

Chalkboard

By

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Today's *Chalkboard* continues last week's sortie into the area of the state legislature having to answer the mandate of the Arkansas Supreme Court to provide school facilities that are "**adequate, efficient, and substantially equal**" to all of the state's students. If you read last week's piece, you noted the price tag estimated to perform a complete fix, including projected new construction, was about 4.5 billion dollars. That cost analysis was derived after each school district in the state had each one of its individual buildings evaluated by a team of architects, engineers, and like professionals during the last year. You may read about it in great detail at <http://www.arkansasfacilities.com/index.asp>. Following is a quick primer, as it pertains to the Gentry Public School District, for those who may not wish to digest the 77-page report.

The study reported on buildings in three categories- building condition, educational suitability, and enrollment growth. Enrollment growth, as implied, is the cost of adding space for an increased student population. Educational suitability defines whether or not the space has adequate square feet of space per student. Building condition is an analysis the current condition and life expectancy of the following systems: Site, Roofing, Exterior, Interior, HVAC, Plumbing Fire, Safety, Specialties, Structural, and Technology. Further, these 11 systems are divided into 4 priorities with Priority 1 being things that need to be fixed immediately, Priority 2 being things that could need to be fixed within the next year, Priority 3 being things that should be fixed within the next 2 to 3 years, and Priority 4 being things needing to be addressed within the next 5 years.

I reported last week that the number shown for the Gentry School for the 5 year "fix" District was \$6,735,222. Of that amount, \$103,196 was deemed to be Priority 1 or critical, current needs. The large amount for our district was Priority 2, next year's needs, for a total of \$4,414,901. Priority 3 was \$1,033,779. The final long-range Priority 4 number was \$1,183,346.

The report indicated only \$347,828 was needed to meet the "educational suitability" category for the district. That is wonderful because, based on growth projections performed by the Task Force, in five years the Gentry District will need 38,753 additional square feet for a total cost of new construction being \$3,901,615. In 10 years that number would

be 75,218 additional square feet at a cost of \$7,572,877 needed for “enrollment growth”.

Follow all of that? Let me briefly restate the numbers. The report says that that in the next 10 years fourteen million, six hundred fifty-five thousand, nine hundred twenty-seven dollar (\$14,655,927) will need to be spent within the Gentry School District for us to have “**adequate, efficient, and substantially equal**” school facilities. I note that on their scale of 0% to 100%, with 65% being the break point where it is cheaper to replace a building that repair it, our district has an overall FCI of 26.01%. It would be even lower than that if our new Primary School was built as the old Primary School has an FCI of 60.1%

Last week I mentioned the “C” word (consolidation). I think it is something that will have to be considered. Etch this in concrete- the determining factor should not have anything to do with school size until and unless the state begins to pay the cost of new construction.

Let me say that again. It has been established that education is a function of the state. No legal debate exists there on any front. If the state is going to pay the cost of building new buildings, then it has the right to decide where those buildings will be built and who will attend them.

The flip of the coin should be that those districts, whose patrons have paid the bill to maintain good facilities, should be viewed for what they are- a group to whom the state has delegated the function of maintaining schools. Because local tax bases are different, I even say that communities who have made an effort to maintain their buildings by taxing themselves well over the 25 mill Uniform Rate Of Tax should be given consideration.

The legislature has access to a lot of data. Here are some “facts” they have from the report:

1. the value of each District’s FCI
2. the cost required for each district to measure up to “Educational Suitability”
3. the amount of space that districts have in excess of “suitability”
4. the cost of projected new construction based on growth

From other currently available sources, the legislature could correlate the following to the above:

1. the amount of money each district spends now to “maintain” their facilities per student (or ADM)

2. the amount of money each district spends now to “operate” their facilities per student (or ADM)
3. the amount of money each district spends each year for certified staff salary per student (or ADM)
4. what each district’s tax burden is for new construction or operational expenses above the required 25 mills (local effort indicator)
5. AYP Status (Academic indicator)
6. the poverty index for the district based on F & R Lunches
7. Assessed value of the school district
8. Teacher to Student To Required ADE Class size ratios

Maybe some bright thinker can design a matrix that uses all of the above to describe what a base-line standard of local performance needs to be in order to have “**adequate, efficient, and substantially equal**” school.