



Advocates for Community and Rural Education

Eudora and Midland: A tale of two schools

When Dorothy Singleton drove into the small town of Eudora, AR, in the fall of 2004, she was struck first by what a nice town it was.

Prosperous-looking businesses and well-tended homes lined the quiet streets of this town of 2800 near the Louisiana line in Southeast Arkansas. In the peaceful late afternoon, she saw several mothers walking their young children home from school.

A more somber note was sounded when she drove past a business that displayed a huge hand-made sign that expressed deep concerns about the school. The business was located next door to the superintendent's office.

Singleton, a representative of Advocates for Community and Rural Education, had come to Eudora to attend a school board meeting and get to know the community.

Becoming acquainted with residents of Eudora over the next few months, Singleton found them to be vitally concerned about their school, which was on academic distress and in financial difficulties.

Community members told her they needed both local and state-level leaders to address long-standing problems with financial



Community leader Andrew Taylor addressing Eudora citizens

accountability and achievement in their school district. Large crowds attended school board meetings and parent-involvement activities, raising questions about finances and what they perceived as a lack of concerned leadership.

In December the superintendent resigned and was replaced two months later. By this time a group of community members was meeting regularly, seeking to understand the school's financial problems and urging school board members and the new superintendent to deal with deficiencies in achievement and accounting. The district was officially placed on the state's "fiscally distressed" list that spring by the State Board of Education.

The school's bookkeeper (see EUDORA on p. 2)



Midland spokesperson Debra Frazier at community celebration

Saturday night, March 18, was a night of celebration for the folks in Pleasant Plains, Floral, and the surrounding countryside.

One month after the State Board of Education ruled that they could keep their school district intact after raising an astounding \$400,000 to make up for a budget shortfall, patrons, friends, and supporters of the Midland School District gathered in the school cafeteria for food, fellowship, and reminiscing.

It was a time of tears and laughter, smiles and joy.

Notified in March 2005 that the State Department of Education had projected they would have a negative balance and thus they were being placed on the state's list of "fiscally distressed" schools,

they passed a millage increase of 8+ mills in September 2005.

Two plans for fiscal recovery were submitted and rejected by the State Department of Education.

Like other districts in the same situation, some Midland school patrons felt the Department of Education had not given them the kind of assistance that should have been offered.

According to the state Commissioner of Education, Ken James, the district missed the December 31, 2005, deadline for filing an acceptable improvement plan to show how they would return the school to good fiscal standing.

James and other state officials moved in on the district January 13, 2006, and removed the school board and superintendent, citing the Omnibus Education Act of 2003 as their authority.

James appointed retired superintendent Charles Vondran to oversee operations at the school until June 30.

At the time James said he would recommend that the Midland School District be annexed into a neighboring district.

Wasting no time, residents of the district began raising money, hoping to be able to present a sum equal to the entire projected shortfall to the State Board at their (see MIDLAND on p. 3)

Eudora, cont.

resigned, and the district requested assistance from the Southeast Arkansas Co-op in sorting out the tangled financial records.

In the fall district officials submitted a fiscal distress plan to the State Board of Education, but it was rejected. The State Department of Education later claimed to have made 15 visits to Eudora to give "technical assistance," but residents say most of those visits were merely to tell them that they had a problem, which they already knew. State officials refused to get involved in telling them how to improve their situation.

Finally, after a complete breakdown in communication among the board, superintendent, and State Department, with the deadline set by the state looming, community members wrote and submitted their own plan.

They had their answer when, on January 13, 2006, even as a group of concerned citizens were on the verge of leaving for the state Capitol to request further assistance, state Commissioner of Education Ken James, attorney Scott Smith, and other state officials showed up at the school to remove the school board and take over the district.

One month later at a hearing before the State Board of Education attended by about 50 community members, the district's attorney, Jimmy Wilson, requested more time for the community to put together an acceptable fiscal distress plan and raise the approximately \$350,000 the Department of Education had forecast they would fall short by the end of the 2005-2006 school year. In the month between their takeover by the state and the State Board hearing, they had already raised \$30,000. Their request was rejected by the State Board, which immediately voted to annex the Eudora School District into the Lakeside School District in Lake Village, 17 miles away.

The residents of Eudora, however, refuse to give up their school without a fight. As one resident said, "This is a



Above: Eudora citizens gather in preparation for a strategy meeting on how to save their school.

Below: Community members look at problems and assign committees to tackle different issues.



legal problem. We need to meet legal problems with legal action." Six citizens asked Wilson to file a lawsuit on their behalf charging discrimination on the part of the state in their method of funding schools and in the unequal treatment different districts received by the State Department of Education and the State Board.

At the same time the lawsuit is going forward, a community group calling them-

selves Parent-Teacher Association Save Our Schools Committee has planned an aggressive campaign to raise the money the district needs and hopes to persuade the State Board of Education to reverse their annexation into Lakeside before it irrevocably takes effect on June 30, 2006.

The leader of the group, Andrew Taylor, says, "We're not going to be discouraged. We will stay focused and stay in prayer."

Scheduled events include a 3-on-3 basketball tournament between Eudora and neighboring communities, including Lake Village, which has been designated by the State Board as their receiving district. They also have planned a motorcycle rodeo with the assistance of a Christian motorcycle club from nearby Strong.

The committee has asked for personal pledges from community members and has written alumni asking for contributions, receiving a positive response.

Markos Ingraham, a ninth grader, has started his own campaign. Surveying all the name-brand products used in his home, he wrote letters to every company explaining the situation, telling how much he loved his school, and asking them to send him a contribution to help save it. To date, he has raised over \$800 from major corporations.

Will Eudora citizens ultimately be successful in their two-year-long battle to keep a school in their community? Even assuming a positive outcome to the lawsuit and a successful fundraising campaign, they have many problems still to be addressed.

In the past two years, though, they have learned a great deal about what is expected of their school and how to draw on the strengths of the community to meet those needs. They have proved that together they can accomplish much.

Now they need the state to acknowledge their heroic efforts and grant them the time and opportunity to work as a community to save their school.

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Midland, cont.

February 13 hearing.

Within nine days they had raised a quarter of a million dollars.

They held five public meetings to collect donations, set up a phone bank to make fund-raising calls, and put on a rodeo that raised \$17,000.

Other benefits included a chili supper, two auctions, and a ball game.

Donations ranged from amounts as small as 22 cents to as large as \$7,500, the largest single donation.

One 12-year-old, Jonathan Farrar, gained national media attention when he donated the \$1,000 he had been saving to go and see the Yankees play. Hearing of his sacrifice, Yankees owner George Steinbrenner replaced Jonathan's \$1,000 and offered him a personal tour of the stadium and access to the field during batting practice.

Steinbrenner praised Jonathan's action, saying it was "the right thing to do."

Besides raising the money, Midland supporters wrote hundreds of letters to State Board of Education members, pleading their school's case and pledging to help it get in good financial shape.

At the hearing before the State Board, Superintendents from each of Midland's neighboring school districts—Batesville, Bald Knob, Bradford, Cedar Ridge, Concord, Pangburn, Southside, and White County Central—testified that they believed Midland should remain a separate district given the community's outstanding show of support for their school.

The 568-student Midland district also benefited from the expertise of acting superintendent Vondran, who identified inefficiencies in staffing, buying, and other expenditures.

While celebrating their reprieve by the State Board on February 13, residents of the district are aware that though they may have turned the corner, they are not yet out of the woods.



Above: Midland school patrons gather for an evening of fun and feasting to celebrate raising \$400,000 to keep their school open.

Below: The crowd is entertained by a demonstration of Taekwondo students.



The district will remain under state supervision and will be managed by Vondran until such time as the State Board of Education decides they are ready to elect another school board and resume governance of the district.

At the March 18 celebration, acting superintendent Vondran spoke to the crowd.

Telling them they had only gotten past hurdle number one, he advised the group to remain vigilant and involved so that they will know what is going on in their school and also be educated about state mandates concerning the budget and other things that threaten their district.

Vondran not only advised the group but also committed to participating in monthly meetings with the community to teach them to understand school budget and facilities issues, the items deemed most threatening to their school.

Selfless acts of sacrificial giving, strong community spirit—Midland proved once again that rural schools come through when it counts.

CONSOLIDATION STUDIES REACH NO CONSENSUS

The following was excerpted from an article in *The School Administrator*, a publication of the American Association of School Administrators, March 2006, author Alexander Russo.

"No conclusive research supports or debunks school district consolidation, which can be affected by several factors, including student enrollment, geographic distances, pre-existing conditions in the districts, and differences in research methods.

However, some commonly cited studies and reports on the subject may prove useful to administrators involved in a district consolidation.

Rural education task force report: According to the 2005 National Rural Education Association Task Force Reports on School Consolidation, the educational and financial results of state-mandated school district consolidations "do not meet legislated expectations." In addition, the task force finds that smaller districts "have higher achievement, affective, and social outcomes."

The full report online can be accessed at [www.nrea.net/awards%20&%20other/Consolidation cover sheet1.doc](http://www.nrea.net/awards%20&%20other/Consolidation%20cover%20sheet1.doc).

Syracuse University study: A recent Syracuse University study by William Duncombe and John Yinger examines consolidation in New York State's rural districts between 1985 and 1997. The main economies of scale appear in both operational costs and capital expenses, their research reports. Some of these savings are obvious. "Doubling district enrollment cuts administrative costs per pupil by more than 40 percent," the report says.

Other savings, in areas such as transportation, do not materialize. "Apparently savings in maintenance and in the scheduling of buses and drivers in larger districts offsets any increase in route lengths," the report says.

(see CONSOLIDATION on p. 4)

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Consolidation

The report concludes that doubling enrollment cuts costs per student by 28 percent for a 300-student district. The offsetting costs include increased capital spending at the rate of 5 percent as well as short-term adjustment costs.

“We conclude that consolidation is an effective cost-reduction strategy for rural school districts, particularly when they are very small, and that states should make certain that their post-consolidation aid programs do not encourage wasteful capital projects,” the researchers said.

The full report can be read at www.cpr.maxwell.syr.edu/efap/MONTHLY_COLUMN/MAY2005.HTM.

The report cites two other studies that also provide mixed reviews of school consolidation efforts.

In a related article entitled “Mergers, Annexations, and Dissolutions” by the same author, Marty Strange, policy director for the Rural School and Community Trust, which monitors rural education issues, says that “a new wave of state-mandated consolidation efforts is taking place in several states, fueled by a number of factors, including population declines and debates over equity and adequacy of state education funding.”

The article continues, “Whenever legislators get involved in a school funding debate, almost the first thing they say is ‘If we’re going to put more money into these schools, we’re going to make sure they’re operating efficiently,’” Strange says.

To rural school advocates like Strange, district consolidations are just the beginning. ‘Let’s not be naïve,’ he says. ‘District consolidation always starts out being about getting rid of expensive superintendents, but it’s also about clearing away the political infrastructure that supports small schools.’

School consolidation almost always follows, says Strange. ‘District consolidation is the shoehorn for school consolidation,’ he says. ‘When you close districts, you come back later and close schools—no matter what they’re saying now....’

The reality is that few local boards of education decide to consolidate willingly, and many do it for financial rather than educational reasons, according to school district leaders....”

Proof that unintended consequences are the rule rather than the exception in consolidations, the article references the consolidation between the school district in Corning, Ark., and its smaller neighbor, Biggers-Reyno.

At the time of writing, that merger appeared to be going well, but in January of this year the Corning School District petitioned the State Board of Education for the closure of the Biggers-Reyno high school and elementary campuses.

Despite a strong lobbying effort by Biggers and Reyno residents and even a speech by the mayor, Stanley Edington, Corning superintendent J.M. Edington’s brother, the State Board voted in favor of closing the schools.

The following letter appeared in the

March 4, 2006, edition of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette:

The Arkansas Board of Education cares nothing about quality education. The Board is supposed to be about quality education, and yet on Jan. 9 it voted to close Reyno Elementary School, which has never been in academic distress, and send these students to the Corning Elementary School, which has been on the No Child Left Behind list for improvement the last two years. This is really quality, isn’t it? This shows that they care nothing about quality education; they just want fewer schools. If they wanted quality, they would not have closed Reyno.

They also voted to close Biggers-Reyno High School, which had nothing to do with quality education, because the students of Biggers-Reyno who took the ACT test in December 2005 averaged 25.6 on their scores, which is about five points above the state average. There will be no quality in education until we forget quantity. There is no way that the Arkansas Legislature can fix education because [legislators] are the ones who messed it up in the first place. When we get rid of the legislators and their followers who have pushed quantity, then and only then will there be a chance for Arkansas to have a quality educational system. Forget quantity and concentrate on quality. Quality is the small schools, not the large ones. The closing of these schools is a disgrace to the state Education Board, the Legislature and the Corning School District for proposing it.

STANLEY EDINGTON, Reyno