athletic, some have not yet hit a growth spurt, forget that one has polio, forget that one has to wear a leg brace, forget that one has asthma, and forget all other natural distinctions that make children naturally different from each other. But don't ever forget that if you cannot perform this task that there will be sanctions for your school."

So the school complies with the edict. Various conditioning programs are adopted and implemented. Teachers undergo training that allows them to better teach students how to run faster. The race is held again and more students get labeled as fast, not all but more. The newspapers dutifully report the improvement.

Then the governmental Track and Field Agency says, "Wait! There is one more thing you must do. In 12 years we want all your students, whenever we race, to be really fast or at least fast. We do not accept that your classes overall are getting faster, we want 100% of your students to be really fast or at least fast every time we race. We want you to study the different groups within each class. We will label those groups for you based on the research we have that explains why some children may not run as fast as others. Oh, and yes- if you cannot get those groups running faster then we will punish your school. If we don't just close you down, we will send those not so fast students to some other school where more children run faster. Oh, and yes- you pay their tuition and transportation. Or maybe, we will make you hire private track coaches for those students who are trudging along. Oh, and no- we are not going to send you any more money to hire these experts."

End of example. The bottom line is that Gentry Middle School is in Year 1 of School Improvement because a group of students whose family income qualifies them for "Free or Reduced Lunch", the "determiner" of who is labeled as "Economically Disadvantaged" did not make sufficient "Adequate Yearly Progress" on the State Benchmark Exam.

First, understand that every Gentry child who qualifies for Free or Reduced Lunches did not score poorly on the exam. To have a sub-group identified requires only that from the last three, test year's classes, 25 students must fall into that category- say 5 students from 2001, 12 students from 2002, and 8 students from 2003. Poverty is only a "predictor" not a "guarantor" of poor academic performance. For the record, approximately half of all our students qualify for "Free or Reduced Lunches".

Second, understand that being identified as requiring school improvement does not mean that the students in that group tested did not show progress. Rather it means that they did not show the amount or percent of progress required by a formula determined at the state level.

Third, understand that this labeling process does not compare the student's individual progress to his or her own from year-to-year but rather compares the scores from one year's class to the next year's. Specifically, this most recent labeling of the middle school is based on the scores of

students, labeled by the state as “Economically Disadvantaged” from classes attending the middle school in the years 2001, 2002, and 2003.

Fourth, understand that this convoluted system from the state officials is their best effort to comply with the federal requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. Their intent is to design a system that improves education for all students in the state; they are not seeking to be intentionally obtuse.

Finally, understand this article is not “sour grapes”. I have never said Gentry Public Schools is perfect. We are not. I have said, and I affirm again, that we are seeking continuous improvement in every thing we do.

Next week, I will provide the “statistics” that describe Gentry’s AYP or Adequate Yearly Progress.