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Students Push for Equity in School Funding

As the economic pendulum swings back to more austere times, the budget surpluses of the late 1990s seem a distant memory. With tax payers in revolt in communities across the country and dwindling amounts of aid passed on from state and federal sources, local education officials face drastic reductions in programs, teachers, and services. The difficult choices that result many would judge as unconscionable, as those hit worst by the cuts tend to be those least able to absorb them.



Photos courtesy of Ohio Fair Schools Campaign (left) and Student Activist Alliance, Portland, OR (right)

But in urban, rural, and suburban areas nationwide, students and their adult partners are taking to the streets, the editorial pages, the public plaza, and to their legislators to demand their fair share.

“Is it right that only the rich should be educated?” an eleventh-grade speaker asked a crowd of 1,000 at a rally for more equitable education funding held last month on the steps of the Ohio state capitol in Columbus. “Is it right that they should be given such a drastic advantage from the start? Is a child born to rich parents more deserving of success than the child born into poverty?”

This young protester gets right to the heart of the equity issues that haunt school funding: why should students from less wealthy communities settle for fewer education dollars than their more affluent counterparts? Those eager to fight for answers, however, often bog down in the at-times bewildering details of tax policy, revenue streams, and budget line items.

Not so for a group of students in upstate New York. When students in the government classes at Poughkeepsie High School discovered the very real consequences budget decisions made in their lives, they were determined to inject their voice into the funding debate. Students wrote, distributed, and collected data from a 57-question survey that solicited opinions from their peers on what should be included in next year’s school district budget. They subsequently submitted to the Poughkeepsie Board of Education, the school district

superintendent, and business manager, a 149-page budget report documenting their findings and suggestions.

In rural Clay County, Alabama, residents waged a campaign of a different sort, one with a David-Goliath aspect. For two years, students and adults have fought to save their tiny K-12 school from the school consolidation trend plaguing many small rural towns in recent years. Though they thought they had the battle won in March when the school board voted to keep the school open permanently, last month a federal judge overturned that decision and reinstated the school closure.

Particularly in difficult economic times, education cannot be diminished as an unaffordable luxury but safeguarded as the necessity that it is. As the student speaker in Ohio reminded her audience:

Providing free, public education is not simply an altruistic act; individuals, communities, and countries gain immeasurably by providing schooling for all citizens. America prides itself on being the land of opportunity for all; let us not become a land in which only the rich have opportunities.

Below, What Kids Can Do presents three stories of the difficult fight for fair education funding in tough times:

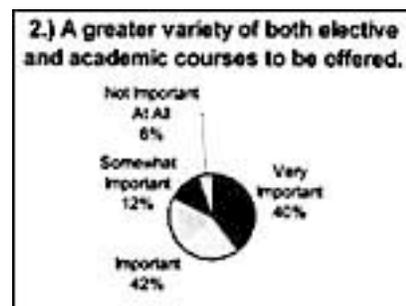
Ohio Students Join Fight For Equitable School Funding

“... Since public education was not a fundamental right in Ohio, an appropriate education took on very different meanings to the Haves and the Have-Nots.”



Poughkeepsie (NY) Students Submit Budget Recommendations

“I’ve never heard of anything quite like this,” David Ernst of the New York State School Boards Association told *The New York Times*. “Let’s face it, most adults are oblivious to the budget process. Clearly there was something here that energized these students.”



Alabama Students Fight School Closure

“If for some reason, we are not here next year, just remember the wonderful times we have had. Each person that has been connected with this school has been part of something great, and greatness, no matter how brief, stays with you forever.”

Judge rules Bibb Graves and Mellow Valley will close at year’s end; school board plans appeal

By Lisa Rowell
Students at Bibb Graves and Mellow Valley schools wonder if the emotional roller coaster will ever stop.
The latest development took place on



Board’s two decisions to schools. The new Board court to reject the Join Approve Consent Order p

Note: Both the students in Ohio and in Alabama are part of the Rural School and Community Trust network, as well as part of Project 540 (a project of the Pew Charitable Trusts that supports clusters of schools focused on student civic engagement).



Ohio Students Join Fight For Equitable School Funding

On a breezy spring day in May, roughly one thousand protesters from across Ohio, including some 200 students, converged on the west steps of the state capitol in Columbus. The boisterous yet peaceful throng chanted and cheered, danced and sang, clapped, swayed, and stamped their feet in a show of unity for more equitable funding of the state's public schools.

"I was so surprised," said sixteen-year-old Jessica, a sophomore from rural Leesburg, after the event. "I didn't think it would be anything like that," she noted about the energy and enthusiasm of the crowd, speakers, band, and drill team.

Jessica, whose previous public speaking experience consisted of a three-minute talk before an audience of 11 classmates, was the first of five students slated to address the rally. Each had submitted a winning essay on a school finance issue in a state-wide writing contest sponsored by the Ohio Fair Schools Campaign, a coalition of groups working toward a solution to the state's school funding crisis and an organizer of the rally. (See below for the students' essays). The group's director Debbie Phillips saw the contest as a way of injecting student input in the state's long-running debate about school funding.

That struggle goes back at least to 1991, when in *DeRolph vs. State of Ohio* a father brought suit against the state after overcrowding left his son without a desk, sitting on a classroom

floor to take a test. In 1997, the Ohio Supreme Court decided the case, ruling that school funding in Ohio was inequitable due to the state's reliance on local property taxes. After subsequent appeals and rulings, the Court issued its fourth and final decision in January 2003, upholding earlier findings that Ohio's school funding system was unconstitutional. The ruling, however, failed to set a clear deadline by which Governor Bob Taft and state legislators had to resolve the school funding issue.

On the day of the rally, legislators inside the capitol negotiated the latest budget details. With an expected deficit upwards of \$4 billion, most budget proposals under consideration include cuts in education spending.

"Education funding as a civil rights issue was a strong theme," said Debbie Phillips of Ohio Fair Schools Campaign about the protestors' message to their elected representatives. "And there was a clear focus on the ability of legislators to fix this problem if they choose to." Summoning that political will was a main purpose of the day's rally.

For Jessica, the day's most memorable moment occurred during her speech, when she caught the eye of a stranger in the crowd, another student about her age. When Jessica referred to the education motto, "No child left behind," the girl nodded in response, raising her sign up high over her head. It bore the message: "What about me? Where am I going to be left?"

Student Speeches

Elizabeth Bonham
7th grade, Bay Village Middle School



What is a Quality Education?

A quality education is like a tree, always growing, cultivating new trees and strengthening itself. The roots are the teachers, the educators. They give strength and support to the tree and feed the leaves. The trunk is the school facilities, a strong, solid basis that supports the tree. Finally, the leaves are the students, the educated. They are fed and nurtured by every part of the tree, from the soil to the roots to the trunk through the branches. The leaves fall off the tree in the end, making way for new leaves, and falling to fertilize seeds which will grow into whole new trees. Each part of the tree is vital; each part would not function without all of the others.

The soil, too, is most essential to the tree as it grows. It feeds the roots. Inadequate soil will cripple, or eradicate the whole tree and, therefore, all of the other trees that would have been seeded. The money from the government that must feed the system of education is crucial to the entire structure. To discontinue or even to reduce the money flow to the system of education is to stifle or kill the tree. It stops that tree from growing, spreading new trees, from oxygenating the earth.

And trees give back—feeding the human race with oxygen as we could not otherwise be fed. We need trees to live. The world, the economy, the human race needs a quality education for

its children to grow and prosper. It is the only way. As oxygen from trees is vital to the individual human being, children with a quality education are vital to the human race. As ideas germinate in the minds of children all over the world, these children will become the next Einstein, Locke, Plato, or daVinci. Children have their own ideas, unique and wonderful. These ideas need to be cultivated and shaped, so that the children of this generation can become better than their parents were and their grandparents. Their ideas are necessary for a better future, a better world. That is the result of a quality education.

So that is what must be given to children, all children, no matter what lifestyle or race or location or upbringing: a quality education. That's what counts, that is what our future depends on — a quality education today for a better tomorrow. The basis for a quality education, plain and simply, is what I see around me when I go to school each day. To be educated by educators who care, that is what makes me care about my education, and wish for one of quality. I realize that I am getting a quality, exceptional education. Not everyone has something this excellent. In fact, most do not. But all deserve one.

That is the task that must be accomplished: to give all children, equally, a quality education. To fill all students with knowledge and push them to their potential is to begin at the base, the roots, the teachers who will educate. Give the teachers all they need to grow their seeds, because they are most important, most significant to the growth of the tree. Then help to support the base, the trunk of the tree. Without functional school systems, the facilities, and now especially technology, the tree will wither and decay. The leaves, the children, need a quality education to be free to detach from the tree and make way for new leaves to be nurtured. This critical cycle of our lives is planted in a quality education.

Katie Krause

10th grade, Strongsville High School

Public Education: A Fundamental Right



It was March madness. The children thoughtfully pondered their choices . . . which one would be the correct pick? Kentucky looked good, but so did Kansas. It was hard to select the “right” choice. It was hard because these children attended the “Have-not” school district. March madness at their school district was not about basketball, it was about high stakes testing. If the children could make the right choices, their school might look better in the eyes of the public. They might not look like a Have-Not, but a shining Have district where the word “excellent” was taken for granted.

It was an injustice that the Have-Not school district had to take the same test as the Have school district. After all, *everyone* is entitled to a *free and appropriate education* and the state has *standards* for its students. It was somewhat ironic that the two districts could be afforded the same fundamental rights, such as freedom of speech and the freedom to assemble peaceably. The Have-Not’s were certainly free to discuss the inequities in school funding in an organized rally, but they were not free to receive the same education as the Have school district. How did the government define “appropriate”? Since public education was not a fundamental right in Ohio, an appropriate education took on very different meanings to the Haves and the Have-Nots.

The Have-Not district had school buildings that were so old that one of the town residents petitioned for the high school to be declared a historical landmark. Many of the children were going to the same school buildings that their mothers, fathers, and sometimes grandparents attended. The town elders said that it would be terrible to tear down tradition. However, those same people had no explanation why the cancer rate was somewhat higher in their community. They did not have the money to remove the asbestos from the buildings, and they had been told that the asbestos would not harm them.

Children in the Have-Not district had a different view of world history. Vietnam was supposed to be over, but their textbooks said that it was still happening. Perhaps the Iraq invasion had some connection to Vietnam, they thought. Science was particularly hard. The students had to know all kinds of information for those tests in March, but they were not sure about everything because some of the material was not in their books. Their school libraries did not have many materials, either. If the students did not have TV, it would be difficult to understand what was happening in the world.

It was difficult in the Have-Not school district for the college-bound seniors to prepare their college applications. While they had good grades and had learned a lot in school, their test scores were much lower than the seniors in other districts. It was difficult for the Have-Nots to obtain scholarships. Even the best athletes in the Have-Not district had trouble getting athletic scholarships because no one wanted to see their games on a field that looked more like farmland than a football field.

In contrast, the students at the Have district went to school in a building that was built less than ten years ago. They had large science labs with the latest equipment, access to computers in the classrooms as well as in the media center, and an indoor natatorium for swim meets. The building was beautiful. As students ate their lunches, the large picturesque windows revealed a scenic landscape where the cross country team practiced. The Haves could check out lap top computers from the media center to use at home. All of the classrooms had televisions and their morning announcements resembled *Good Morning America*.

In their classes, students at the Have district had new textbooks that embraced diversity, were user-friendly, and contained thought-provoking questions. Students planning on college could take many different foreign languages, such as Latin, German, Spanish, French, and Japanese. The college-bound students could also select from several AP classes so that they could earn college credits before actually going to college. Many of the students did very well on their exams because they had teachers who attended workshops to help them better prepare their students. The athletes in the Have district routinely went to state championship contests. The teams had many well-trained coaches who helped them be their best.

The students in the Have district beamed in pride when their students won many scholarships for college. At least every year, a dozen or more of their students were able to get full-ride scholarships for college. Usually, five or six students were accepted at prestigious colleges each year. Additionally, the Have district school officials beamed in pride each year when they had the most National Merit Finalists in the state.

The state politicians were happy when *No Child Left Behind* began. One of the Have-Not mothers, labeled a “malcontent” by a politician, said that it was really No Legislator Left Behind in a letter-to-the-editor. The mother was upset because she felt that she should not have to move or send her children to a private school for a better education. An angry father

at the Have-Not school district organized a rally at the Statehouse because he was frustrated that things would not change. The state officials stayed out of sight at the rally, hoping that the angry parents would just go away. They did not go away. In fact, they fought even harder to try to make the politicians understand that education was more important than anything else. It was more important than producing commercials to persuade people to come to our state. Why would people want to move to a state where education is not valued?

The students at the Have-Not district stumbled upon something in their history textbooks. It was something about Sputnik. Hmm . . . perhaps we need another Sputnik. Then maybe the people would believe that education is a fundamental right.

Elizabeth Alexy

11th grade, Athens High School

Why Public Education Is a Fundamental Right

When I was asked why I personally felt that public education was a fundamental right, I thought about what it has meant to me. My parents would have liked to send me to a private school, but they could not afford it. Despite this, I was still able to receive an education at a public school. If not for that option, I would not be here speaking today.



Literacy is an absolutely essential tool in our society. Not only do the vast majority of professions require it to varying degrees, it is also integral to functioning in the world today. Basic things that most people take for granted would be impossible without the ability to read. For example, one could not read road signs, warning labels, instructions, nutrition information—even the phone book! These skills have a gigantic impact upon one’s quality of life.

Without public education, there would of course still be a system of education in the United States. However, it would be at the expense of the parents, and innumerable children, myself included, would be deprived of schooling. Is it right that only the rich should be educated? Is it right that they should be given such a drastic advantage from the start? Is a child born to rich parents more deserving of success than the child born into poverty? Our country was founded on the belief that ALL men are created EQUAL, and I challenge anyone to refute that. Every child should be given a chance to succeed, not merely those whose parents can afford it. Inequity in education only serves to widen the gap between the rich and the poor. Without an education, many people would not reach their full potential. This hurts them, and this hurts society. Brilliant minds are found among the privileged and underprivileged alike. By refusing to develop all minds, we as a people would be depriving ourselves of potential Einstein’s and Edison’s. We could look over the child who could one day find a cure for cancer.

All people have the right to be happy and successful. Ignorance is NOT bliss. Knowledge of the world around us makes us better citizens and more capable human beings. Not only would we deny ourselves potential for greatness, a lack of public education would also create a race of ignorant and small-minded people. School provides an invaluable opportunity for children to discover different cultures and beliefs, and helps developing adults to define themselves. In a public school, I am exposed to people of many different races, economic

backgrounds, family situations, religions, and beliefs. It has undoubtedly increased my ability to understand and appreciate the world around me.

Another concept that created this country was Democracy. As Winston Churchill said, "Democracy is the worst system of government in the world—except for all the rest." The human race has yet to create a more fair and equitable system of representing the people. Democracy is contingent on the people's understanding of the issues and their ability to vote intelligently and consistently. This includes ALL of the people, including those who could not afford to pay for their own education. If we wish to continue as a free, Democratic society, it is essential that we have free, equal public education.

All men ARE created equal. They should be given opportunities that are not contingent solely on factors they cannot control. Their lives should not be determined by their parents' lives. However, providing free, public education is not simply an altruistic act; individuals, communities, and countries gain immeasurably by providing schooling for all citizens. America prides itself on being the land of opportunity for all; let us not become a land in which only the rich have opportunities.

Luke Feeney

9th grade, Pandora-Gilboa High School

What the DeRolph Decision Means to Me



After searching through several web sites and reading several articles about the decision on the DeRolph ruling, I have pieced it all together, and I have come to only one conclusion: that the State of Ohio would rather save a few bucks than spend money to help Ohio children get a good education. The state is so worried about saving money they would rather have kids in overcrowded classrooms, learning nothing, than spend a penny on "Ohio's future."

I believe the DeRolph decision means that the state of Ohio has some serious problems. How can the state sit by and watch Ohio's "future generation" get a poor education because of a lack of funds? How sad the proud state of Ohio cannot even reach into its pockets to benefit the future of Ohio and America. Why won't the government give money towards schools? DeRolph did not ask for money to buy new sports equipment or money to start a new school club. Even though the state has given thousands of dollars to do both of those, all he wanted was the money to make his classroom big enough so he could have a place to sit and learn.

I guess you could say that the state did admit that the funding was unconstitutional. But there is one problem, the state still needs to provide the funding. What is the point of finding a solution if there is no action taken to solve the problem? When you are not feeling good and visit the doctor, he will check you over from head to toe till he finds the problem. And when he finds the problem, does he just tell you that you are sick and that is it? No, the doctor gives you the antidote to the problem. Anyone could have figured out you were sick, but the doctor is the one who gives you the antidote to the problem. The state claims that the school funding is unconstitutional, but does nothing to fix the under funding. It is the exact same thing. Anyone could have told you the funding was not right, but the job of the state is to fix the problem. DeRolph knew there was a problem, and he brought it in front of the state to get the

problem solved. All the state did was agree and say that's too bad. I think the state needs to take control and fix the problem.

Is it right to let a gifted child slowly lose his or her gift just because the government thinks that school funding is unconstitutional? Ohio could be known for its great scholars and brilliant minds, if the state would give the money to fund the needed resources. These resources would in turn help the children learn. But sadly, Ohio instead will only be known for its great college football team.

To sum it up, the DeRolph decision means to me, (excuse me, proves to me) that the state knows there is a problem, but is unwilling to reach into their money-filled pockets to solve it. The schools need the money to give the students the education they deserve. There is no other solution but for the state to give the schools more money. It is a shame that the state has prioritized saving money over educating tomorrow's leaders. However, I believe that is exactly what the state has done, and this is what I believe the DeRolph decision means.

Jessica Elaine Morris
10th grade, Fairfield Local High School



What Makes Ohio's System of Funding Schools Unconstitutional

Dear Sirs,

Let me begin by introducing myself. I am Jessica Elaine Morris. I live in a very little town called Leesburg where everyone knows each other and are very supportive. There is getting to be more and more stress throughout our community, because of educational cut backs. There isn't a lot of money to be going around in our community. What I am trying to say is we are a lower economic school district and cannot afford the educational budget cuts we are experiencing.

The Ohio Graduation Test is designed to test concepts instead of content. In order for these concepts to be met they will have to be presented in multiple ways. These resources are vital in the development of the students. However, the State is cutting education funds which make these resources become unavailable. The reasoning for the OGT and other standardized tests are to hold the teachers and school accountable. Schools are told to look to their community for financial support, now that the cut backs are occurring. The state preaches "No child left behind," but instead they are willing to leave an entire school district behind. Why are we being punished for being a small rural school? Is the State willing to sacrifice an entire school district?

The State has been talking about the next educational cuts eliminating extra curricular activities. Extra curricular activities are very important in learning life lessons such as leadership, morals, responsibility, dedication, and achieving goals. I am a perfect example of a student who needs extra curricular activities. I am fortunate to participate in the sport of softball. God gave me the talent to use it, and teach me leadership, communication skills, and life lessons. Softball gives me something to push for. I have to get good grades to play. Therefore, I push myself to get good grades. Without softball, my chance of getting a higher education beyond high school is very unlikely.

Music, Art, and Drama gives students a way of expressing themselves that they can't necessarily do through words. It is important that we have a variety of extra curricular activities, this allows for more students along with the community to interact with one another. They also provide the opportunity to develop pride throughout the community.

How will the cut backs affect the relationship between the students and teachers? The teachers not only have the stress of preparing students for the OGT, now their resources will be cut. They also have to think and take into consideration the limited budget. To be honest these cut backs on educational funds not only bother me, they scare me. Our teachers and students really react with each other. Our teachers are here to teach and help us succeed. With these cuts, I'm scared our teachers are going to move to a higher economic school district. As a result, we will have less qualified teachers.

The DeRolph Case means a lot to me. It makes me feel good that someone that doesn't know my situation cares about my education, but not only mine but everyone's education. The State wants students to be well rounded individuals, yet they are willing to cut back on our education.

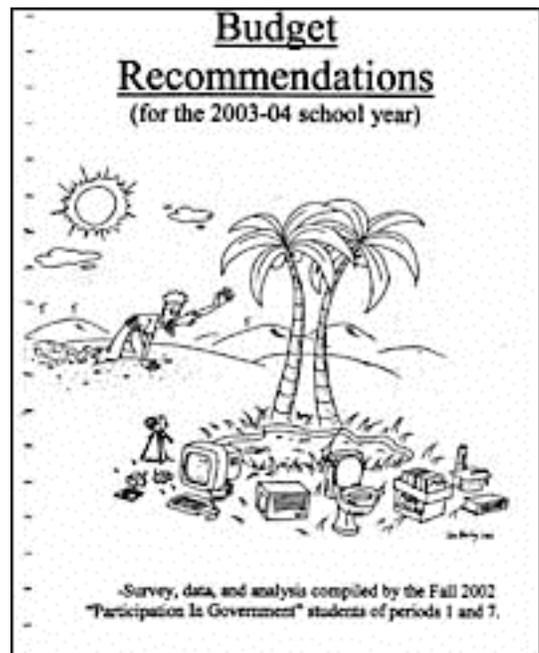
We are the future of America and deserve a well rounded education so we can become tomorrow's leaders.

Thank you.

Poughkeepsie Students Submit Budget Recommendations

When the Poughkeepsie Board of Education met for budget de liberations this March, it received input from a constituency rarely involved in school funding debates: the students themselves. Students in teacher Rick Keller-Coffey's Participation in Government class at Poughkeepsie High School had written a 57-question survey that solicited opinions from fellow students on what should be included in next year's school district budget. The students tabulated (by hand) and analyzed data from 596 completed surveys—over half the student body—then submitted to the Board of Education, the district business manager, and superintendent a 149-page report documenting their findings and suggestions.

"I've never heard of anything quite like this," David Ernst of the New York State School Boards Association told *The New York Times*. "Let's face it, most adults are oblivious to the budget process. Clearly there was something here that energized these students."



The students involved shared his amazement. “We’re surprised and pleased at how seriously the student body approached the survey,” students wrote in their report. Indeed, rather than seeking more dances, better food, or expanded sports, student priorities focused squarely on improving their education. Aware that New York Governor Pataki had proposed deep cuts in state education financing—potentially slicing \$2.1 million from the Poughkeepsie schools’ anticipated \$57.6 budget—students pushed their own set of basics. For the school’s predominately African-American student body, these included more help with the college entrance process and more avenues to scholarship money, more advanced courses, and basic improvements in school facilities.

Students kept an eye on the state capitol, as legislators approved an education spending package that restored many of Pataki’s cuts, which Pataki then vetoed, which legislators, in turn, overrode. Meanwhile, the government class met with the school guidance staff to sift through the report’s recommendations for those that promised positive results with no additional costs. Students and staff reviewed plans for creating a new course in the fall focused on getting into college. Counselors pledged to do a better job of getting important information into the hands of students, while students promised to be more attentive. Students also asked counselors to visit their classes more often, and counselors agreed to.



The meeting lent weight to one of the report’s final comments: “Student input should be solicited and gathered periodically so that students can always be a part of the process. Students want to be involved!” And in late May, when the Poughkeepsie Board of Education passed its budget for the coming school year, they introduced an unprecedented line item: \$25,000 for “student initiatives.” Having praised the student’s work on the budget, the board realized “we needed to put our money where our mouths are.”

Click below for excerpts from the report and materials from the meeting between students and guidance counselors.

Budget Recommendations (for the 2003-04 school year) by Fall 2002 Participation in Government Students at Poughkeepsie (NY) High School

Introduction: Project description by PHS social studies teacher Rick Keller-Coffey

Students have a lot of opinions. Often their opinions come across as complaining and whining, and most adults feel that asking for student input would be asking for trouble. It’s a credit to our current district administration that they felt that student input would be a good thing to hear...

My P.I.G. classes and I started by asking all students what they thought the district should consider in relation to the High School when planning the budget. This was done through the Social Studies classes because all students are required to take courses in this subject. We reviewed all of the topics that were raised, removed the repetitions, and wrote the survey items. In this way, all of the survey items were student generated and reviewed.

Again, through social studies classes, the survey was distributed. All together, 596 surveys were returned. Next we tabulated the results (by hand) and created graphs and charts to represent them. Then the real fun started. We spent several days analyzing and interpreting the data. Finally, we created lists of suggestions as to how student concerns could be addressed. Some of these suggestions cost money and some, you'll be glad to hear, don't.

... This project wound up being bigger than any of us anticipated, but we all agree that it was worth the effort. I am very proud of my students for the time and thought they put into producing this document—even after the course ended. They were very enthusiastic and very serious about the work. This project mattered to them. They know this may be the first time that the concerns of this particular constituency have been systematically gathered and reported to the Board of Education, the Superintendent, and the District Business Manager. They wanted to do it right.

Students' Analysis: "Very Important"

We have chosen to focus on the items that were identified as "Very Important" by 50% or more of the students. There were nine such items. From them we have identified three main themes.

1). The items that received the highest percentages were related to college. Most students are interested in going to college but are afraid that they can't afford it. Therefore they want more scholarships for seniors (74%) and more help with the college process (57%). Students receive help, but feel that they need more.

2). The physical condition of the building is also a big concern to students. Specifically students like the idea of renovating the bathrooms (72%), installing air conditioning (61%), improving the consistency and efficiency of the heating and air circulation systems in the building (56%), improving the overall appearance of the school—i.e. making it cleaner, more attractive, more inviting (53%)—and taking care of basic repairs around the building in a more timely fashion (50%).

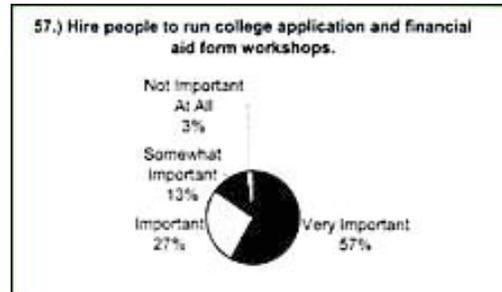
There were more items related to this theme that were ranked higher than any other. Students care about how the building looks and feels. They value a good "learning environment" and want to feel proud about "their" school.

3). Two highly ranked items, as well as several items that fell just below our 50% cut off point, indicate that students want additions to their course options and more opportunities within existing courses. Students specifically want more technology for use in classrooms (60%). They clearly want the Drivers Education Course brought back to PHS (54%). Not too far down the line are other items that support this particular theme. District money for field trips (44%), bringing back the photography course (41%), and providing a greater variety of both elective and academic courses (40%) are items that were chosen as "very important" by 40% or more of the respondents. Students seem to want more chances to learn about different things and more courses, or course work, that have direct or practical applications.

Students' Suggestions (excerpted)

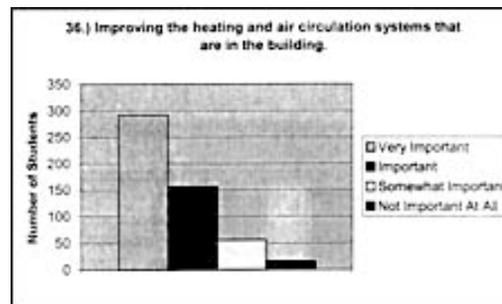
How to Provide Help and Funding During the College Entrance Process

- * As a district, aggressively pursue scholarship money for students from local companies, corporations, and organizations.
- * Hire a person to be the High School “College Counselor.” This person would not only help students who already plan on going to college but would also aggressively encourage and support students who are undecided.
- * Seek grant money to pay for a “College Counselor.”
- * Create a course entitled “getting into College” to be taught to second semester juniors and/or first semester seniors.
- * Work with the teachers union to develop specific ways that trained teachers can be a part of the “getting into college” process.
- * Train teachers in recommendation writing.
- * Encourage English teachers who teach senior English classes to emphasize college essay writing during the first semester.
- * Arrange for representatives from more colleges to visit PHS.
- * Provide support and help to the registrar at the High School, perhaps in the form of a volunteer student worker or a paid assistant.



How the Physical Environment of the School Can Be Improved

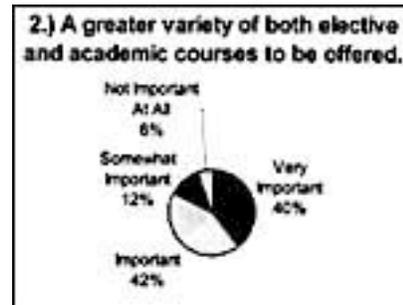
- * Gain grant money for the beautification of the building—inside (bathrooms, hallways, etc.) and outside (building facade, landscaping, etc).
- * Create a community service program at the High School. A good portion of that service could take place within the building and on the campus.
- * Establish programs that encourage greater student responsibility. For example, an “adopt-a-hallway” program could be created where responsibility for the care of parts of the building is taken over by student organizations, clubs, or teams...



- * Start up an apprentice program that would teach students handy-man skills while at the same time help the maintenance and custodial staff.
- * Hire more maintenance workers for the district. Assigning one per building would probably get basic maintenance and repairs addressed more quickly.

How to Enhance the Variety of Courses

- * Hire more teachers.
- * Create more electives and academic courses. Seek student input in the process.
- * Create structured after-school programs for credit.
- * Widen the variety of courses offered in summer school and open it to all students, not just those who have failed courses during the school year.
- * Create an optional 10th period to the day.
- * Broaden the independent study program so that students can work with teachers in creating their own courses.
- * Establish an official “Bridge Program” with the local colleges.
- * Connect with other school districts for “Distance Learning.”



Meeting with Guidance Counselors (May 2003)

Agenda: Meeting Between Participation in Government Students and the Guidance Department at Poughkeepsie High School (PHS)

Goal:

The goal of this meeting is to have a conversation about the perceptions, the realities, and the possible future of the college entrance process here at PHS.

The Topics of Concern:

- * scholarships
- * financial aid
- * the financial aid form
- * matching students to colleges
- * writing college essays
- * teacher recommendations
- * information/details about college life
- * students finding out more about what’s going on in the guidance office related to the college process

The Concerns

- * there aren't enough scholarships
- * students don't know about the ones that are available
- * college info isn't getting to students
- * students aren't getting enough help in:
 - * financial aid (the form or in knowing what's available)
 - * college essay writing
 - * selecting colleges for which to apply
 - * finding scholarships
- * students don't know enough about college life, including budgeting finances, what to expect, time management, etc.
- * teachers could write better recommendations
- * not enough colleges visit PHS
- * there isn't broad knowledge of colleges shared with students

Suggestions

- * bring in college professionals for afternoon and/or evening special workshops for students, parents, and teachers
- * bring in college professionals to help students with aspects of the college process
- * create a "getting into college" course
- * bring in more colleges to visit the high school
- * use the district web site to provide college info to students and to provide links to "college process" related sites (e.g., Arlington District web site, Fastweb.com)
- * use the Guidance newsletter to give complete information about what's going on in the Guidance Office
- * more frequent classroom visits by guidance counselors
- * work with the teacher's union to develop specific ways that trained teachers can be part of the "getting into college" process
- * train teachers so that they can help students more with the college application process
- * train teachers to write better recommendations
- * encourage English teachers who teach senior English classes to emphasize college essay writing during the first semester
- * bring in college students—preferably PHS grads—to talk about college life and give tips on what to do and what not to do
- * provide support and help to the Registrar at the high school
- * work towards hiring a "college counselor" who would work with students on the college process...full time

What's now being done?

What do you feel needs to be done?

Are students and the Guidance Department on the same page?

What can be done?

What can we (the students) do to make that happen?

Is there anything that we can all do together?

Students' Letter

PIG Students—Periods 1 and 7
Poughkeepsie High School
70 Forbus Street
Poughkeepsie, NY 12601

The Guidance Department
Poughkeepsie High School
70 Forbus Street
Poughkeepsie, NY 12601

Dear Guidance Department,

Thank you for coming to our class on May 14th. We appreciated being given your perspective about the college counseling process here at Poughkeepsie High School. We also appreciate how open you were to student suggestions. It seems that we all agree that communication between students and the Guidance Office needs to be worked on. Therefore, while still recognizing the responsibility that students have in the college process, we would like to offer the following suggestions for next year:

- * Guidance Counselors could visit senior classrooms at least once per month to help guide and answer questions about the college process. The PIG [Participation in Government] classes could be a good avenue for that.
- * Send out the Guidance Newsletters in mailings that are separate from progress reports. When they're combined, parents don't pay attention to news from the Guidance Office.
- * Guidance Counselors could visit underclassmen classes and have students fill out sample college applications. This might encourage underclassmen to focus on the college process earlier in their high school careers.
- * Hand out "college visit" calendars in junior and senior homerooms or in social studies and English classes.
- * Publish college information in the student newspaper.
- * Provide information about and visitors from trade schools for students who don't plan on going to college after graduation.
- * Bring in college professionals for workshops with students and parents. Use a lot of advertising and sign up lists to encourage greater turnout.
- * Train teachers, or at least provide information to them, so they can write better recommendations and help with the college process.
- * Bring in PHS graduates to talk about college life or the work world so they can give tips on what to do and not to do. Sign up graduating seniors now to come back in the fall.
- * Use the PCSD web site to get college information out to students and parents. Provide links to scholarship applications, career information, and specific college and trade schools. There are 2003 seniors who are willing to help with this right now. Next year perhaps the Web Design class could help Guidance to create and update their own web site.

Over the long term, we would like to see:

- * college visitation trips organized by the Guidance Office to more distant colleges.
- * The new college course run 4-5 sections at a time.
- * A full time "College Counselor."
- * The College Fair taking place during the school day.
- * A wider variety of colleges at the college fair.
- * A process where the web site is updated on a constant basis.

Thank you again for discussing the college process with us in such an open manner. We put in a lot of effort to come up with what we felt are good suggestions and are glad that you might find some of them helpful. We also want to thank you for the help that you've given to us throughout our high school careers. If there's anything else that we can do before we graduate then please let us know. Thank you.

Sincerely,

The Participation in Government Students

Students' Self-Evaluation

Things that we did well:

- successfully surveyed the entire Poughkeepsie High School student body and found out what is really important to them.
- used student input to make up the survey items.
- accurately tabulated and organized all of the data, by hand.
- carefully and thoroughly analyzed the data that we collected.
- learned how to make graphs with the computer (Microsoft Word Excel).
- worked well as a team and got cooperation from all of the students involved in working on the survey. Many students worked on the survey outside of class doing tabulation, typing, graphing, proof-reading, editing, analyzing and any number of assorted necessary tasks that went into producing this report.
- didn't give up halfway through the process. We completed this project even though most of us are graduating seniors and therefore won't enjoy any of the potential benefits.

Things that we would do differently next time:

- use more advanced software to make the tabulation and graphing a lot easier.
- use fewer survey items.

- keep track of specific demographic information. For example, knowing what freshmen think is important versus what seniors think is important would make the data, and therefore the analysis, more specific.
- not let students who didn't work very hard slow down everyone else.

Students' Final Comments

- We are surprised and pleased at how seriously the student body approached the survey.
- We are grateful that the teachers involved took the survey seriously.
- Student input should be solicited and gathered periodically so that students can always be a part of the budget process. Students want to be involved!
- Clearly the majority of students see the school as primarily a place of learning. While here, they want challenges and more opportunities to learn. Students see courses and extracurricular activities as ways to provide learning opportunities.
- Education and educational opportunities and creating a good learning environment received high ratings. All of the sports related items rated medium to low. Students seem satisfied with the support that the sports program now gets, but want more attention paid to academic related topics and our school environment.
- A school that is brightly lit, kept clean, not in disrepair and has constant and comfortable temperatures makes for a good learning environment. A clean and comfortable learning environment makes school a place that people want to come to.
- Students need to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility towards school in general and the building in particular. Taking steps like student surveys to find out their views and beginning "adopt-a-hallway" type programs will help lead to this end.
- The greater the variety of courses offered and the greater the variety that exists within these courses, the more students will want to come to school.
- Guidance counselors' loads are too high. Relieving them of some of the college process by creating a college counselor position will help students and help guidance counselors do a better job with their other responsibilities.

Thanks go to Abigail Garrity, Mr. Murphy, the members of the High School Social Studies Department and the High School librarians for all of their help, cooperation, and support throughout this process.

Thanks go to Mr. Baker, Mr. Watson and the members of the Board of Education for offering this opportunity and for listening to the analysis, comments and suggestions offered in this document.

Alabama Students Fight School Closure

With the next school year scheduled to start August 6th, students in Clay County, Alabama, along with their parents and teachers, face a cruel uncertainty: they still don't know whether they'll be able to return to their old school or be forced to attend a new one.

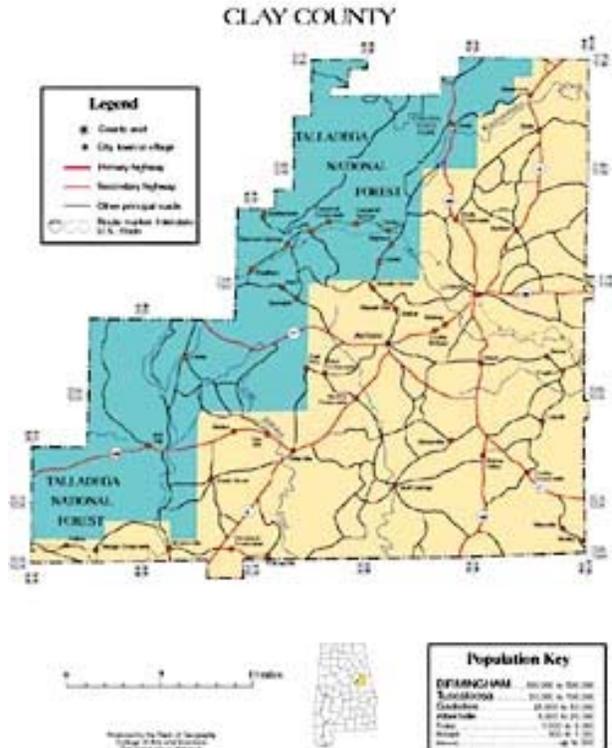
In May, a federal judge issued an unexpected ruling, the latest development in this community's two-year roller coaster ride to save tiny Bibb Graves School (roughly 440 students K-12) from the school consolidation trend that has devastated too many small, rural towns in recent years.

It began in the spring of 2002 when the Clay County Board of Education voted to close Bibb Graves because keeping it open would cause an \$800,000 deficit in the 2002-2003 school year. A multi-racial group of students and community residents fought back, and the U.S. Department of Justice ruled that the county could not single out Bibb Graves, a racially integrated school, for closure. The county board agreed to keep Bibb Graves open for 2002-2003, but voted to close it and another school the following year. Again the students and residents mobilized and again the county board reversed itself, deciding this past February to leave the school open. A key factor: the projected \$800,000 deficit did not materialize and, instead, the school district eyed a \$250,000 surplus.

When a federal judge reinstated Bibb Graves' closure this May, Bibb Graves English teacher Pam Horn summed up the feelings of many in the community: "It was heartbreaking." The long struggle has taken a toll. "We're worn out. We're kinda numb," she said.

"It was bad," agreed Lisa Rowell, 18, who had helped lead the fight to save Bibb Graves "and just like last year, when the school board voted to close the school and they announced it right before final exams." In her Valedictory speech (see below) at what may have been the school's last graduation, Lisa reminisced not about proms, soccer games, and classroom pranks but about the many activities students had taken to save Bibb Graves:

Remember all of the times we have crammed into the Anchor Holds Full Gospel Church to listen to the latest news on the school situation, to laugh together, and to cry together. Look back on the times we have worked all day together to clean up our school, the times we packed ourselves into the Clay County Board of Education meetings and defended our school's right to be here, the times we have cried openly when we thought it was the end for our school.



In addition to the meetings, fundraisers, and clean-ups, students also provided detailed coverage of the drawn-out proceedings in The Community Connection, the school/community newspaper published by the Bibb Graves journalism class. Students distribute 1,000 copies of the paper per month, with an estimated readership of 1,500; should the school closing be upheld, chances are residents would also lose this unique voice and important source of local news. (See student articles below).

The school board has appealed the judge's ruling, with another final decision expected near the end of June. "We still have hope," said Pam Horn.

And as she closed her graduation speech, Lisa reminded her listeners:

If for some reason, we are not here next year, just remember the wonderful times we have had. Each person that has been connected with this school has been part of something great, and greatness, no matter how brief, stays with you forever. Bibb Graves will never be closed, because each of us will carry it and each other in our hearts for the rest of our lives.

More student writings are below.

Postscript

Note: As this story was in final production for WKCD.org, the update below came in from Bibb Graves English teacher Pam Horn.

Yesterday [June 10] a federal judge dealt us what may be the death blow on our school. He refused to allow the board to rescind the vote to close and said get on with it. We took three buses from here and Mellow Valley to Birmingham and rallied near the Federal Courthouse. We had a good bit of media coverage, signs, beautiful weather, and absolutely no success at all.

I understand the judge's ruling. The feds don't need to overturn or otherwise interfere in local jurisdictions—we'd be screaming our heads off if they did. Still, it was a ray of hope. I will complete cleaning my classroom today and turn in my keys.

The kids are quiet about it—the "been there, done that kind" of quiet. I had two journalism students in the courtroom yesterday. I didn't go in because of limited room. Perhaps I will know soon what I will be teaching next year, if I stay.

I must close and get to work—one of these days summer vacation will start:).

Valedictory Speech at Bibb Graves High School Graduation, May 2003

By Lisa Rowell, 18

First of all this evening, I want to thank you all for being here and I want to thank everyone that has helped me get to this point in my life.

This is a critical time in our lives because at this time we all have many different choices to make. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Do not follow where the path may lead. Go, instead, where there is not a path and leave a trail." Each person on this stage is standing on the brink of leaving the path we are currently on and I truly believe that each one of us will leave a trail to be followed.

In a sense, today may be the end of a very important time of our lives, but really it is only the beginning of our adventures. We do not know what the future holds for us, but we stand ready to meet it.

As we prepare for tomorrow, we must also look back at yesterday. Look back to the trials and triumphs we have been through as a school, a community, and a family. Although it has been and it is difficult not knowing for certain if our school will be open or closed, it has also been a growth experience for us. Our community has banded together as never before. Friendships have been forged that will last a lifetime. I ask now that you all take a moment and reflect upon all the times we have had such a sense of community and togetherness. Remember all of the times we have crammed into the Anchor Holds Full Gospel Church to listen to the latest news on the school situation, to laugh together, and to cry together. Look back on the times we have worked all day together to clean up our school, the times we packed ourselves into the Clay County Board of Education meetings and defended our school's right to be here, the times we have cried openly when we thought it was the end for our school. Through all of it, we have persevered and now here we stand, the graduating class of 2003 of Bibb Graves School.

For the Class of 2004, remember these words from Edward Everett Hale: "I am only one, but I am still one. I cannot do everything, but I can still do something and because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." You all can make a difference whether that difference is in keeping our school open or simply by taking part in the lives of the people you meet. I look forward to being here next year watching all of you graduate from Bibb Graves.

However, if for some reason, we are not here next year, just remember the wonderful times we have had. Each person that has been connected with this school has been part of something great and greatness, no matter how brief, stays with you forever. Bibb Graves will never be closed, because each of us will carry it and each other in our hearts for the rest of our lives.

I leave you now with these words of wisdom: "Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow." Thank you.



Judge Rules Bibb Graves and Mellow Valley will close; School Board plans appeal

By Lisa Rowell

The article below originally appeared in the June 2003 edition of The Community Connection.

Students at Bibb Graves and Mellow Valley schools wonder if the emotional roller coaster will ever stop.

The latest development took place on Wednesday, May 14th. Students at Bibb Graves were called into an assembly at 2:20 that afternoon. They filed into the auditorium laughing and talking quietly, but they left with somber faces, some with tears streaming down their cheeks. Principal Ben Griffin called the assembly to inform the students that there is a very good chance Bibb Graves and Mellow Valley will be closed after this school year.

"Be aware of how blessed we are to live in America," Griffin reminded the students, urging them "never to be afraid of the unknown, but to rest in God's love."

Federal Judge C. Lynwood Smith, Jr. sent his ruling to the Clay County Board of Education, the Mellow Valley plaintiffs, and the Bibb Graves plaintiffs. The order states that the motion filed by the Mellow Valley and Bibb Graves plaintiffs to intervene in the closing of the two schools is denied.

Early this year on February 27th, the Clay County BOE with two new members voted to rescind the prior Board's two decisions to close the two schools. The new Board petitioned the court to reject the Joint Motion to Approve Consent Order previously filed by the old BOE.

The court order states, "The court must deny the Board's request. The court is not free to reject the consent decree solely because the reconstituted board no longer wishes to honor it."

The ruling went on to say that, "There being no evidence presented to the court to indicate that the proposed consent decree is unconstitutional, unlawful, unreasonable, or contrary to public policy, the court grants the Joint Motion to Approve Consent Order filed on February 26, 2003." The court order demands that all parties meet and devise a new timetable "pursuant to Section III, Paragraph 5 of the Consent Order." After the meeting, a report must be sent (no later than May 30th) to the court to inform them as to "whether a status conference is necessary to resolve any further disputes."



The Clay County Board of Education met Friday, May 16th at 3:00 p.m. On the agenda was the transfer of teachers to Ashland and Lineville. Teachers from Bibb Graves are listed to be transferred to Clay County High or Ashland Elementary with two exceptions. Principal Ben Griffin and teacher Fred Beverly both may be transferred to Lineville where they will teach science. However, the transfer of teachers was tabled until a later date.

The last item on the agenda was the approval of a resolution “as requested by Chairman Dennis Gautney, prepared by Donald Sweeney, Jr., (Board counsel) to appeal [the] decision rendered by U. S. District Judge Lynwood Smith.”

Students Successfully Fight School Closure in Alabama **By Lisa Rowell**

The article below originally appeared in the March 2003 edition of The Community Connection.

Students have many worries during their high school years-worries such as the graduation exam, the prom, ACT tests, and algebra. This year, students at Bibb Graves School in rural Millerville, Alabama, had another worry to add to their list: until last month, they did not know if they would have a school next year.



For the past two years, a battle has been waged back and forth between Bibb Graves School and the Clay County School Board. The school board wanted to close Bibb Graves and Mellow Valley schools and send the students to schools on the other side of the county. Supporters of both the threatened schools have worked vigorously to keep their schools open. Many students became involved in the fight.

Deidre Ware, a freshman at Bibb Graves, supported the school by going to the meetings that are held regularly by the Bibb Graves Parent-Student-Teacher Organization (P.T.S.O.). These meetings were sometimes held in a local church during the hot summer months. Ware also talked to her peers about avoiding violence and getting their grades and test scores up and keeping their school clean and safe.

“I helped in the fundraisers that go to the B.G.H.S. legal fund and I support keeping the school open,” said senior Cody Rowell.

Mashema Brown, a junior, also supported keeping the school open. “I attend all the meetings about the school that I can. I also help with fundraisers for the legal fund,” she said.

These students and many more did a great deal to try to keep their school open. They went not only to P.T.S.O. meetings, but also to Clay County School Board meetings. They followed in the footsteps of their parents and teachers and spoke up to let people know what they think about the situation.

In addition to participating in several fundraisers, students worked at school clean-up days. Some students also sent letters to the editor to local and regional newspapers. Finally, much of the community's information about the closing came from the school's own newspaper, The Community Connection. Student journalists covered the proposed closing, the board's decision to leave the school open until the end of this school year, and the continuing and drawn-out proceedings of the superintendent and the Board of Education.

Students thought about what the following year would be like if Bibb Graves closed. "Next year will be especially hard for all the seniors (including myself) if we are forced to go to a new school. It will be a busy year anyway with everyone making plans for college. It would be an extra strain to have to adjust to a new school," said junior Kristi Stewart, who was involved with the effort to keep Bibb Graves open.

In January 2003, the Clay County School Board decided to close Bibb Graves permanently after the end of the school year. But these students (along with their parents, teachers, and other concerned citizens of the Millerville community) would not give up the fight for Bibb Graves. Finally, the Bibb Graves community won the fight. Just two months later, in March 2003, the school board reversed its decision. The school is no longer in jeopardy of closure and will remain open.

Students from Bibb Graves will always remember the struggle that led to their victory in keeping their school open. Perhaps it has opened their eyes to how their vote can affect what happens in their life and how they can change policies by standing for what they believe in and not giving up. It could be that the uncertainty and fear in the long fight to prevent Bibb Graves' closure will turn these students into better citizens in the future.

Morality and the Board of Education

By Lisa Rowell and Kristi Stewart

The editorial below originally appeared in the September 2002 edition of The Community Connection.

"We recognize that the success or failure of all society depends upon the integrity of its citizens." This line is from the Clay County Board of Education code of conduct book. Ironically, it is under a sub-heading of "MORALITY" and a heading of "WHAT DO THE ADMINISTRATION AND TEACHERS WANT?" Ironic because this paragraph goes on to ask the students in the Clay County School System to be "honest in their dealings with each other, with us as individuals and as a faculty, and with parents." What they mean by that is "they should not take unfair advantage of another, should not misrepresent facts either by word or deed, should correct false impressions, and should not seek to get ahead at the expense of others or through copying work done by others." The book also says that students should "at all times be worthy of the trust placed in them by others." This is something that the students should strive to do, but who do they have to look to as examples of this behavior. The teachers and faculty of Bibb Graves are outstanding examples of how students should behave, but if those students look higher to the Clay County Board of Education, what will they find?

They will find a superintendent that falsely told many people that he would NOT close any school in the county. They will remember far into the future how they were misled time and time again by the school board to believe that their school would not be closed.

These students will find a board member elected by the trusting people in District Two who seconded the motion to close the very, school he was elected to represent, protect, and strengthen. This board member did not even pretend to be interested in his school by attending any meetings or graduations at that school.



Why should we not take advantage of others when advantage has been taken of us? They chose our school, not because of test scores and enrollment as they have said, but because they believed we would not fight back. They believed that we were an easy target and they took advantage of the fact that our own board member supports Clay County High School and not Bibb Graves.

When a person is elected to an office, there is a great amount of trust placed in him or her by the people who voted. Our superintendent was trustfully voted in mainly because of his pledge to keep all schools open.

This is who we, as students, have to look up to as our role models. It seems this year will be no different as Bibb Graves School is already being treated once again as the proverbial stepchild of the Clay County School System. The name of Bibb Graves School was not printed in the Code of Conduct book's list of Clay County Schools and right below the list of schools is a discrimination notice. What contradictions this book makes! Some might say that they did not have time to put the name into the book, but they had time to change the starting date of school and take out the fall vacation from the book when the start of school was delayed.

Another source of displeasure with the Code of Conduct book is to be found under the subtitle of CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY on the same page as the MORALITY paragraph. The handbook states what qualities a good school citizen should hold, but in speaking of these qualities it says only "he." It does not say he/she or they. An example is "HE will cooperate with the school administration, the faculty, and his fellow students . . ."

This is not only wrong, but it is also sexist. Do they mean that a female student cannot be a good school citizen or that it does not even concern female students at all? Either way, this is blatant discrimination. All our English textbooks show how to avoid sexist usage.

Although we are delighted to be back at Bibb Graves—especially the seniors—it is clear that Bibb Graves students can look forward to another year of hard work which will go unrecognized at all by the Clay County School Board and superintendent.