

Equity Suit Updates From The Courtroom

DAY 4 - JANUARY 9, 1997

Dr. James Goodhart Superintendent of the Reading School District in Berks County spoke of his urban district and its problems. The community is undergoing vast changes in both community and school population. The Hispanic population is growing to the point that it represents 48% of the students in the schools. Many of the Hispanic folks were drawn to the area for jobs in the agribusiness in Berks County, mushrooms, orchards, poultry among others. Since their circumstances did not allow them to live in the wealthier areas, they moved into Reading City. They inhabit row homes and subsidized housing. The subsidized and federal housing are then taken off the books as taxables. This has resulted in a decline in assessments.

Reading is one of the highest tax effort school districts in the state.

The increase in the number of students in general and poverty students, in general has put a great strain on the school district and its resources. The ability to raise taxes from income goes down as does the value of property, therefore the ability to raise local revenues from real estate taxes. Many middle class residents had gone to the suburban areas. So much so that if the school district had spent the same amount of money per pupil, for a much lower tax effort, as one of the other districts in Berks County it would have increased its resources by 50%.

Many "social safety net" programs for handicapped, as well as adjudicated, alcohol and drug rehab community living arrangements are growing in the city. Many of the programs have folks in it from the rest of the county.

To mitigate the social problems of the district in the areas of bi-lingualism, teen pregnancy, crack babies, behavioral problems, poverty, nutrition, other language problems, the district has developed a myriad of programs for these youngsters. Transiency from school to school and out of the district is enormous, some 1,200 youngsters in some of the middle schools change residence in one year. The district goes after any grants, both public and private that it can get. It does to fund the programs but it provides administrative and ancillary services to all the programs.

Many of the buildings are old, however they are maintained. Most do not have any air conditioning, so the plans to go to all-year schools are a long way off. There are a number of advanced placement programs at the high school, as well as an attempt for all students to have some hands on in technology. There has been a reduction of a commitment to technology because of a lack of funds

Many things have been done to cut costs:

transportation has been contracted

Food service has been put on a cost basis and is not a drain on the budget

No more funding for the Reading museum, all is private funds

Commitment to Reading Area Community College has ended students now pay

Reduction in staff resulting in larger class sizes

The defense asked about how the many programs are funded- mostly through grants. There was a large number of questions about the test scores on the State Assessment test relating to the poverty of some areas and how those areas seemed to have lower scores. There was again questions about how the test ranks similar schools and against state norms.

Computers are in all of the schools. There were questions about the increase in state funding over the years both in gross and in per student. A later redirect elicited a response about the change in the special education funding mechanism that sent money to the districts in 91-92 instead of the I.U.s. And the sending of the state share of the pension contributions to the school districts.

Reading has some affluent areas that are doing well on the testing program.

On redirect Dr. Goodhart was asked if he was satisfied that the lower income youngsters were not doing as well as the rest of the population. He said an emphatic NO.

He is trying to prevent dropouts, partnering with colleges and universities and businesses in the area to help the youngsters. He is doing the best that he can.

Mr. Peter Miller is the Superintendent of one of the smallest districts in the Commonwealth, Salisbury- Elk-Lick in Somerset County. He is the superintendent, the elementary principal, a teacher of special education youngsters, the remedial math and reading teacher, does 1 ½ hours of cafeteria duty and does bus duty. He says that he loves what he is doing. The area is dairy farming, a furniture factory, maple syrup and some mom and pop stores.

There is a great deal of poverty 35-40 % of the youngsters are AFDC folks. He has remedial programs to help the youngsters because of family needs;

preschool

teen pregnancy program

comprehensive family center

The health care, nutrition, and sometimes even shelter care are part of what the school works with. With all of the programs, the greatest need is a physical structure. The district would 45-50 mils (exclusive of state aid) to build a very conservative secondary school. The building is very old and is on many levels, not handicapped accessible, labs are antiquated, materials sub-standard, libraries in both staff and collection are substandard. There are computer programs for all the youngsters, and many of them are in good condition, but many need to be upgraded. There is one Internet hookup in each building. The building has no capacity for wiring, the roof leaks, and many other mechanical and electrical problems. Boilers will be gone before too long.

Even a renovation, over a long time will be costly.

Merger has been reviewed many times over the past 40 years. A recent Pennsylvania Economy League study indicated that although that is possible it would not benefit another district. The community wants its own school but cannot afford a place that is "Warm and Dry."

The counsel for the defense described the area as "Out in the Middle of Nowhere" Mr. Miller answered by saying "We're There." Counsel pointed out that there was no long term debt. That 48% of the classes had computers, that there were distance learning grants that had brought many elements of technology to the community. Answers were elicited about the teacher salaries of an average of 31,000 a year with 16 years of experience. The counsel noted that the strategic plan said that the teachers were wonderful and that they cared for the youngsters and wasn't it true that rural schools had a closeness and individual attention that other school districts did not have. Mr. Miller said that was true of his school district, but did not know if others were the same. Counsel complimented the district on holding the line on teacher salaries. A great deal of attention was paid to the school profiles and the scores of the PSSA and how well some of the youngsters did on the PSSA and how many went on to further education. .

When asked if he was satisfied about the education of the youngsters in the district, he answered "No I am not."

Dr. Woodrow Sites is the Superintendent of the Donegal School District in Lancaster County. It is an agriculture based area with some other plants, such as Armstrong and AMP. Assessments on properties are generally stagnant, about 2.5 % increase over a five year period. This is because many of the businesses are going in for assessment appeals and winning. 10-15% of the community residents have a college degree any most others have a high diploma. There is very little in the way of teen pregnancy, drugs or alcohol problems. 3% are on AFDC and 12-13% are on free and reduced priced lunches.

Dr. Sites explained what tax effort meant (equalized millage) as the product of the division of market value into the total local taxes. He described his administrative and teaching staff. The lack of funds for librarians, counselors nurses, physical facilities for many activities and large class sizes in the elementary schools. He discussed the pressures on the school district to both do things for the youngsters and keep the taxes low. This is a constant battle. However he does understand that in comparison to his neighbors he does not have the facility to do the things that he wants to do for his students. When asked if the school program is adequate for the youngsters, he said no.

Defense asked questions about the choice of spending \$ 7,500 on technology in one year, and spending over \$100,000 on extracurricular activities. He answered on redirect as to why should there be a choice for his district. His students did well on test scores and even in some buildings where there were higher class numbers, the youngsters did very well. Is poverty and excuse for lower test scores. The defense pointed out that Dr. Sites said that this was a bedroom community. And didn't that mean that people wanted to live there. Dr. Sites said yes. It was pointed out that there was a 21% increase in basic subsidy over the past 5 years. Dr. Sites pointed out that his tax effort was above the median for the state.

The question of state subsidy increase as a result of special education money being given directly to the school district and the states share of pension funds going to the district inflated those figures.

Friday's Witnesses will be:

Dr. David Magill, Superintendent of the Lower Merion School District

Ms. Sue Fury- former board member of the Lower Merion School District, and a teacher in the Southeast Delco School District