

Other views

Smaller schools are better for everyone involved

Taxpayers, students, neighborhoods benefit.

By Diane Eldridge

A recent *Greenville News* editorial, picked up around the state and in Charlotte, acknowledges the many benefits of small schools but contends that the initiative supported by Gov. Sanford and a bipartisan coalition of legislators in support of such schools may be "enormously expensive." *The News* further argues that in setting limits on school size, the initiative "usurps local control of public schools." I respectfully disagree with both assertions.

Cost is regularly cited as the justification for school closure and consolidation, and for the construction of mega-schools — all too often built on remote sites, or along interstates, far from any real community.

The fact is that smaller, community-centered schools are a bargain for taxpayers. Drop-out costs, transportation costs, and service and infrastructure costs are just some of the factors that

make this true.

Several studies have found that dropout rates are higher at large schools. For example, a study of 128 New York high schools determined that schools with 600 or fewer students had a 5 percent dropout rate, compared with 13 percent for larger schools.

High school dropouts impose enormous costs on society. For example, 82 percent of the adults in American prisons are dropouts. Half of the heads-of-households receiving welfare did not finish high school.

Cost comparisons often do not take into account the buses, bus drivers, fuel and maintenance necessary to transport students within the large geographic area served by a big school. Parents who drive their students to school and students who drive themselves bear the costs of their own transportation, both in terms of mileage and in time.

In 1995-96, Americans spent

GUEST COLUMN



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\$1.4 billion transporting public school students, twice as much as was spent 25 years ago. Today, South Carolinians spend an average of 74 minutes in the car every day — many of which are spent chauffeuring children to and from school.

The South Carolina Department of Education currently has minimum acreage requirements

for new school sites, based on grade level and number of students served. For example, a 1,000-student elementary school (Greenville County's new prototype) requires at least 20 acres, and a high school with 1,500 students (e.g., Spartanburg High, Anderson's T. L. Hanna High) needs a minimum of 45 acres.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find enough undeveloped land in existing communities to meet these standards. Even where sufficient land is available, it can be prohibitively expensive. Thus, school districts are forced to build schools on large tracts of "cheap land" in the countryside. Soon another problem occurs. The school attracts sprawling development, which requires governmental services such as new or widened roads, water, sewer, and police and fire protection.

Dorman High School in Spartanburg County is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Relocated from an urban location to a rural site along I-26, the

new school opened last year on a 292-acre site (twice the size of the Wofford campus). Costs to provide services to the surrounding area are already being incurred — a nearby development with 375 homes, 180 apartments and 35 acres of commercial property is underway.

In numerous studies conducted nationwide, neighborhood schools have been proven to produce higher achievement rates, higher graduation and lower dropout rates, less violence and vandalism, greater teacher satisfaction, and more parental and community involvement. Isn't that what education is all about?

Regarding the local control issue, more than half of the entire state budget is devoted to public education. The state, therefore, clearly has the right to impose reasonable standards to ensure that these funds are spent as wisely and effectively as possible. It has already established an array of standards relating to building specifications, teacher certification and curricula, to

name just a few. Surely it has the right to place limits on the number of students allowed in a school, subject to a variance for extraordinary situations. Indeed, in view of the higher costs associated with larger schools, a strong case can be made that the state has the obligation to do so.

The small schools initiative will actually give local school districts more power in the choice and size of school sites because it totally eliminates the minimum acreage requirements. Not only will this enable local districts to build more neighborhood schools, it will also save taxpayer dollars by not requiring extensive infrastructure and services at remote locations.

The basic principles of the small schools initiative are incorporated in a bill known as the South Carolina Neighborhood and Community Schools Act, HB 3608, which is sponsored by several Upstate legislators. This bill is a "win-win" for taxpayers and students and will bring neighborhood schools back to South Carolina.