

Baxter: City-county high school 'only solution'

By SHEP MONTGOMERY
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Oktribbeha County schools must consolidate their upper grades with the Starkville city schools to give rural students a fighting chance of receiving an equal education, a consultant hired by the embattled county district said Tuesday in his final report.

"The Oktibbeha County School Board and the superintendent should pursue consolidation with the Starkville Municipal-Separate School District immediately. The two

boards should develop a three-year, phased-in merger of the district," schools consultant Dr. Milton Baxter of Jackson told a capacity crowd of over 300 persons gathered at Greensboro Center auditorium Tuesday.

"That's my recommendation. There's not any other answer to y'all's problem. Period."

Baxter laid down a sweeping range of recommendations that, if followed, will touch every aspect of the districts' future, affecting administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and students alike.

The recommendations were the results of

a nearly four-month study which school board members launched late last year in hopes of solving the districts' lingering woes once and for all.

The effort involved dozens of interviews by Baxter, a long-time educator and state College Board employee, with dozens of school administrators and staffers, parents, government officials, and independent consultants.

Specific categories covered in Baxter's report address recommendations to improve instruction, accreditation, course offerings,

parental involvement, extracurricular activities, physical facilities, transportation, administration, special education, student services, discipline, and food services.

But the most immediate task for school officials will be to come out from under the Level 1 probation that the district was placed under last year by the state Department of Education after it was revealed that the district offered too few courses and that students had averaged poor scores on standardized tests.

At the root of the district's woes is its

very shape, a creature of the 1950s that has left educators with only the crumbs of the county's taxable wealth to provide education at four campuses scattered in each corner of the county, Baxter said.

"The heart of the county has been taken out, and what (OCSD Superintendent Walter Conley) is to operate a district that is the rim of a county," Baxter said.

Another factor aggravating the county

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Baxter

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Schools' plight has been the steady decline of enrollment of students in the Oktibbeha County School District — a drop of 212 students from 1980 to 1990 alone, which results in lower levels of state matching funds.

"That makes all the difference in the world when you're talking about a viable school district," Baxter said. "If you're diminishing enrollment, you're also diminishing the funding that's available to your school district."

Baxter offered three alternatives board members can follow to avert the crisis — all of which promise to yield some pain and sacrifice to all sides involved in the debate.

By doing nothing, Baxter said the district could avoid "community unrest", but would probably result in a takeover of the district by the state Department of Education, who would close the county schools and send its children to an adjoining district — probably Starkville's, he said. Such an occurrence would be the first time the conservatorship provision authorized by the 1991 state Legis-

lature would be exercised.

"That would be unplanned movement into another district," Baxter said. "It would create an impression of a county being unable to solve its own problems."

Another option, the construction of a centralized county high school, would require the passage of a bond issue.

The county school district can issue up to \$3,750,000 in bonds, plus \$250,000 in notes, enough to meet the the construction costs of a new school, Baxter said. Under the measure, county elementary schools would remain their four present locations.

Proponents of the measure would have to negotiate with the Starkville district, which embraces all lands in the county considered suitable for a centralized school, for a site.

"It would be very unusual situation in that it would be the only school district in the state where there would be a school within the boundaries of another school district," Baxter said. "It also would be difficult to pass a bond issue."

Building a consolidated county high school also would not address the problem of fewer students in the district, raising the specter of having to deal with the same problems now

faced by the district again several years down the road, Baxter said.

The third option — the one advanced by Baxter — would be for county school district to request gradual consolidation of its high school grades into Starkville High School over three or more years.

"We're not talking about a drastic, massive construction program," Baxter said. "It would be phased in gradually to adequately plan for growth."

Moving county students to Starkville would automatically resolve the county accreditation deficiency problems by enabling county students to enjoy comprehensive academic and extracurricular offerings.

"I find it hard to believe that the children in the county are not offered music and band," Baxter said. "Knowing who to sing or read music might not get you a job, but it might make life a whole lot more meaningful."

A larger SHS drawing students from across Oktibbeha County would undoubtedly emerge as an athletic powerhouse, Baxter said. "I imagine y'all would whip everybody in the state," he quipped.

Baxter also addressed consolidation as a way of resolving the prob-

lem of chronic district attendance violations of students residing in the county district illegally attending city schools.

Joining the two districts at the high school level also would equalize real estate values throughout the county and promote countywide economic development, he said.

But Baxter acknowledged that such a move will create "some unrest in both districts, due to change" and temporary budgetary strains as teachers in both districts are brought to the same pay scale.

Baxter also called for a implementation of a computerize teachings system to bring up performance on standardized tests up to acceptable levels.

The consultant He also took aim at what he called insufficient involvement of many county schoolchildrens' parents in their childrens' education.

"I doubt seriously that you parents are really supporting your children in the educational process," Baxter said.

Baxter also lashed out at substandard performance on the part of the districts' teachers.

"It's part of the teachers' fault — there is a problem there," Baxter said. "It's also a parental problem."