

Chalkboard

By

**Randy C. Barrett, Superintendent
Gentry Public Schools**

The appeal to the State Board of Education, as you probably have already read or heard on one of the local television or radio stations, was denied and the Gentry Public School District has been classified as being in fiscal distress. I have written enough past articles on the subject to feel that no further explanation of “who” and “what” is necessary. To some degree, today’s efforts will deal with “why”.

First, I will go on record and say I take responsibility for our school district being in this position. If you will allow me the liberty, note that I have used the word “responsibility” rather than the word “blame”. I avoided the word blame, not to shirk the idea of my being at fault, but rather so as not to make trivialities of the issue.

Let me tell you a story of history repeating itself. If my dates are a little blurred, forgive me because I was elsewhere at the time. You local historians can straighten me out sometime.

In the late 70’s and early 80’s the Gentry School District was blessed by having SWEPCO locate on the edge of town and generate some significant new revenue for the district in the form of local tax dollars. In 1978 a capsule sketch of the district would have revealed a K-12 enrollment of 840 students and 46 teachers making an average salary of \$9,807. The assessed value of the real, personal, and utility property in the district was \$12,235,625. With the onset of the new power plant and the future looking bright, the Gentry School Board and Administration went about the business of preparing for the future. The board secured the Doss, Sullivan, and Welton properties on the southwest edge of town and commenced to build a new high school and football stadium. With money readily available they included shortly thereafter an auditorium onto the high school and a multi-purpose building on the old high school, then a middle school across town. Debt was obligated, life was good and Gentry was the crown jewel of similar sized schools in Northwest Arkansas. The board and administration had done a good job preparing for the future and that future was bright.

Skip ahead to that bright future. It’s 1992 now. The district has an enrollment of 998 students being taught by 72 teachers making an average salary of \$22,888. In fourteen short years the district’s assessed value has grown to \$53,970,671. But there is a worm of a sort in the shiny apple that is Gentry Schools. Amendment 59 has taken away much of the revenue that SWEPCO was providing and spread it about the state. Controversies exist about whether proper

amounts of money due teacher salary laws were followed. Lawsuits loom on the horizon. Roofs are leaking. Appeals to the State Board of Education are undertaken. Plans are made for the future.

Skip a decade and glance around. It's 2002 and the district has survived some tough times mostly through the support of the community and forged ahead planning for the future. The lawsuits are settled. For the most part, the roofs don't leak. A new middle school sits out on the Sullivan property. The high school, residing on the Doss land, has graduates who were kindergarteners when it was being constructed. A new VoAg building sits out behind the high school. A new cafeteria building used by the school and community alike sits between the middle and high schools waiting for the 2006 12-classroom addition that will link the two campuses. A baseball/softball field is situated on the west end of the Welton property. Enrollment has increased to 1211 students being taught by 99 teachers making an average salary of \$32,582. Plans are being made for the future.

Last stop. It's 2008. The district has an enrollment of 1441 students being taught by about 112 teachers making an average salary of about \$40,000. The district's assessed value is about \$66,150,550. A new Primary School serving grades K-2 sits on the Sullivan property southwest of the middle school. Student growth, flourishing in the early 00's, has leveled off. The State Board of Education has classified the district as being in Fiscal Distress according to rules it adopted in 2003. The future looks bright.

The future looks bright? Am I crazy or what to make such a statement is such a precarious time? I hope I am not insane or deluded; some days I wonder.

I give you this quick history lesson to say that I hope history repeats itself again. The district has had some hard times and some good times in the last 30 years. Right now, like about 1996, is a hard time. The projected growth in enrollment and continuance of a booming economy has not materialized. If the school board made a bad decision about adding an addition to the K-2 School building while the main part was being constructed, then I will take the responsibility or blame or whatever label you want to use because I encouraged the board to plan for what the future looked like at the time the decision was made.

Did the school make a bad decision to buy land and build a high school in 1980? I don't think so. What- 27 groups of seniors have departed from there since it was built?

Was the school at fault that Amendment 59 to the Arkansas constitution was passed and the money dried up? I don't think so. Things happen and adjustments are made and life continues. It happens in business, it happens in schools, and it happens in families.

Some adjustments are being made now in this present matter so that the education of our students will continue in a good manner. Some of these necessary adjustments are bitter pills to swallow but better times are ahead.