

Quit denial and face Bibb County schools' biggest challenge

There's an elephant in the room!

By Rick Maier

I knew it was out of whack, but I didn't know how much until I sat there and counted each of the names in the recent Telegraph listing of local high school graduates. Eight hundred and seventy eight seniors graduated from five Bibb County high schools and 460 graduated from 12 area private schools.

Only 66% of seniors graduated from public schools!

It's even worse in some areas - our church bulletin listed 15 of 34 – that's only 44% - who graduated from public schools. The trend will probably gain momentum as a large new generation of private school graduates become parents and decide where to send their children to school.

Any community the size of Macon could expect to have a parochial school or two, plus a prep school, but 66% seems way too high.

I've talked to a number of parents about this situation and found some common reactions. Most have struggled to find an acceptable situation for their own children, but few seem satisfied with the overall Bibb County school situation. Few people offered any suggestions for improving the situation, and most hold little hope that things will get better.

An emotional issue

That's not to say there isn't a lot of emotion surrounding the issue. Bring up the subject of schools and people launch into dramatic anecdotes and sweeping judgements - many with a hidden hint of denial.

There is an elephant in the room and we talk about everything except the elephant.

The 'elephant' issue is this: thousands of parents aren't supporting public schools because they don't meet their expectations, and the public schools can't reach their potential with a third of the base missing.

I believe that the decisions of many companies not to locate in Bibb County, and employees to either turn down opportunities to move here or move away, have been greatly influenced by the real or perceived condition of our schools.

Millions of dollars go to fund private schools instead of creating jobs that generate sales for Bibb County. Our real estate values suffer because of the "hidden tax" of private

school tuition. Our local economy is hurt by a work force with high illiteracy and low graduation rates.

Yes, I'm ambivalent! Why don't my kids go to public school like I did?

Because their school offers excellent instruction, lots of quality attention and dependable surroundings. That's not to say that some public schools don't provide these things, I just have more confidence in their private school. I want the highest odds that they'll go on to college, even if they don't receive the variety of social experiences that public schools would provide.

So what are we going to do about this? The challenges are too complex and the space here too short to take more than a broad swipe at the issues. I just want to hear our local officials recognize that an elephant does indeed exist.

Decisions on where to build or close schools, and how budget dollars are spent, need to be directed at getting more kids back into the system, not just tweaking the existing system. The constituency of the Board of Education should be every school age child in Bibb County regardless of where they go to school.

Let's give more recognition to the principals and their teams at those public schools that are successful, and hold others up to their standards. Let's get tougher on disruptive students, under-performing teachers and unproductive staff. How about returning to neighborhood schools?

Find new ways

We need to find ways to take advantage of the existing private school infrastructure. If we are successful at increasing attendance in the public system, we will need the fantastic people and facilities already in place.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if one of our local leaders stepped up and led a public conversation on how to get more private school students back into public schools? The right leader could bring us together as a community to work out some creative solutions.

It took 30 years for private school attendance to get this high, and it's going to take several years to reverse it, but what could be more important than improving the overall education of our children and pumping up our local economy in the process?

Rick Maier lives in Bibb County

2001 Bibb County Graduates

(Source: May 25, 2001 Telegraph listing)

<u>Public High Schools</u>		<u>Private High Schools</u>	
1. Northeast High School	158	1. Stratford Academy	73
2. Westside High School	280	2. Woodfield Academy	8
3. Southwest High School	179	3. First Presbyterian	54
4. Southeast High School	76	4. Tatnall Sq. Academy	84
5. Central High School	185	5. Mid. Ga. Christian	5
		6. Covenant Academy	11
		7. Ernest Saloom Acad.	17
		8. Gilead Christian Acad.	14
		9. Mount de Sales Acad.	74
		10. Windsor Academy	52
		11. Central Fellowship	62
		12. Home School	6
Total	<u>878</u>	Total	<u>460</u>