As a Friend of Valdosta City Schools, the wife of an employee of VCS, and step-mother to a child attending VCS, and a graduate of LHS, I truly want to see improvements in our public education. I do question CUEE’s school consolidation referendum, which is a distraction from the real issues.

Below in **black** are the frequently asked questions from Cuee’s website. Comments in **red** are from the Vote Yes website. Anything in **blue** are questions/concerns that I, as well as many others opposing consolidation, have regarding the truth behind wanting to consolidate our school systems.

Etta Mims

229-834-2668

Q: WHAT IS CUEE? The Community Unification for Educational Excellence (CUEE) is a non-profit corporation focused on improving public education in Lowndes County, Georgia. CUEE believes a community-wide focus on building successful schools and students will create an environment for a better public education system in Valdosta and Lowndes County for generations to come. **Based on what research? A better way to ask this question is “who is CUEE”?**

**Chairman Leroy Butler, Woodlawn Forrest Church of Christ
Vice-Chair Rusty Griffin - Griffin Corporation**

**Johnny Ball South Georgia Medical Center**

**George Bennett Better Neighborhood Housing Corporation**

**Ruth Council retired**

**Jack Edwards retired**

**Gene Godfrey retired**

**Walter Hobgood Express Employment Professionals**

**C. Terry Hunt Hunt Construction**

**Tom Kurrie, Jr. Coleman Talley, LLP**

**Dr. Ronnie Mathis Crossing Jordan Baptist Church**

**Jud Rackley Brandon, Rackley & Dukes**

**Supporters**

**Julia Ariail John and Helen Bennett James Bridges**

**The Honorable Tim Golden Kevin Conrad Joe Cordova
Ed Crane Curtis Fowler Jeff Hanson
Lee Henderson Ryan Holmes Jerry Jennett**

**Joe Johnson Greg and Nancy Justice Matthew Lawrence
Richard Lee James McGahee Dutton Miller
John Peeples Jennifer Powell Donald (Butch) Williams**

Q: WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN TO UNIFY THE VALDOSTA AND LOWNDES COUNTY SCHOOL SYSTEMS? Registered voters in Valdosta, whether they support or oppose school unification, will need to sign a petition that places a school unification question on a ballot for the next general election in Valdosta, which is scheduled for Nov. 8, 2011. CUEE is leading a petition drive May 8 through July 8 to gather the required number of valid signatures – roughly 7,500 – from registered voters in the city of Valdosta. **Has CUEE or The Chamber of Commerce reimbursed the City of Valdosta for the cost of “validating” the signatures (approximately $10,000)? Why aren’t city AND county voters allowed to vote? CUEE should have chosen “A. The first method of consolidation is found in the Georgia Constitution.  *See Ga. Constitution, Art. VIII, Section 5, paragraph I.*  Such method would require the General Assembly to propose an amendment abolishing the independent school system and creating the consolidated system; such amendment would provide that it would not be effective until ratified by the voters.  The consolidation of the school systems under this method is not effective until it is approved by a majority of the voters in each separate school system proposed to be consolidated.**

Q: HOW DO THE CITIZENS OF VALDOSTA VOTE ON UNIFYING THE SCHOOL SYSTEMS? Once the petition signatures have been validated and certified by the Lowndes County Election Commission, the school unification referendum will be placed on the next general election ballot for the City of Valdosta, which is scheduled for Nov. 8, 2011. If a majority of those voting vote YES, the unification process would begin. **Is there a way for the citizens of Valdosta to present a petition to the county residents in order for the county residents to have the opportunity to vote?**

Q: ONCE THE PROCESS BEGINS, WHEN WILL THE VALDOSTA AND LOWNDES COUNTY SCHOOL SYSTEMS MERGE? When voters approve the school unification referendum, the school boards of each system will determine the time period and specific process to develop a smooth process for unifying the school systems. If the referendum passes, both School Boards will appoint people to a committee that will create a plan for a county wide school system. Nothing changes until both School Boards agree upon this plan that will ensure a smooth transition to a unified school system. State law says so. A new county wide school board will be elected that represents all citizens, including minorities. **IF the schools are consolidated, when will the Valdosta and Lowndes County School Systems merge? What happens if Lowndes just says “no”?**

Q: ARE SEPARATE COUNTY AND CITY SCHOOL SYSTEMS TYPICAL FOR GEORGIA? Actually, they are not. A large majority of counties in Georgia have one unified school system. (Only 21 of 159 counties in Georgia have multiple school systems.) **Are separate County and City School Systems typical nationwide? Of consolidated school systems, nationawide, how many are meeting AYP? Since so much importance is being placed on AYP, why would you bring in a speaker to discuss a consolidation (which by the way sounded extremely painful on many levels) in Troup county which has not meet AYP in the last 8 years?**

Q: WILL THE UNIFICATION OF OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM SAVE MONEY? There is no evidence to suggest unification saves money in the short term. But there is substantial evidence to support that, in the long term, money saved from the efficiencies created by school unification benefits students because these resources are reallocated to the classrooms and instructional programs that benefit student achievement. **What specific “efficiencies” are you referring to?**

Q: WHAT HAPPENS IF THE REFERENDUM PASSES TO UNIFY THE TWO SCHOOL SYSTEMS? The Lowndes County Board of Education immediately assumes the financial obligation for the operation of both school systems. However, the City of Valdosta school system will continue to function independently until the Lowndes County Board of Education arranges to assume the operation of the City of Valdosta school system. The City School Board will maintain control over the operation of the City School System until the County arranges for the operation of the City school system within the County’s school system. New school board districts will also be drawn for the unified school system. These school districts will reflect the demographics of the entire county and require approval from the Department of Justice. In the coming years, our community will elect a new county-wide School Board that represents all of the citizens in Valdosta and Lowndes County. If the referendum passes, both School Boards will appoint people to a committee that will create a plan for a county wide school system. Nothing changes until both School Boards agree upon this plan that will ensure a smooth transition to a unified school system. State law says so. A new county wide school board will be elected that represents all citizens, including minorities. **Please make up your minds! Will the Lowndes County Board of Education immediately assume the financial obligation for the operation of both school systems? OR – Will nothing change until both School Boards agree upon a plan developed by a committee appointed by both School Boards? How soon would a new county wide School Board be elected?**

Q: WHY ARE THE RESIDENTS OF VALDOSTA THE ONLY ONES WHO WILL VOTE ON UNIFICATION? By law, counties have the constitutional authority to provide public education to all children unless the student lives within a city school district. This process of unification essentially dissolves the Board of Education for the City of Valdosta. The City of Valdosta School System was created by an ordinance of the City of Valdosta; therefore, it can be only dissolved by the voters of the City of Valdosta. **Because this involves children living within the city limits and outside the city limits of Valdosta, shouldn’t all voters be allowed to vote on this matter? Why when there were two choices did CUEE chose the one that would only allow the city citizens to vote?**

Q: IS SCHOOL UNIFICATION A CRITICISM OF OUR CURRENT SCHOOL SYSTEMS? No! Unification does however provide an opportunity for our community to rethink, in a holistic way, what is best for all of our children. **How many educators are currently on the CUEE board? How many educators are on the list of supporters of CUEE? Of the educators on the board and supporting this consolidation, what are your individual concerns when it comes to what is best for our children? How can you claim this is not a criticism? On all propaganda attached to your group’s name, there are criticism’s of one and sometimes both school systems.**

Q: WILL MY CHILD BE MOVED TO ANOTHER SCHOOL IF THE SYSTEMS ARE UNIFIED? Once unification occurs, children will attend the same schools they attend today. Over time, the new countywide School Board will study the transportation needs of students in an effort to minimize the distance our children have to travel to attend school. This study, along with the possibility of building new schools, could result in some changes in which schools our students attend. Children will not be bussed all over the county. **Please make up your minds! Which is it? How can CUEE guarantee this?**

Q: HOW WILL UNIFICATION OF OUR SCHOOL SYSTEMS IMPROVE EDUCATION? School unification, by itself, will not improve the quality of education for our children. Unifying our public schools means we can have ONE focus on education in our community. CUEE seeks to unify the strengths, aspirations, goals and resources of both school systems into ONE system with ONE focus on providing a quality education to all children and close the achievement gap. School unification will affect education reform in key areas including;

• ONE focus on resources that support the critical goal of having all our children be proficient in reading and math at grade level by the 3rd grade. Children who are at grade level by the 3rd grade achieve 10-20% higher graduation rates. **Based on what research?**

• ONE single school system. Our community should focus on graduating all students to ensure they are ready to enter college, technical school, the military or the workplace. **With what specific programs?**

• Establishing district-wide priorities and standards for all students and schools. Best practices will be applied across ONE school district instead of two. We could have one, highly focused professional development program for our teachers and school leaders. Singularly focused professional development is the key to effective teaching. Great teachers and great principals make great schools, and that makes a difference in the classroom**. We have great teachers and great principals. Who determines the best practices?**

• ONE positive focus to closing the achievement gap for all students. Our schools should have a culture of high expectations for all students, regardless of their gender, race/ethnicity, ability, or socioeconomic status. A unified school system will have a focused mission on developing programs and services to ensure all children are performing at high levels, achieving proficiency and receiving equal educational opportunities. **How many educators are currently on the CUEE board? How many educators are on the list of supporters of CUEE? Of the educators on the board and supporting this consolidation, how familiar are you with the current curriculums of both school systems? Who developed and what is the “focused mission”?**

Q: DO WE KNOW HOW THIS NEW UNIFIED SCHOOL BOARD WOULD BE CHOSEN? There are state statutes outlining the School Board’s authority to draw districts for electing school board members, the appointment of interim school board members in the case of vacancies, and arranging for special elections, etc. There are also laws ensuring that Valdosta voters have equitable representation on a countywide School Board. As required by law, a new countywide School Board would be created, and the school districts will be redrawn to ensure equitable representation for both city and county residents. Until a special election is held, interim school board members representing Valdosta could be appointed to the countywide School Board. If the referendum passes, both School Boards will appoint people to a committee that will create a plan for a county wide school system. A new county wide school board will be elected that represents all citizens, including minorities. **Which is it? The appointment of interim School Board Members? Which of the current 16 total members are willing to walk away to make room for the 7 interim members? OR- Will the schools be run by this “committee” appointed by both School Boards? Does no one understand that is this passes, Valdosta City Schools no longer exist? Again, how many educators are currently on the CUEE board? How many educators are on the list of supporters of CUEE? Of the educators on the board and supporting this consolidation, how familiar are you with the current curriculums of both school systems?**

Q: WILL A UNIFIED SCHOOL BOARD REPRESENT VALDOSTA’S DIVERSE POPULATION? Yes! New school board districts will be drawn for the unified school system and are required by law to represent the demographics of Valdosta. The final approval of these school districts must be given by the Department of Justice. If the referendum passes, both School Boards will appoint people to a committee that will create a plan for a county wide school system. A new county wide school board will be elected that represents all citizens, including minorities. **How soon would a new county wide School Board be elected?**

Q: WILL UNIFICATION AFFECT THE SALARIES FOR TEACHERS AND STAFF MEMBERS? Unification of the two school systems should have no marked effect on the teacher and staff salaries, except where adjustments are needed to bring all employees to the same system of compensation. Teachers will not lose their jobs, tenure or their pension. It won’t happen! **Who will supply the $5 million dollars required to bring the current City School Employees to the same retirement compensation level as the current County School Employees? How can CUEE guarantee that teacher will not lose their jobs, tenure or pensions? These teachers consider their jobs to be at their current school. Can CUEE also guarantee that no staff members will be moved around to other schools? How?**

Q: ARE THERE LIKELY TO BE MAJOR PERSONNEL CHANGES IN A UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT? Major personnel shifts are unlikely. Teachers will not lose their jobs, tenure or their pension. It won’t happen! **Can CUEE guarantee that no staff members will be moved around to other schools? How? FYI – Use of the word unlikely is not a yes or no.**

Q: WHO WOULD LEAD A UNIFIED SCHOOL SYSTEM? The County Superintendent or his/her successor as appointed by the new countywide School Board. A new county wide school board will be elected that represents all citizens, including minorities. **How soon would a new county wide School Board be elected?**

Q: WHAT HAPPENS TO ATHLETICS IF WE UNIFY OUR SCHOOL SYSTEMS? Nothing. All athletic programs will continue to operate in a unified school district as they do today. The Vikings and the Wildcats will continue to be staunch competitors whether they are in two school systems or one, unified school system. This is the custom in other Georgia counties that have unified school systems. Football and other athletic programs will continue to operate in a unified school system as they do today. The Vikings versus the Wildcats tradition will continue! **Can CUEE guarantee this? How? Because the different athletes will now be attending other schools.**

Q: WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO UNIQUE ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AT VALDOSTA HIGH SCHOOL (E.G. THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE)? Academic programs and services, especially successful ones like the International Baccalaureate program at Valdosta High School, will not be affected by school unification. Unifying our school systems means we can have one, countywide focus on improving public education in our community. The best programs of both school systems can therefore be available to all students. **Can CUEE guarantee this? How?**

Q: I HAVE A CHILD WITH SPECIAL CHALLENGES. HOW WILL SCHOOL UNIFICATION AFFECT MY CHILD? Special education is largely controlled by state and federal laws. Unification will not affect these programs, and the new countywide school system will provide the same Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for special education students that they receive today with the Valdosta City School District. **Can CUEE guarantee this? How?**

Q: WHAT HAPPENS IF VALDOSTA VOTERS SAY NO ON SCHOOL UNIFICATION? Lowndes County will continue to have two school systems, and CUEE will continue to work with community and education leaders to help reform our public schools. **Will CUEE promise publicly to stop trying to divide and conquer our city/county? Wouldn’t the enormous funds “donated” be better used to improve our schools?**

Q: WHAT HAS BEEN THE EXPERIENCE OF SIMILAR JURISDICTIONS WHICH HAVE CONSOLIDATED AN URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEM WITH THE COUNTY SCHOOL SYSTEM? The closest analogy we have found is Chattanooga, TN, which merged its school system with Hamilton County in 1997. The city of Chattanooga had a low-income, predominantly black school district while Hamilton County had a more middle-class, predominantly white school district. Since the two systems were unified into one, the new countywide school system has implemented numerous education reforms to improve the quality of education for all children while making significant strides in closing the achievement gap among students. In 2007, the Annenberg Policy Institute issued a report detailing specific reforms – like increasing college attendance, improving high school academic rigor through the creation of theme-based high school “academies” and closing the achievement gap in urban, high-poverty schools – which occurred in the years following the unification of the two school systems. A recent Chattanooga Free Press editorial on school unification said: “The evidence here confirms that the merger has focused more effective attention on student performance in urban schools. Efforts to improve teaching standards raise school test scores and graduation rates, and programs involving magnet schools and minority-to-majority transfers have improved achievement countywide and insured fairer focus on children and schools previously left behind.” **According to Times Free Press, fewer than half of Hamilton County schools earned “good standing” status under federal benchmarks this year. And for the first time, the district itself was identified as “high priority,” putting the system at risk of sanctions if reading and math scores don’t improve. Many local schools failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress standards set by the federal No Child Left Behind Act because state standards were raised to be more in line with national standards. Why would CUEE want to use such a school as an analogy on their website?**

Q: WHY CAN’T WE IMPROVE OUR TWO SCHOOL SYSTEMS JUST AS THEY ARE TODAY? Everyone believes our public schools should strive to meet the highest standards of achievement for all children – regardless of whether they live in Valdosta or Lowndes County. CUEE and its supporters believe children, teachers, and parents are best served by having one school system with a singular focus on increased student achievement to ensure all students are ready to enter college, technical schools, the military or the workplace. **How many educators are currently on the CUEE board? How many educators are on the list of supporters of CUEE? Of the educators on the board and supporting this consolidation, how familiar are you with the current curriculums of both school systems?**

Q: VALDOSTA SCHOOL SYSTEM TEST SCORES ARE IMPROVING. WHY SHOULD WE UNIFY OUR SCHOOL SYSTEMS? While the Valdosta School District has made some improvements in academic performance as measured on the state’s accountability tests, we are not keeping pace with similar school systems throughout the state, our region or the country. Georgia measures improved academic achievement in terms of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which is the lowest standard for measuring student academic performance. Based on the latest testing data, our public schools continue to face challenges in meeting this standard. Research tells us that the more intensely we focus instruction and resources on teaching our students, the better the results. Unification, by its very nature, supports such a focus. **How many schools in Georgia met the standards of AYP? How about the nation?**

Q: WILL A UNIFIED SCHOOL SYSTEM MEAN INCREASED BUSING OF STUDENTS? No. It is unlikely the system of neighborhood schools will be disturbed. Therefore, transportation should not be altered. Children will not be bussed all over the county. **Can CUEE guarantee this? How?**

Q: IF WE UNIFY OUR PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS, WILL THE COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD SELL THE BAZEMORE/HYDER STADIUM TO VALDOSTA STATE? No! The Valdosta High School will continue to use Basemore/Hyder Stadium as it does today. Bazemore-Hyder Stadium cannot be sold without approval of the newly elected Valdosta-Lowndes County School Board. **Which is it? No? Or only is the new school board approves the sale. How can CUEE guarantee this? Where would both teams play?**

Q: WILL SCHOOL UNIFICATION LEAD TO A THIRD HIGH SCHOOL FOR THE SCHOOL SYSTEM? Unification would have no bearing on the need for a third high school. As Lowndes County continues to grow and student enrollment increases, our community may need a third high school to avoid overcrowding. If we unify the two school systems, a new countywide school board will make this decision. **Can CUEE guarantee this? How? Because new zones will have to be drawn and approved by the Department of Justice, where will the money come from to build a new high school?**

Q: HOW DO EMPLOYERS, BUSINESS LEADERS AND NEW RESIDENTS FEEL ABOUT THE POTENTIAL ECONOMIC IMPACT OF A UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT? According to a study done by the Carl Vinson Institute and the Fanning Institute from the University of Georgia, there appears to be a very strong consensus among business site selectors, business executives and the Valdosta-Lowndes business community that a unified school system would improve the competency of our workforce and would have a positive impact on business growth in our County. **According to the Carl Vinson Study: Business Site Locators (page 64) Methodology**

**CVIOG faculty and staff identified business cite locators from independent searches, calls to industry and development associations, and from available databases from Southern development associations (e.g., the North Alabama Industrial Development Association). We compiled a list of 65 business site locators. CVIOG faculty and staff called every business site locator at least once and most were called a number of times until a respondent was either made available or refused to participate in the survey. Seventeen site locator consultants completed the survey. The survey can be found in Appendix A. Ten respondents either believed that they could not assist in the study or were uninterested. Our Chamber of Commerce states it has over 1500 members. So if 65 business site locators were chosen, and 10 of those were uninterested in being a part of the survey, only 55 businesses were surveyed. Of these 55 businesses, we do not know how many are members of The Valdosta/Lowndes Chamber of Commerce. Hypothetically, if these businesses are members of the Chamber, how do the remaining business owners feel about the consolidation?**

Q: PEOPLE LIVING IN WAYCROSS SAY SCHOOL UNIFICATION WAS THE WORST DECISION THEY EVER MADE. THEY NOW HAVE A LARGER SCHOOL SYSTEM WITH MUCH HIGHER COSTS. WILL THIS HAPPEN IN VALDOSTA? In talking with officials in Waycross, they tell us that while today the decision to unify was the right one, they did not allow themselves adequate time to plan for the actual merger once the City of Waycross voters approved the referendum to unify their two school systems. This will not be the case in Valdosta. If the voters approve the school unification referendum, the school boards of each system could come together to develop a plan for a smooth, successful transition to a new unified school system. The boards can use CUEE’s recommendations as a model for a unified school system. Sufficient time for thoughtful planning will be provided between the time the vote for unification takes place, and the actual implementation of school unification.

**According to a summary from Academic Leadership, Volume 4 Issue 2 Spring 2006**

**Authors: Joe Bard , Clark E. Gardener , Regi L. Wieland**

* **There should not be “forced” consolidation.**
* **There is no “ideal” size for schools or districts.**
* **“Size” does not guarantee success – good schools come in all sizes.**
* **Smaller districts have better achievement, affective and social outcomes.**
* **The larger a district becomes, the more resources are devoted to secondary or non-essential activities.**
* **Local school officials should be wary of merging several smaller elementary schools, at least if the goal is improved performance.**
* **After a school closure, out migration, population decline, and neighborhood deterioration are set in motion, and support for public education diminishes.**
* **There is no solid foundation for the belief that eliminating school districts will improve education, enhance cost-effectiveness or promote equality.**
* **There is a strong negative correlation between district size and student achievement in low-income populations.**

**Better yet, let’s use the results of the Carl Vinson Study: Prior Experiences (pages 59 & 60) UGA Faculty interviewed state and local officials and community leaders to identify issues among communities that have either consolidated their school systems in the past or have attempted to do so. Findings from these interviews include:**

* **School district consolidation can be quite difficult for some communities. For example, there have been 3 studies of school consolidation in Jackson County where the studies generally had findings that were positive for the merger option. However, these studies did not lead to a successful merger.**
* **There is a need to have the movement come from the school leadership. Hard for outside people or groups to lead the movement.**
* **The Georgia Department of Education must conduct a study that focuses primarily on the issues of facility use prior to implementing a merger.**
* **There are various reasons for communities choosing to implement a merger. No two communities are alike. Some school districts merged because one school system was having financial difficulties. The merged system was more financially stable.**
* **Overall, the loss of state QBE funding for administrators that can occur as a result of a consolidation is miniscule. When schools work out the details of reducing the number of total administrative positions, the savings tend to outweigh the costs. Relevance for Valdosta-Lowndes: The current study does not attempt to provide a detailed analysis of the potential savings due to the reduction in 59 Impacts of Single versus Multiple School Systems duplicative services. However, the current study has provided estimates of the potential loss of a slight amount of state funding if the systems consolidate. Consequently, the reader should be careful not to give these loss estimates more weight than they deserve.**
* **Sometimes mergers tend to take a good bit of time to really succeed as a unified system. Pre-existing rivalry-- even sports rivalry-- tends to damage the effectiveness of the new system. This appeared to be the case in the Sumter and Americus consolidation: it took a long time to really merge.**
* **Having a large differential in size of the systems being merged tends to make it go more smoothly.**
* **As part of the merger process the GDOE conducts a school “facility need” calculation for the new merged system. The resulting needs assessment can be quite different than for the needs assessment that the GDOE might produce for the individual systems. Consequently, the probability for the assessment to conclude, for example, that the new merged system will need to create a new school could change (either up or down) from the assessment of a need for a new school provided to the two pre-existing school systems. Relevance for Valdosta-Lowndes: Lowndes County already has a small new high school planned. Such a plan might be changed.**

****

****