



# Advocates for Community and Rural Education



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## **Community Members Rally for Rural Special**

Patrons filled the bleachers of the Rural Special school gymnasium with a sea of red September 26 in a public meeting to try to save their school.

Rural Special, along with Timbo, was annexed into the Mountain View School District by Act 60 of 2004 because of its small size. Rural Special has an enrollment of about 200 students K-12.

Now, after only one year, the Mountain View administration is recommending to the Board that both high schools be closed due to the costs of keeping the campuses open.

An active and committed

community group calling themselves Rally for Rural Special has formed to challenge that assumption as well as others.

In the recent public meeting, a number of Rural Special citizens spoke after Mountain View superintendent Mark Rector provided figures that projected Rural Special as losing \$335,000 and Timbo as losing \$360,000 this year.

Renee Carr, ACRE chapter leader and a Certified Public Accountant, gave a Power Point presentation that noted under-reported revenue that reduced the deficit to about \$184,000. Subtracting

one-time expenditures would further reduce it to \$127,539.

“We funded our own deficit by the cash reserves we contributed,” Carr pointed out. Then she noted other potential savings of \$73,150 and offered further community efforts, saying, “We’re willing to do whatever it takes to keep this school here.”

She pointed out that instead of being a drain on Mountain View’s finances, the district’s cash balance actually grew from about \$2 million to \$5 million at one point after the annexation.

Carr was followed by

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## Rural Special, cont.

community member and former teacher Rachelle Stewart, who pointed out the value of small schools, citing the high achievement at Rural Special on the Benchmark and End of Course exams and the ACT.

Citing Research from Ohio University and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has donated millions to make schools smaller, Stewart asked board members if they wanted to reinvent the wheel or be on the cutting edge.

### Community members speak

Other community members spoke on behalf of the school. With the superintendent pushing for a decision from the board now, Al Schiefer pleaded with them to wait to see what impact the Special Masters' recommendations to the Supreme Court, the next legislative session, and even the next governor would have on education funding.

Shelly Branscum, a teacher who previously taught at Leslie, told of the negative effect of the consolidation of Marshall and Leslie, a smaller district, on Leslie students.

Stan Morrison, a JP for the area, pointed out the increased transportation costs and extra travel time for students. His son starts out before daylight now in the dead of winter and gets home after dark. How much more time would be added to that trip if he's transported to Mountain View, over 20 miles away from the Rural Special campus, he asked?

Rodney Rushing, a former superintendent at Rural Special, challenged board members, "I can't believe you'd vote to put your kids in that situation. I'm wondering, would you vote to put ours in it?"

The meeting with Rural Special patrons was followed by another with Timbo residents the next night, where superintendent Rector and Mountain View board members again faced

tough questioning.

### Mtn. View would have to build

Admitting that the classes at Mountain View are pretty well full now, Rector said that more teachers would have to be hired and classrooms built to accommodate incoming Timbo and Rural Special students.

Patrons countered with a suggestion that students at the outer edges of the Mountain View school's borders be encouraged to attend the already existing facilities in Timbo and Rural Special.

Timbo community member Tom Bisulco finally counseled board members: "If you embrace the concept that it's doable, I believe it's within your capacity to come up with a formula to make these campuses viable."

### A textbook campaign

The determined members of Rally for Rural Special have conducted a textbook campaign for keeping their campus open.

Armed with a mountain of research on the value of small schools, they have left no stone unturned to increase their school's viability.

Carr is the community's own personal "truth detector," skillfully ferreting out arcane details about school financing and the district's financial situation.

Denied representation on the school board, in the election just past, they recruited their own candidate and campaigned vigorously to get him elected. He garnered 75% of the district-wide although opposed by a 13-year incumbent and another resident of the town of Mountain View.

At least one family has sponsored a foreign exchange student to increase enrollment, and they have investigated offering distance learning classes to home-schooled students in the district.

They have pointed out to citizens of Mountain View that their own children

will have fewer opportunities if the population of the school is enlarged by nearly 500 students and asked them to contact members of the school board opposing the mergers. They have written letters to the editor and guest editorials.

### Appeal to Mtn. View parents

In a recent issue of the *Stone County Leader*, the group sponsored a full-page letter to convincingly make their case directly to the citizens of Mountain View, ending with school board members' names and phone numbers and an appeal to call and make their views known. Following are some excerpts from that letter:

*When [the Timbo and Rural Special campuses] are closed, about 425 kids in this county, 25% of those we are trying to educate, will lose somewhere between one and two hours out of every single school day for the rest of their K-12 lives. Time matters, and it matters very much. If we close those campuses, an awful lot of our kids are going to have an awful lot less time to spend with their families, to do their homework, to do their chores, and to just goof off being a kid.*

*Most of the students from Rural Special and Timbo can, if they choose, play basketball and can learn the lessons most of us feel competitive sports has to offer. Most of these children won't be able to make the team at a consolidated school, and for every one that can make the team, that's one less child at Mtn. View that will get to participate.*

*Closing the campuses will have some negative effect on ...businesses in Mtn. View, the county economy, and the tax base as a whole.*

They ended the letter with words that should be taken to heart by every community that has a decision to make about closing a school campus that is the heart and soul of a community:

*If they close these schools, and it truly had to be done, it is a bad thing. If they close these schools, and it didn't have to be done, it is a shameful thing.*

# Where are they now?

- Acorn, Alread, Altus-Denning, Arkansas City, Biggers-Reyno, Bright Star, Carthage, Cord-Charlotte, Cotton Plant, Crawfordsville, Deer, Delaplaine, Drew Central, Emmet, Evening Shade, Fountain Hill, Fourche Valley, Gillett, Grady, Holly Grove, Humphrey, Huttig, Kingston, Lake View, Leslie, Bruno-Pyatt, St. Joe, Western Grove, McNeil, Mt. Judea, Mt. Holly, Oark, Oden, Parkin, Paron, Perry Casa, Randolph County, Plainview-Rover, Scotland, St. Paul, Rural Special, Timbo, Umpire, Union County, Walker, Williford, Winslow—

Take a good look at the names. Two years ago these were viable schools in functioning communities—no, not thriving metropolises, but rural communities with maybe a convenience store, a branch bank, a local eaterie, three or four churches, and a few quiet streets with modest homes.

People would come in from the surrounding countryside on ballgame nights to sit in the gym, visit with their neighbors, and watch their kids grow up.

Some found the satisfaction of civic engagement by serving on the school board.

Occasionally, if someone in the community had an expensive illness or a burnout, people would gather there and hold a benefit to help out financially.

Where are they now? A few lucky ones found a consolidation partner near their own size who would sympathize with their plight and help them make the best of a bad deal.

The others? Let's take a look at some of them....



*Gould  
High School*



*Grady  
High School*



*Humphrey  
School*



*Holly Grove  
High School*



*All "administratively" consolidated by Act 60--  
All gone now.*

## Save Our Schools

4408 Blankenship Road  
Everton, AR 72633

Phone: 870-429-6543  
Fax: 870-429-6543  
Email: lavinagrandon@hotmail.com

www.aracre.org

## Advocates for Community and Rural Education



# THE LATEST OUTRAGE

Although some of us saw this coming when the Legislature passed Act 90 on the last day of the 2003-04 Special Session for Education, many legislators no doubt envisioned it as a way to equalize opportunities between the richest and the poorest districts in the state.

It called for a pool of state money which districts could apply for to be spent on facilities.

The needs would be prioritized and the funds awarded on a “most needed” basis by a Commission on Public School Academic Facilities and Transportation.

I read the other day that the architect of the facilities plan, Senator Broadway, said in response to some criticism that he thought the whole idea of establishing the fund was to “prop up” — I take it he meant *subsidize the facilities costs of* — the poorer districts.

That may have been the plan, but the reality is far different.

The facilities commission is made up of state education commissioner

Ken James; Richard Weiss, the state’s finance chief; and Mac Dodson, president of the Arkansas Development Finance Authority. These commissioners have been denying requests for facilities to any school district they deem too small to be worth saving.

So far, funds have been denied to Bradley, Black Rock, Elaine, Lockesburg, and Turrell because they “are tracking to fall below 350 students” in a few years.

Actually, as an article in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* pointed out, Bradley and Turrell have both *gained* students recently, something the all-powerful commissioners overlooked.

The article noted that in a letter protesting the commission’s decision, Bradley’s Representative, Bruce Maloch, acknowledged that some people would like to require consolidation of larger districts than the 350 student minimum set by the law.

However, he stated, “That does not change the fact that the Bradley School District and others similarly situated are operating in accordance with current law

and it is not up to a body of three ‘judges’ to only consider requests from schools with more than 400 students. If that is what was intended, that is what the Legislature would have done.”

Never mind that the requested funds were to pay for an intercom system, security equipment, and fire alarms—things that could easily be dismantled and moved if the campuses closed.

Never mind that should those districts have to be consolidated, the receiving district would have the option of keeping the campuses open if they were in good condition.

It just goes to show how well-meaning legislators should beware of putting any power into the hands of a thoroughly politicized State Board and State Department of Education.

In fact, wouldn’t it be a good idea for legislators to take back some of that power by clearly defining some of the terms like “fiscal distress” and “academic distress” in statute and limiting the power of political appointees to “legislate from the bench”?