

Part III: The plight of Oktibbeha County Schools

# Consolidation seen as only solution

Editor's note: This is the third and final article in a series on the plight of the county school district.

Oktibbeha County  
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Starkville Daily News

Making improvements in the quality of instruction in the

Oktibbeha County schools, will, at best, be a temporary solution to the long-term problems faced by the embattled school district.

"You have to have good teachers that are well-prepared, with adequate money for supplies and materials in a building that is comfortable," Dr. Milton Baxter

said. "That's what it takes to have children learning in a school."

Baxter has taken aim at both teachers and parents of the district for not providing enough instruction and motivation to propel student performance on standardized tests forward. On its 1992-93 performance report, the

OCSD met only 53.6 percent of a required minimum performance level of 70 percent.

"I have doubts about the seriousness on the part of the teaching staff in certain areas of the district as well as parents providing the type of support (needed)," Baxter said.

Bringing teachers and parents up to speed could take years, Baxter said. Until then, he recommended the immediate implementation of a computerized basic skills program to bring county school students' performance up to par.

"You don't have time to catch teachers up, so this is a stop-gap measure," Baxter said.

Under the program, children at every grade level would be scheduled for 45 minutes every day when they would work on a battery of math, science, language, reading, and social studies skills.

"Everybody would be hit with the same thing at once, and you would have a short-term turnaround," Baxter said.

Baxter also has recommended the creation of a parent's guide to aid understanding of standardized tests in order to involve parents on test score interpretation and to encourage them to expect more from their children.

Some say that the district is already on its way to escaping the deficiencies in instruction.

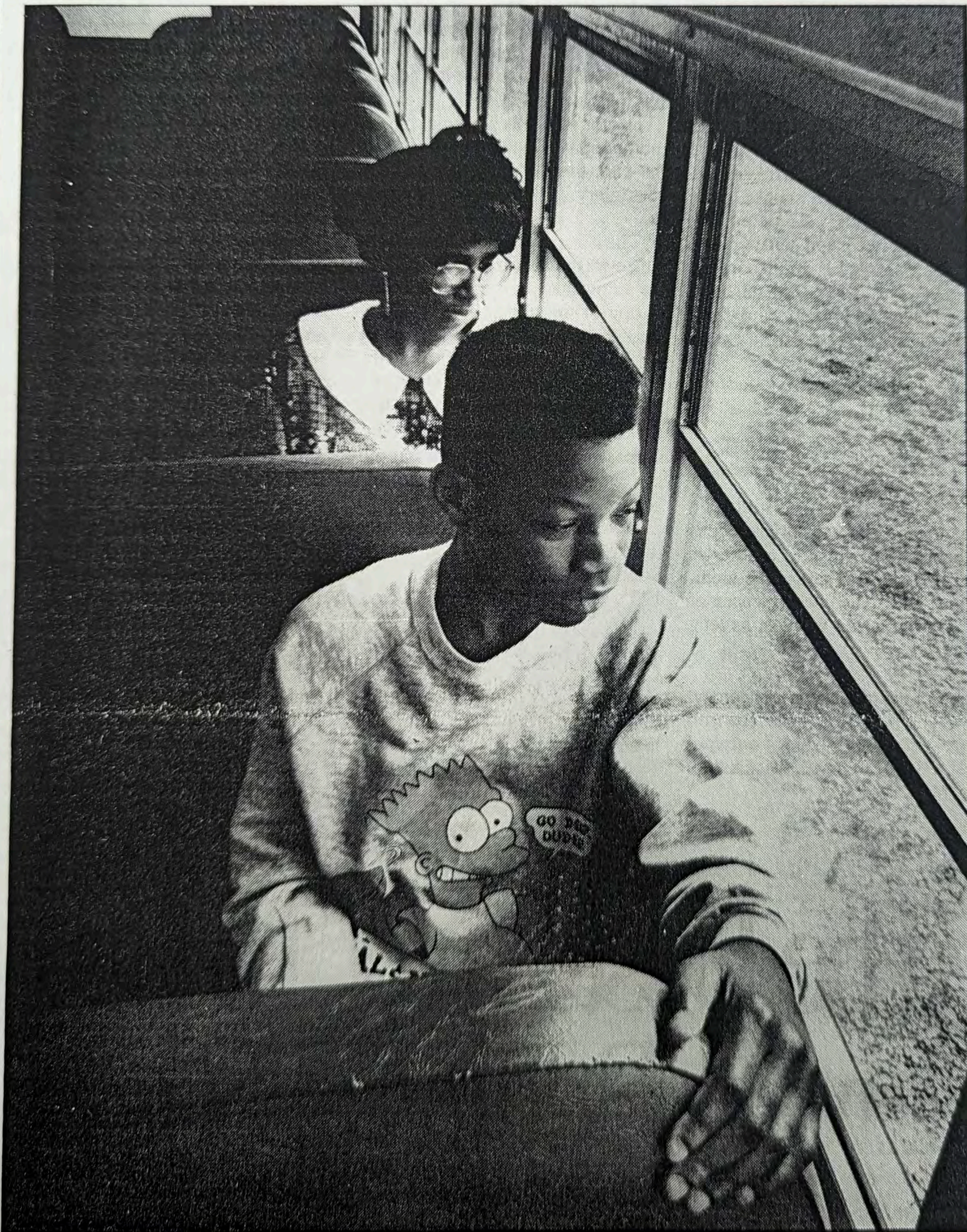
District officials have implemented a program to insure that children who don't pass the mark in basic language arts, math, and reading programs aren't promoted to the next grade.

Whatever measures are made in classroom teaching to improve students' test scores in the Oktibbeha County School District (OCSD), they still won't address the fact that schools don't have the money to fund enough classes to meet state standards — or enough students to attend them.

"You don't have enough students for a bona fide high school, and it's going to do nothing but go downhill, the way the high schools are located now," Baxter told school board members in February.

When he first took the job of

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Barton Spencer/SDN

**The long ride home**—Moor students Roderick McGee and Nitina Lawrence ride for nearly an hour twice each school day on a bus that takes them to and from their homes in Bethel. Should the consolidation of county high schools become reality, the length of time students spend riding buses to school may change.

# Solution

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consultant to the Oktibbeha County Board of Education to help in their search for a solution to the problems facing the district, Baxter took pains to avoid the 'C-word'.

After two months on the job, Baxter all but championed consolidation of the county school's upper high school grades as the only means that the embattled rural district can save itself.

In his final report, Baxter laid out three alternatives — all of which point to consolidation as the only rational means for the district to solve its problems.

By doing nothing, Baxter said the district could avoid "community unrest", but would probably face a takeover of the district by the state Department of Education. Under that scenario state officials would send county students to the nearest accredited district — most likely Starkville's. Such an occurrence would be the first time the conservatorship provision authorized by the 1991 state Legislature 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."

Alternative II would convert the schools at Maben, Sturgis, Alexander, and Moor to K-8 schools and build a new consolidated county high school (9-12 grades) in a centralized location.

Such a move would require the district to have a bond issue — a proposal considered difficult at best.

The district can issue up to \$3,750,000 in bonds, plus \$250,000 in notes, enough to meet the costs of a new school building, estimated at \$3,300,000.

Because the Starkville district includes virtually all of the lands considered appropriate for a centralized high school, the county district would have to negotiate with the Starkville district for a parcel of 16th Section lands, and then plan and build a school.

"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.

Building a consolidated county high school would not create immediate concerns for the Starkville Municipal-Separate School District, and would allow each school to keep an equal facility while retaining K-8 schools.

On the downside, building a consolidated county high school would not help with the the district's diminishing enrollment problem.

All told, Baxter estimates that a consolidated high school would

only stave off the county's problems for seven or eight years. "It would be a good band-aid," he said.

Baxter's third alternative, the one which he clearly favors, would be to have the OCSB approach the city district and request the consolidation of the two districts in a multi-year phase-in plan.

"It but be a lot easier to operate one high school rather than five," Baxter said. "One of the biggest pros of consolidating with Starkville is that the kids would go from a possibility of 23 or even 19 classes to over 60 courses that they might be able to take."

Such an arrangement, according to Baxter, would:

- Project a positive community image.
- Likely enhance the value of real estate county-wide.
- Foster a stronger and more competitive athletic program.
- Allow for the development of a better library.
- Enable easier and less expensive access for all children to attend the Millsaps Vocational Center.

Under the proposal, county elementary and middle grades (K-8) would remain at existing buildings at Alexander, Moor, Maben, and Sturgis.

The downside of the proposal, in addition to the potential unrest caused by the change, is that Starkville High School would have to be enlarged, and that there would be necessary personnel changes, Baxter said. Bringing teachers from both districts to the same pay scale also could create a temporary budget strain, Baxter said.

Another drawback to consolidation are worries that the move will throw the balance between whites and blacks in the city public schools out of balance.

Whether improvements in the county schools will ever become reality is ultimately up to the board members themselves, Baxter said.

"I hope that you all are preparing to take whatever action that it takes to bring about a viable school district as far as the children out in the county are concerned," Baxter told board members in early March. "We're talking about 1,650 plus children out there that are going to school in a district that is on probation, which means that they are hanging on a thread as far as their probation is concerned. Their lives are being affected long-term."

But what is crucial to the success of the city-county high school consolidation is the approval of the city school board, which by law must also sign off on the proposal.

On March 1, county school board members attempted a joint school board meeting with city board members, but city board members failed to show up.

"(Baxter) wanted to see if he couldn't try to get them to work something out, or even start talking," county school board attorney Ben Hilbun said. "But you can't talk to somebody who won't talk."

Hilbun told county school board members that they have two legal avenues to force city board members to the table: Obtain a federal court order mandating consolidation of the two systems, or contract with the city district to take over the county's high school grades.

"Litigation should be a very last resort, because it is against the interests of the children and the taxpayers in both districts," Hilbun said.

Members of the Starkville Municipal-Separate School district still have not held an official discussion on city-county high school consolidation, although board members say they have been assembling information to make a decision.

"We're going to compare the dollar amount that it's going to cost the Starkville school system to implement whatever proposal we decide to go with ... or that the state decides to make," school board president Katherine Jones said. "We're going to look at the options that face us, as far as the financial responsibilities that face us in the Starkville school system."

Jones said city school board members fear that a shortfall of funds may develop from the admission of students from the county system into the city system because of decreased state matching funds.

"The way we look at it, it may save the county money, but it certainly will be an expensive venture for the Starkville school system," Jones said. "We're going to get all of the information together and try to show just what this merger or consolidation will mean for the taxpayers."

expected to act on April 6.

Opponents of the measure would have the option of mounting a petition drive, which, if successful, could force a referendum to be held in a special election if necessary.

"The way to do it is to go through the legal part and take three or four years to get the consolidation accomplished," Baxter said.

If the districts consolidate, the new governing board probably

Nevertheless, the failure of the city school board members to speak publically on the issue has caused tensions to rise among some county school officials.

"It's a matter of common decency — people caring about everybody," said Oktibbeha County Schools Superintendent Walter Conley at the meeting in which Baxter presented his report. "But I'm afraid that common decency is in short supply."

Baxter has said that the key to a successful consolidation effort lies at the feet of the business community.

"I've always felt that the business community must get involved in educational decisions," Baxter told board members in delivering his report. "You people are going to have to effect the business community in order to get change."

In his report, Baxter recommended that county school board leaders solicit a pledge of support for city-county high school consolidation from the Oktibbeha Development Council.

ODC Executive Director John Rucker said his board of directors would likely take up the matter at the group's next meeting in April.

"Lord knows, we need economic development, and economic development is directly related to this problem," Rucker said. "Everybody who is in business in this county is concerned about the issue and recognizes that education is tantamount to development in the county."

In order to merge systems, the each board must first formally vote to consolidate, and then advertise intent in copies of the local newspaper.

The county school board is planning to address the issue at a special March 29 meeting, with recommendations on a final course of action slated before April 6.

The city school board also is

would be composed of five elected board members, one from each county supervisor's district, plus an appointed superintendent, Baxter said.

"If (the two school boards) did that, the state Department of Education, in my estimation, would back off completely from Oktibbeha County," Baxter said. "They would know that Oktibbeha County had a plan, and was moving in a direction to solve their problems."