

Commentary

School superintendent responds to readers 'Sound Off'

Editor's note

Three weeks ago The Gazette-Times asked readers to write their reasons for voting for or against the now thrice-defeated school levy and send them in. We promised to publish responses in the September 3 issue of the G-T and the September 4 issue of the Boardman Enterprise.

Responses were published last week with the headline, "Readers 'sound off' on budget."

Morrow County School Supt. Doyle McCaslin has this week responded to some of the reader's remarks. His letter to the editor is printed below:

TO THE EDITOR:

The voter "sound off" page in last week's "Gazette-Times" may have provided a public service or it may have sewn seeds of greater discord in the county--time will tell. (Please comment on the editor/publisher's ethical responsibility to verify the accuracy of statements before publishing the equivalent of poison pen letters. People who read the untrue may not bother to read the true.)

Some of the factual inaccuracies, misconceptions, and misperceptions in the article, however, are extreme and I believe it is incumbent upon public officials, especially the superintendent, to do his best to give factual information and help people understand the facts and issues as the board has been dealing with them for more than a year. As a matter of fact, many of the factual matters and items at issue today have been issues dealt with by school boards in a continual stream of actions over, it appears to me, the past five or six years.

Close Ione High School

One such issue is the issue of closing Ione High School. A number of persons in the "sound off" article seem to believe that by continuing to vote no on the budget the board will be compelled to close Ione High School. That is decidedly not the case.

The board intends no willfulness or arrogance in that issue and any such decision about Ione High School; quite the contrary. The board has policy, legal policy which has been in effect some three, four, five years, we're not sure just how long, which addresses the issue of school closure in any community of the county. That policy places a number of requirements on the board, and the school district, and the citizens of this county. For example:

1. The decision to close the school must be announced at least six months in advance.
2. Before an actual decision to close any school a full study of the impact of that closure must be conducted.
3. A public hearing must be held in the attendance area where the school would be closed.
4. At the hearing required by No. 3, a complete impact statement of the effect of the closure on the community is required to be presented. That impact statement is required to address the financial impact of the decisions projected five years into the future; the impact on class size and teacher ratio in the school closed as well as the other affected schools; the academic implications for students; the social implications for students; transportation costs; maintenance and repair costs for plant operation or closure; the potential impact on the community; the geographic problems involving travel and time; the impact on home and family; and the impact on students themselves.

In other words, the pros and cons of continuing Ione High School in operation have not been fully studied, either as required by policy or as would be desirable by people who have a decent respect for the opinions and welfare of their small town neighbors. Certainly it is fair to point out that the overwhelming majority of the people at Ione--that is the voting majority--vote to support their schools and schools county-wide. We believe the facts would show that they pull their weight in paying taxes as well.

It is also fair to point out that any attempt at forced closure at Ione will put the people of Ione in a fighting mood, even those who have some doubts about the viability of a high school as small as Ione's which by the way enrolls 41 youngsters as of today. That fighting mood might translate to a solid block of no votes against schools in Heppner and the rest of the county, enough no votes to defeat any school budget. The chances are great that either the student population at Ione will increase somewhat in the near future because of development in the northwest section of the county, or the people of Ione will themselves question further the wisdom of maintaining their school for so few. (By the way, Irrigon High School closed several years ago.)

Teachers Salaries, Etc.

Teachers's salaries, benefits and working conditions seem to be a second major item of misinformation or misconception in the "sound off" article. Someone commented about the eight month work year for a twelve month salary. Someone else would have us believe that teachers put in six hours per day.

It is true that teachers work a short year, about 9 1/2 months. Their contracts are for 190 work days. Their salaries are, therefore, for 190 work days.

The board's objective has been to pay competitive salaries to all teachers. Through lengthy negotiations, the board and the association representing teachers in collective bargaining agreed on a salary schedule that would allow the district to compete for new staff members and continue to pay senior staffers a competitive wage. As we monitor teacher's salaries around the state for the 1986-87 school we find that our salaries at the beginning level are hovering at about the average wage settlements. At the upper levels our salaries appear to be somewhat better than average, continuing a pattern that has been in existence for a considerable period of time.

In any case, rollbacks in teachers' salaries and benefits at a time

that we are facing a teacher shortage, state-wide and nation-wide, are simply out of the question. We observe a greater competitiveness in our area for teachers every year, with our efforts to recruit spreading wider and wider. Should we base our efforts to recruit on what is occurring in the local economy, exclusively, then staff quality and school quality are sure to suffer. The important fact is that the district is competing for teachers, and the district must expect to pay a competitive teacher wage.

On the issue of the short teacher day, most teachers must wish that they would put in a 40 hour week and be done with it, just as they must often wish they could go to work right out of high school earning good wages and not have the expense and time tied up in getting a teaching degree, and the added expense and time tied up in keeping the teaching certificate, returning to school three to six summers out of their first ten years of teaching. But the fact is they never recover the preparation time and expense in teaching. The fact is, no teacher can do a passable job by working six hours per day. They certainly are scheduled to work longer than that.

One has to know only a few teachers to know that as a group they represent some of the hardest working individuals in any community. They are dedicated to youngsters, to schools, and to improvements in the general welfare of our community. In order to teach successfully they must spend a great deal more time preparing than the time they are given during school hours for it. An eight hour day and 40 hour work week without evening responsibilities and without public scrutiny of every action and every inaction would be a joy, indeed, to most teachers. But they recognize that professional work requires much more and the huge majority give their time willingly. If we expect youngsters to learn well from them, they must be accorded more respect and support than they have lately received--all over the country.

Budget Committee Preparedness

In the column of comments from those who voted for the levy, one voter expressed disappointment in the budget committee's lack of preparedness on August 13 after the second budget failure. Perhaps most people are not aware that the board starts its planning for budgeting by adopting a budget calendar in September each year. This planning results in a budget election in March at the time the district is required to have the annual board of directors election. The board does not do a great deal on contingency planning for failure as a result of the March election, but once a failure occurs, as happened this year in March, the board calls the budget committee back into session and reconsiders the budget.

Prior to the budget committee's approval of the budget in January it cut \$261,000 from the original proposal. When the budget was defeated in March the budget committee was called back into session where it proceeded to a round of discussions and motions to cut the budget further. Each motion to cut, either by a dollar amount or a percentage figure, was defeated by the majority and the budget was resubmitted.

The consensus of the budget committee at that time seemed to be that since the election was conducted during spring vacation when many citizens were gone from the county, the budget did not have a fair chance to pass; therefore, it should be resubmitted as originally approved.

When the budget was again defeated in May the budget committee was called back into session and after another round of discussions and proposals to cut, the budget was, in fact, cut by \$344,000. The cuts ranged over all schools, but were primarily in the areas of replacement and new equipment purchases, remodeling proposals, maintenance projects and new staff members.

The consensus of the budget committee at that time was that the voting public did want to see cuts in the budget, but that it had no mandate to begin cutting programs that had been built up over a number of years.

When the budget was defeated again on August 12 the board had already decided in July that the county clerk would be notified of the September 16 election on the very next day after the election--August 13. This date is the required notification date for a September 16 election, and the board felt that it would have no time to meet in order to make a decision prior to that notification deadline.

In behalf of the board, however, the county clerk waited until August 19 to hear the board's decision about the amount which should be placed on the ballot. The board did meet on August 18 at its regular meeting and considered for two hours whether or not to begin cutting programs that are not required by state minimum standards. It considered the possibility of cutting transportation, kindergartens, the extra curricular program, extra courses at the high school level which have been required over the years by the district, but not by state standards, and extra staff members who are necessary for the expedient operation of programs which are required. The board again decided that it had no clear mandate to begin dismantling any programs which have been built up over the years by the school district, none of which, by the way, is a new program.

If the budget is defeated again, the same dilemma for the board persists. The board hears about a general dissatisfaction with a great variety of items about the schools, but it hears very little that is consistent in what should be done about it. There seems to be a general feeling that cuts are needed in the extras, but one man's extra is another man's meat and potatoes, so that what the board is really hearing is that someone else's program ought to be cut.

Again the board is confronted with the problem that is very difficult to solve, one that is made especially difficult by the fact that neighbors all around us are continuing to operate the same programs in the virtually the same economy as exists in Morrow County. If we were able to compare our programs, program for program, we believe our costs would compare very favorably. The only real comparison that we can make that makes any sense in terms of comparing economics is to compare the taxes which are paid by our neighbors to those paid by ourselves, and certainly in terms of tax rate, Morrow County compares very favorably.

School Closure

In this sense, the board is justifiably unprepared to understand the refusal of the majority of the voting public to approve the levies necessary to balance the budget so that when the board says, if we continue as we are going, schools will have to be closed, because we are running out of money. The board is not saying either accept the budget as it is or we will close the schools; it is simply sounding an alarm that we cannot go on the same way--if we want to continue the programs that have been in place in the district for a number of years, the same type of programs that are being operated by our neighbors all over the state, we simply have to pay for those programs. If the voters, however, will no longer support a levy to pay for all of the programs that are in place the board needs a clear mandate on which programs to cut, otherwise it will be shooting in the dark.

One alternative suggested by the "sound off" article is a general across the board cut. That idea seems to lack feasibility for two reasons: first, the budget committee has already cut all of the significant dollars for program improvements of any kind from the budget; second, across the board cuts in salary and benefit areas, which is where the major money is budgeted, would require return to the negotiations table on two collective bargaining contracts. The board has no authority, under the law, to proceed any other way than returning to the negotiations table on that type of issue, and it has been

unwilling to believe that anyone would wish negotiations back on the district when it took 16 months to settle one of the contracts.

Taxes and Per Pupil Costs

In a separate letter, Mr. Bruce Nicholes, Boardman, displayed his taxes from the year 1983-84 through 1985-86, indicating a 12% increase in one year and a 25% increase the next year, all due to school taxes. Assuming Mr. Nicholes has attributed properly his first year taxes of \$716 to the schools in 1983-84, his taxes on the same property based exclusively on an increase in the tax rate for schools should have been \$720 in the next year, and the year following they should have been \$874, neither of which represents a 12% and 25% increase.

Mr. Nicholes also mentions per pupil costs and specifies figures for 1980-81 and 1985-86, claiming an increase of 98% over that period of time. From the State Department of Education, audited figures for 1980-81 indicate that the district spent \$2845.93 per pupil. The State does not have audited figures for 1985-86 yet, but its estimate is that the district will spend \$4253.92 per student, an increase of 49% in the period of time that Mr. Nicholes claims that costs increased 98%. Audited costs are invariably, over many years, less than estimated costs, but even at that, a 49% increase in what is really a six year period is a large increase, an increase explained largely by the fact that a number of new federal requirements were enacted during that period of time for equity in all educational programs--equity between boys and girls, handicapped and non-handicapped students, employees, and a whole variety of new requirements that have kept school boards hopping to meet them.

Administrative Top Heaviness

On the matter of top heaviness in administration, ever since the 1960s with the "beat" generation and the 1970s with the "hippie", anti-establishment generation and the generation gap, and those many programs that beset us in the 1960s and 70s, a general feeling has existed that all organizations are over administered, especially government. Each time a controversy or community concern develops over any issue, someone usually takes the opportunity to "sound off" about that fact.

Of course, the present "sound off" article is no exception. The amount of administration in Morrow County Schools has not changed in years. In January, 1986 the Department of Education published a study entitled "Administrative Expenditures and Staffing in Oregon School Districts." Computations derived administrative costs as a percent of current expenditures and administrative positions as a percent of total positions. On administrative costs the state average for 1983-84 (the most recent year of the study) for districts our size was 10.8%. Percentages for districts with approximately our student population ranged from 5.5% at Canby Union High School to 15.5% at Sandy Union High. Morrow County's percentage was 11.1% for that year.

As a percentage of total positions in 1984-85 (the most recent year of this part of the study) the average for districts our size was 5.31% with a range from 3.72% at Lebanon to 7.35% at Silverton. Morrow County's percentage was 3.75% for that year, next to the lowest in the state.

As a matter of fact, some of our schools in Morrow County are under administered. Most schools the size of Riverside High School, Sam Boardman Elementary School and Heppner Elementary School have full time vice principals where they have none to assist the principal in a variety of activities. With more than 300 students, A.C. Houghton Elementary School would qualify, in most districts, for at least half time vice principal. Most of our principals are experienced at getting the job done without much extra help, but Morrow County's principals are like Morrow County's teachers--simply human. All too human at times, and we have our own unique set of problems to deal with, day in and day out, but in general, Morrow County Schools are superbly administered.

In terms of payment for administration, Morrow County's administrators are all paid somewhat better than average, and yes, the superintendent did receive a \$1990 merit increase in salary for the 1986-87 school year. It is also a fact that some people believe that the superintendent is too eager to fight for what he believes is right. There are others who believe that the superintendent does not fight hard enough for what he believes to be right. In any case, chief executive officers in any size organization often are compelled to make decisions and support board decisions that are difficult and unpopular, then justify those decisions the best they are able. In public life all of those difficult decisions are a public matter, and we have no public relations men or funds to promote an Iacocca image. As the French say--such is life.

Finally, we are obviously divided in spirit over many school issues in this county. Seldom is it more important than now to heal those divisions, promote understanding of the other fellow's priorities, and rally to support education for children. This means faith in the basic good intentions and good will of one another, optimism about the future, and a willing spirit of cooperation across all real and imaginary dividing lines in the county.

Sincerely
(s)Doyle McCaslin
Superintendent

Don't steal from one community

TO THE EDITOR:

A school is a place of learning and learning is called educational. I trust the majority of responses in last week's Gazette were made in ignorance and not stupidity. Ignorance is when you don't have all of the facts but are willing to learn and benefit from them if you get them. Stupidity is when even if you had all the facts you refuse to learn or benefit.

For the several people in Heppner who felt in order to have a more economical budget for our schools we should close Ione High School and bus them to Heppner, I suggest that we do the opposite; close Heppner High School and bus them to Ione. It would serve the same purpose in the budget, and we could give the money to Hardman High School and Irrigon High School. Benefits to this suggestion: Ione has a turf football field, fine tennis courts, swimming pool, an excellent gymnasium, and a fine high school building. Plus good teachers and administration who really care about their young people, not to mention the concerned parents and community at large, if you don't believe me look at the voting record.

Other things that need to be brought out are these facts: Ione Grade and high schools were in ex-


istence long before the county-wide school system came in. Considering the turf athletic field that was put in by community spirit and effort, not tax dollars, the present high school building, swimming pool, and tennis courts are products of the Ione Community tax dollars and people. Let me remind you again, these things were facts long before this present county school system was instituted.

One letter that I'm sure was intended for a pun of sorts mentioned they had forgotten how their education was paid and by voting against the budget would have more money for beer. I'm sure most of us waste more money on leisure and pleasure than the possible tax increase would cost us.


I am not in favor of over taxation, nor waste in government and bureaucratic administration and I'm sure there is a lot of both. Let us join together in a constructive effort to make our present system work on a county-wide basis. Let's not steal from one community to benefit others.

I invite all those who don't like it to leave and all those who do like it to join in a common bond and make it work.

My due respects to all
(s)David Barnett
Ione



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