

Chalkboard

By

Dr. Randy C. Barrett, Superintendent
Gentry Public Schools

Part 1. "Do we have a problem?"

I open this Chalkboard with a quote from an address Asa Hutchinson, then chief of the DEA, gave at a DARE Conference in Los Angeles, California in **August 2001**. An excerpt reads, "Three years ago, I held a town meeting in Gentry, Arkansas. It's a small community of 2,300 people in a rural area of the Ozarks. Parents, educators, and community leaders wanted the meeting, because since the early 1980s, drug use has exploded in Gentry and other communities in Benton County. At the time of the meeting, the Gentry police department estimated that arrests involving drugs accounted for nearly 70 percent of all the felony cases filed in Benton County."

Next I offer a quote from Congressman John Boozman's web page, "**Siloam Springs, Oct 12, 2003** - One day before Benton County Sheriff Keith Ferguson and an assembly of county law enforcement officials announced the formation of a countywide drug task force, some of the same group met with U.S. Rep. John Boozman to request his help in opening the second front in a "two pronged attack" on the drug problem in northwest Arkansas. Benton County Chief Deputy Don Townsend said Ferguson requested last Monday's meeting with Boozman, R-Ark., to get his support in designating Benton County a High Intensity Drug Traffic Area."

Finally, I report from a recent Arkansas Democrat article of **February 13, 2005**. "Robin Green and other law enforcement officials believe drug traffickers whisk their goods up and down Interstate 540 in Northwest Arkansas unhindered. Green, Benton County prosecutor, wants law enforcement agencies to pull together to do something about it. She's pushing for a new drug interdiction unit. Police got information that a large drug shipment was moving on a Benton County highway, but they didn't have the resources to make the arrest, she said. "We need this program in Benton County," Green said. "The goal will be to intercept the drugs, take them off the highway and use the [confiscated] drug money to fund local drug-fighting efforts."

Accepting Mr. Hutchinson's timeline, the use of illegal drugs in Benton County is not a problem that developed overnight, or last night. While that concerns me as a citizen of the community, what concerns me, as

the superintendent of your school district, is the seeming increase in drug use among our some of our older students.

Let me quickly reaffirm something I have said repeatedly for 13 years, we have good students and good parents at Gentry schools. I reaffirm this view of mine not to seek not to offend someone but rather because “good vs. bad” is not the issue. Some of the students that have been disciplined this year for drug use had never seen the inside of a principal’s office prior to their infraction.

I am not sure to what to attribute the problem. Maybe it is easy access? Maybe it is the culture as portrayed on television, in movies, and the songs being played on the radio? Maybe it is a shift in morality? Maybe it is something so simple as peer pressure leading students to become addicted before they come to realize that saying “no” becomes increasingly harder after that first time of saying “yes”. Drugs in 2005 are not the “six-pack” of 1955.

Whatever the reason, this year’s senior class began kindergarten when I was hired at Gentry as your superintendent. If we are having a rise in students using illicit drugs, then it is happening on “my watch” and I abhor that thought.

If you have a child in school, if you work at this school, or if you live in this community, then it’s happening on your watch also. Next week – Part 2 “So what’s the school going to do about it?”