

Chalkboard

By

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I am not a familiar face at the State Capital. I have a hard enough time keeping up with my work at Gentry to spend much time in Little Rock lobbying. There are other politically savvy superintendents in Northwest Arkansas who do travel down to the “Ledge”; I hold great respect for them and their ability to represent our area.

Every now and then I do send an e-mail when some issue strikes a cord with me. I share with you the body of that e-mail letter to Senator Ruth Whitaker who has introduced a bill to consolidate school districts into countywide districts. The text follows below.

“Please allow me to pose some questions about your Senate Bill 132. Benton County will be used as the example as that is where the Gentry Public School District is situated. There are four groups of related questions.

1. Would all existing teaching staff in all the schools be maintained the first year? If not, who RIF's them? Your reorganization plan is due to the state on April 1, 2006. Under the Fair Teacher Dismissal Act, teachers would need to receive notification by May 1, 2006. Your new countywide districts would begin July 1, 2006. That leaves a one-month time line, from April to May. Logic might dictate that the new countywide school board should be the one to have that on renewal of contracts decision, which it could not consider under existing law until the next school term. Or, would all teachers cease to be employed on June 30, 2006, when the “local” districts cease to exist thus mandating that the new countywide board to hire all new staff?

2. If all teachers are maintained the first year, whose salary schedule will the new district adopt? Each district in Benton County has its own schedule with differing ranges and amounts per step. For example, starting salaries in the seven districts are: Decatur; \$27,500, Pea Ridge; \$29,075; Gentry; \$29,300; Siloam Springs; \$31,838; Gravette; \$33,300; Bentonville; \$34,633 and Rogers; \$36,573. This is also a valid question for all the classified employees of the various districts. Or, will there be a mandatory statewide Teacher Salary Schedule? Logic could mandate such under the assumption of equality based on staff being asked to perform the same tasks and answering to the same accountability standards regardless of

geographical location. It also might be prudent if all teachers do indeed become “free agents” on June 30, 2006. For example, if Washington County has a better schedule than Benton County then teachers might be drawn there out of fiscal considerations.

3. Legally, what will happen to the individual district’s bonded debt now obligated by each district? When the “local” districts cease to exist, will their respective outstanding bonds be callable? Will they be in default? Will the new countywide district assume that debt? Will there have to be a countywide election for the voters to approve both a new debt service millage rate and the sale of new bonds for the countywide district? If so, will that be a special election or will that be done at the same time the board members are elected in 2005?

4. Your bill allows that **“The boards of directors of each school district within a county shall collectively meet to develop a plan to create a countywide administration and countywide interim board as allowed by under § 6-13-1406 and in accordance with the provisions of this subchapter [and] each local school’s parent advisory council as established in § 6-13-1801 may have a member serve as an ex officio nonvoting member on the countywide school board.”** In Benton County there are approximately 46 school campuses in the seven districts. There are about the same number of school board members. With the current board members, have you considered that the size of that initial committee in Benton County, that would meet to select the interim countywide school board, would be larger in number than the Senate? Note that the resulting interim board, counting voting and non-voting members, could have more than 50 members.

Thank you for your consideration of the above questions. While I am uncertain of the practicality of your bill with regards to the mechanics of a countywide consolidation, the bill does have the potential to address the issue of school facilities. With a countywide district, students could be assigned to individual school campuses until teacher-to-student-to-classrooms-to-buildings ratios could be “maxed out” for greatest efficiency. However, an additional level of district bureaucracy and possible increased costs in student transportation might negate that cost savings.

The most important consideration is deciding what is best for our state’s students. I am sure that is on the forefront of your mind as well as the minds of your fellow legislators. I do not believe any of you want to “throw the baby out with the bath water”.”

