

# THE REAL TRUTH ABOUT SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION

**MYTH: The Valdosta School Board is dissolved if the school referendum passes.**

**FACT:** According to Georgia law (OCGA Section 20-2-371), “such independent or local school system shall continue to function under the local laws, organizations, and regulations until the county board of education shall arrange for the operation by them of such school or schools within the local system as a part of their public system.”

**HALF TRUTH:** This means the Valdosta Board of Education would continue to operate the city school system and its properties until the Lowndes County School Board can make arrangements to operate the city school system. Their arrangements will take time and require the involvement of both school systems. Part of this process includes the creation and Justice Department’s approval of new voting districts for a countywide school board to ensure adequate representation for Valdosta residents. Until these arrangements are completed, the both school systems continue to operate as they do today.

**REAL TRUTH:** The key to interpreting Georgia Law (OCGA Section 20-2-371) is the emphasis on the word “until”. CUEE fails to accentuate that, “until” truly means until such time the Lowndes County Board of Education shall arrange for the operation of the former Valdosta City School System. Until could mean a matter of days, weeks, or even months, but this decision will be made by the Lowndes County Board of Education. The current board was duly elected by the citizens of Lowndes County and will remain in place at least through December 31, 2012. Once all votes are tallied and certified, if the disposition of the vote is for consolidation, the former Valdosta City School System will be dissolved and will no longer exist as soon as the Lowndes County School Board is ready to assume ownership. CUEE could have allowed for a two to three year transition period if they had worded the petition and ballot question accordingly.

**MYTH: IF THE SCHOOL REFERENDUM PASSES, TEACHERS WILL LOSE THEIR JOBS, TENURE AND PENSIONS.**

**FACT:** According to Georgia law (OCGA Section 20-2-942), “professional certificated personnel employed by a county or independent local school system that becomes consolidated with or merged into another county or independent local school system... shall retain their employment... in the newly created, or surviving, school system... certificated personnel shall retain and carry over all the rights already accrued and earned in the professional certificated personnel's prior school system.”

The law also says, “any reductions in staff due to loss of students or cancellation of programs in the newly created, or surviving, school system necessitated by the consolidation or merger shall be made first in preference of retaining professional certificated personnel on the basis of uniformly applied criteria set forth in local school board policies of the newly created, or surviving, school system.”

**HALF TRUTH:** This means certified teachers in the Valdosta School System will still be employed on November 9 should the voters approve the school unification referendum. It also means their employment will continue under a unified school system, and their pension and tenure will remain intact as they are today. If any staff reductions are made, the **new** countywide School Board must make

these decisions using a uniformly applied criteria where all city and county school teachers are treated the same.

**REAL TRUTH:** Most of the information stated above is true; however, CUEE's use of the phrase (will still be employed on November 9 should the voters approve the school unification referendum), is most deceptive. In all likelihood, employment will continue on November 9<sup>th</sup> but what about subsequent school years? The Lowndes County School System, like most of the other school systems in the State, has a Reduction in Force Policy. Under the provisions stipulated in the Reduction in Force Policy; factors to be considered by the Superintendent in devising a RIF plan may include, but shall not be limited to, level of certification, the professional expertise, effectiveness, overall job performance, tenure status, and length of continuous service of individual employees with the Lowndes County Board of Education and any other just and sufficient cause deemed appropriate by the Board. Based on calculations of the Lowndes County School System numerous teachers, administrators, and support personnel will not be necessary as a result of school consolidation. This is one of the very few areas where money can be saved.

## **MYTH: OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE IMPROVING SO THERE IS NO NEED TO UNIFY.**

**FACT or FICTION:** While our public schools continue to make progress, they are not keeping pace with the raising standards in our state and continue to face challenges with preparing high school students so they are ready to enter college or the workforce upon graduation. The facts say so. Test scores and graduation rates are average or below average in a state that ranks among the lowest in the country for quality of education. Under a unified school system, our community can accomplish more because everyone has a stake in academic successes and failures of all students. There are certain things our community cannot accomplish with two, independent school systems, such as career academies and magnet schools, school reform initiatives that focus on preparing our children to enter college or the workforce upon graduation, and building a diverse school system that reflects the realities of the world we live in today.

**REAL TRUTH:** Upon careful examination of the indicators of success for both school systems, one will find both systems have exceeded the performance of other demographically comparable school systems throughout the State. For example, CUEE continues to use propaganda that lists the Valdosta High School and Lowndes High School graduation rate hovering near 50%. The current Valdosta High School graduation rate is 77.9% while the Lowndes High School graduation rate is 83.4%. The ultimate goal of both school systems is for all students to graduate from high school. Over the last five years Valdosta High School has improved their graduation rate by 20 percentage points, while Lowndes High School has improved their graduation rate 17 percentage points.

CUEE has stated, "There are certain things our community cannot accomplish with two, independent school systems, such as career academies and magnet schools, school reform initiatives that focus on preparing our children to enter college or the workforce upon graduation, and building a diverse school system that reflects the realities of the world we live in today." This is really untrue. Having two school systems does not prohibit or hinder the acquisition of any of these programs in our community.

**Both school systems are making progress. We're not satisfied with where we are; therefore, we are in constant pursuit of continuous progress. We need community support in order to achieve our goals. Comments made by the Chamber and CUEE over the past several months are certainly not indicative of their support of either school system.**

## **MYTH: SCHOOL UNIFICATION WILL CAUSE AN INCREASE TO THE SCHOOL MILLAGE RATE IN VALDOSTA.**

**FACT or FICTION:** Typically, the millage rate for a unified school system is the average of the millage rates for the city and county school systems. Based on a recent study by the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute, city residents can expect a slight decrease in their school millage rate (16.98 mills) while county residents can expect a slight increase in their school millage rate (14.70 mills).

**REAL TRUTH:** The research provides adequate evidence that the trend of consolidated school systems leads to an increase in the operating costs, and subsequently, an increase in the millage rate; therefore, taxes will increase for both city and county taxpayers. CUEE made a gross error in their calculation of a consolidated millage rate. You cannot simply average the two millage rates. You must take into consideration the assessed value of the property in both systems. In addition, you must take into consideration increases in operating costs as a result of consolidation. The required millage rate to continue the current programs in both the city and county school systems, and the projects CUEE has recommended (additional schools, magnet programs, career academy, professional learning, etc.) will necessitate approximately 28 mills. Georgia law prohibits the school millage rate to exceed 21 mills; therefore, the increase in the cost of operating a consolidated school system with the elimination of a few successful programs will likely be in the 20 to 21 mill range.

## **MYTH: SUCCESSFUL ACADEMIC PROGRAMS RUN THE RISK OF BEING ELIMINATED IF WE HAVE ONE SCHOOL SYSTEM.**

**FACT or FICTION:** School unification will not affect successful academic programs and services in Valdosta City schools, such as the International Baccalaureate, Early College Academy and Pre-K. In fact, these programs have a greater opportunity for expansion in a unified school system versus how they operate today. School unification brings a single, countywide focus to improving public education for all children in our community; therefore, the best programs of both school systems can be made available to all eligible students.

**REAL TRUTH:** Continuing all of the current programs the Valdosta City School System and the Lowndes County School System have would require a millage rate of approximately 24 mills. Considering state law limits us to 21 mills, some programs will be eliminated. The decision to eliminate such programs will be recommended by the Lowndes County Superintendent, subject to final approval by the Lowndes County Board of Education. There will be winners and losers in consolidation and several current successful programs will likely have to go.

## **MYTH: UNIFICATION WILL NOT IMPROVE EDUCATION SO WHY SHOULD WE UNIFY OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS.**

**FACT or FICTION:** Today, our community and its resources are divided between two school systems that are essentially segregated along economic and racial lines. This is not acceptable and has a direct bearing on the educational outcomes of our children. A unified school system is the only way to address the re-segregation of our schools and ensure all children in our community have equal educational opportunities. This is an important issue for many parents in both Valdosta and Lowndes County. In fact, a growing body of evidence suggesting that a diverse student body leads to gains in student achievement, reduces racial prejudices and better prepares children for college and workplace success.

Some have continued to suggest the Justice Department will mandate busing to achieve diversity if our community approves the school unification referendum. This is not true. In fact, an increase in busing is highly unlikely and seldom recommended as a means of achieving diversity by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. There are several approaches to address diversity in our public schools, and our school leaders will determine the best approach based on the needs of our community. When looking at communities in Georgia that have unified their school systems during the past 15-20 years, the number of students being bused in a unified school system was no different than what the community experienced with multiple school systems.

**REAL TRUTH:** One of the primary goals of CUEE is to increase diversity in the consolidated school system; therefore, you cannot increase diversity and leave what CUEE calls segregated schools. As a result, many students will be transported to other schools in order to achieve a school population that is representative of the demographics of our community. This will not only mean a shift of attendance zones of schools in the city and county, it will also mean a drastic increase in the cost of transportation of students. Dr. Terry Jenkins (the consolidation authority that CUEE brought in as their featured speaker at their forum) stated in his presentation at the CUEE forum that the morning after the consolidation in Troup County, he received a call from the Department of Justice mandating that he achieve a racial diversity within the school system that reflects the demographics of their community.

## **MYTH: SCHOOL UNIFICATION SUPPORTERS ONLY WANT CITY RESIDENTS TO VOTE ON THE REFERENDUM?**

**FACT:** People have asked why Valdosta residents are the only ones who get to vote on the school unification referendum as opposed to all residents in Lowndes County. State law actually provides two methods for placing a school unification referendum on the ballot:

1. A bill introduced and passed by the Georgia General Assembly and signed by the Governor calling for the consolidation of the independent school system with the county school system. It would become law and unification would occur if a majority of the voters within the independent school district and the County school district both voted in favor of legislation.
2. Twenty five percent of the registered voters residing within the independent school district sign a petition to hold a referendum to dissolve its independent school charter. A majority of the voters within such independent school district must vote in favor of such dissolution during the referendum before

the two school systems can be unified into a single, countywide school system. Both options were analyzed, but it was clear early in the process that the first option was not feasible since it required support from both School Boards. Even if the local delegation sponsored the legislation, we could not find any situation where this process was used for a school unification referendum. Collecting signatures in a petition drive represents the best, most democratic way for the citizens of Valdosta to voice their opinion on how it should provide for the public education of all children in Valdosta. The facts also show that since 1983, the year the first option became part of the Georgia Constitution; virtually all of the school unification votes in Georgia were as a result of a community using a petition process to hold a school unification referendum.

**REAL TRUTH:** Option 1 was not a bill introduced by the Georgia General Assembly; it was a revision to the State Constitution in 1983. Option 2 was a statute established in 1926. The Chamber of Commerce and CUEE NEVER proposed option 1 to either school board or superintendent. However, they did state that option 1 was not feasible because they knew the county would defeat any consolidation effort. It is ironic that CUEE uses the terminology unification. If they truly desired unification, they would have both the city and county voters engaged in the decision for or against consolidation. CUEE's failure to allow the county voters a voice in consolidation has disenfranchised over half of the people affected by consolidation. If consolidation is approved and taxes increase, the county taxpayers will be a victim of taxation without representation. This is all part of CUEE's plan to force consolidation regardless of the consequences. When one analyzes the number of organized groups who have publically opposed consolidation and compare that number to the mere two groups who promote consolidation, one would naturally question why we are even having this conversation at this time. For the Chamber leadership and CUEE, a private entity, to so forcefully promote such a divisive issue, one must question their motive.

**Myth: If consolidation is approved we will have a new Lowndes County Board of Education.**

**FACT or FICTION:** CUEE has repeatedly stated that after consolidation a new Board will be elected.

**REAL TRUTH:** All members of the Lowndes County Board of Education were duly elected by their constituents to serve a specified period of time (four years). If consolidation is approved, the Lowndes County Board of Education will be the surviving board. The current board will remain in place until provisions are made to create new districts, approved by the Department of Justice, and proper elections held. This process could take up to a year. The Valdosta City School Board members will give up their seats on the day their charter is dissolved and this will occur when the Lowndes County Board of Education assumes responsibility for the operation of the expanded Lowndes County School System. Yes, a new board could be elected but this would hold true under any circumstance with newly elected positions.