



LEARNING, SERVING, LEADING

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Dr. Fay Sprouse, Superintendent

31 year veteran - 14 years as Superintendent of Ware Shoals School District (aka Greenwood 51)

DISTRICT DESCRIPTION

Ware Shoals School District, also known as Greenwood District 51, serves 982 students in Abbeville, Greenwood, and Laurens counties. We are a three-county district in a three-district county.

Greenwood 50, centered in our county seat of Greenwood, serves over 9,000 students and Greenwood 52 serves 1,500 students in the Ninety Six area. Our enrollment has decreased by 18% since I first became superintendent in 2001. Our town was established as a textile mill town. After the mill closed down, many moved away and the demographics gradually changed from a thriving middle-class community to what is now an economically disadvantaged community. District-wide 67% qualify for free / reduced price meals, but 75% of our students in our primary school, which serves grades 4K-4th, qualify for free/reduced price meals.

DIVERSE DISTRICTS

The three districts of Greenwood County are diverse in terms of wealth. Here are some of the differences:

	Value of a mil	Revenue from FILOTs for operations	Index of taxpaying ability	% state support
50	\$145,804	\$1.5 million	0.00843	79%
52	\$ 11,339	\$2.0 million	0.00327	64%
51	\$ 7,214	\$0	0.00057	87%

POOREST DISTRICT IN TERMS OF ASSESSED VALUE

In terms of “assessed value (AV) per pupil,” Ware Shoals School District is the poorest in the state. In 2011-12 our AV per pupil was \$4,260, and the next poorest district was Clarendon 3 (Turbeville) with an AV per pupil of \$7,728. Whenever I share this fact, I am also sure to say, “We are poor in resources, but not poor in results.” Our schools have consistently performed above the state average and have earned a number of Palmetto Gold and Silver awards. Last year our high school was recognized as one of the best in the nation by US News and World Report, and our elementary school received the prestigious National Blue Ribbon award in 2013.

RESOURCES DWINDLING

Since the economic downturn and state budget reductions in 2008 and beyond, we have used \$1.1 million in reserves to balance our budget. That’s one-third of the total available fund balance we had in 2008. We have cut costs by eliminating programs – some of them required by law – eliminating positions, reducing energy consumption, and carefully managing resources.

FINANCIAL EFFECTS OF ACT 388

We are fiscally dependent on Greenwood County. This year, according to the limits established in Act 388, the maximum increase we could ask for was 1.62 mills, the equivalent of \$11,686. The mandated step increase for teachers will cost \$65,000, so we will continue to suffer from dwindling resources.

“ACT 388 and the Minimum Guarantee” (January, 2014), a report by Ellen Saltzman and Holly Ulbrich at the Jim Self Center of Clemson University, focused on the distributional effects on district finances of Act 388’s minimum guarantee of \$2.5 million per county (not per district). The intent was to provide additional relief to poor school districts, but the relief was very uneven. Many of the poorest districts receive no benefit from these supplementary funds. The authors proposed four simple solutions to this inequity, two of which are revenue neutral. The main principle is:

Act 388 supplemental funding should be per district, not per county, and should be distributed on a per pupil basis. This remedy can be achieved at no cost.

FACILITIES

Our newest school was built 60 years ago and our oldest was built 90 years ago, in 1926. At one time, the state provided funds for capital improvements and renovations. Many small, poor districts can't afford replacing their schools due to the heavy tax burden already in place to fund operations. Renovations are very costly as well. We have been able to do some large projects – such as renovating and expanding a cafeteria and upgrading HVAC systems and lighting – utilizing no or low interest federal programs such as Qualified Zone Academy Bonds, Qualified School Construction Bonds, and the ConserFund Plus Loan/Grant. These are underutilized programs due to the federal government red tape.

Establish a capital improvement fund for poor districts with facility needs. Capital bond bills have enabled districts to address facility needs in the past. Another option is to establish no-interest loans, similar to the federal programs above, but with simplified paperwork and fewer regulations.

TEACHER QUALITY

Student success is directly related to teacher efficacy. Poor districts have a difficult time attracting and retaining high quality, highly effective teachers. I envision an elite Early Childhood teaching / leadership force, let's call them the "Special-Ops Educators," being recruited, specially trained, and deployed to work with students and their families in kindergarten through third grade during the school year and during the summer. These teachers would utilize data to design Personalized Learning Plans for each child. The teachers would work collaboratively, utilizing the "Profile of the Graduate" as the framework for their work. It would be preferable that individuals native to the district be recruited, as they are most likely to be committed to staying put. They would be provided a handsome benefits package for a multi-year contract, with benefits commensurate to the length of commitment (e.g., teacher loan forgiveness, employee share of health coverage paid, employee share of retirement paid).

Overall, teacher salaries are lower in poor districts because many cannot afford to supplement the state minimum salary or some had to freeze salaries during the recession. Our county has a funding equalization plan for the three districts. Our district is able to offer a \$1,500 supplement to the state minimum scale because we have a countywide millage rate of 39 mills, and the first three mills are allocated to the poorest district in the county. The remaining 36 mills are distributed on a per pupil basis.

Districts in which "there is a clear disconnect between the inputs and outputs of the education system" need "special-ops" teachers and administrators, and they need incentives to attract and retain highly effective, highly qualified teachers.

CRUCIAL QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

What critical areas need improvement in each level of schooling...?

Technology Infrastructure and Devices

Technology is the key to personalization of learning and attaining the knowledge and skills specified in the Profile of the Graduate.

Recent allocations from the state have allowed us to add wireless access points in all classrooms, and our district just issued a General Obligations Bond for \$420,000 for technology upgrades. We won't be able to do a complete 1:1 initiative, but we will increase our access to 1 device per 4 students.

Continue technology funding to districts, but base it on need. Many districts already have 1:1 in place and do not need additional funding. Redirect funding to poor districts to get them on equal footing with other districts. Funding guidelines should allow expenditures on infrastructure, devices, and professional development.

What needs to be improved to provide high quality early childhood education with better family engagement, birth through age four...?

Education is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty and helping parents become better equipped to be their child's first teacher, helping him/her to be ready for school and ready for entering the path to the "Profile of the Graduate." When we had funds, our Parenting / Family Literacy Program was very successful, resulting in GED attainment for many, increased parent involvement, and improved parenting skills.

Fully fund Parenting / Family Literacy programs in poor districts. Require participation for those receiving government benefits.

What changes...are needed to modernize the school transportation system...?

Transportation is a seriously under-funded mandate. Districts need funding for bus drivers, and we need to be provided with dependable buses.

Our state allocation for bus driver salaries this year is \$38,515, which is only 19% of our total transportation salaries / benefits cost of \$200,000.

Districts are having to provide benefits and supplemental duties to attract and retain drivers. Many times, districts have to "double-up" due to a shortage of regular drivers or no available substitute drivers, causing extremely long bus rides.

Fully fund bus driver salaries at an hourly rate that is competitive.

I have addressed only a few of the issues raised in this case. Collectively, we have addressed many. I appreciate your time and effort in evaluating our public school system and recommending changes that will improve the State's ability to educate all children. As Justice Toal stated, "there is no loser" in this case. All children of our state will benefit by a more effective and successful school system.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak this evening.

