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A team effort led to major improvements:

McCracken has brought 15 years of success to Giles County Schools

Giles County School Division Superintendent Dr. Robert McCracken was officially hired on April 1, 1989, April Fools' Day. He will officially retire after Thanksgiving on November 30, 2004. He said this is sheer coincidence and hopes no one will try to read anything else into these particular dates.

In response to a question as to how he came to Giles County almost 15 years ago, McCracken says there were two objectives that played a major role in the family's decision. First, both McCracken and his wife, Pat, grew up in the mountainous area of western Pennsylvania. "Second, we had small children and wanted to spend time in a community and let our children grow up in an area similar to what we did in terms of smallness, safety, warmth and relationships. That's what drew us to southwest Virginia," said McCracken.

Before coming to Giles County, McCracken worked in two larger school systems in northern Virginia. He spent 12 years in various classroom and administrative positions in Prince William County before serving four years as an administrator in the Stafford County school division.

After his retirement was announced during the January 20th School Board meeting, McCracken set a tone for his tenure when he said, "I have not done this. We have done this together with the help of you the School Board, the Board of Supervisors and the dedicated employees of Giles County Public Schools."

When asked, McCracken says his biggest challenge has also been what he considers his biggest success "which continues to be my biggest challenge" and that is creating a continuing team effort in supporting the county's education system. "I continue to say that's the way we've got to do business," said McCracken.

The team members include the school administration, the school staff, the school board, the county board of supervisors, community leaders, students and parents.

"Let me give my view of a report card as to where I think we are," said McCracken. "The relationship I've created between the administrative staff and the school principals is about 90%, maybe an A- which is pretty good. The relationship with the teachers has improved dramatically from where I think it was and is probably up to 80% to 85%, a good solid B. The teachers to parents relationship has improved but we're still not there. I hope we're at least to a C level but this particular area will continue to be a challenge."

He said one thing that struck him immediately when touring the Giles schools for the first time was the cleanliness and the condition of the facilities. "The pride that you could see in the way the buildings were taken care of was just a very positive first impression as the board took me around the buildings," said McCracken. "These are the kinds of thing that makes this community - pride and ownership. We've got conflicts and disagreements, but when you get down to it, those are the things that pull Giles County together. That's what I think over the last 15 years has helped us keep together as a team through all the stuff that we've had to deal with."

Some of the "stuff" that has been dealt with involves the ever-changing world of standardized testing. In 1994 there were the Literacy Passport Tests; Standards of Learning (SOLs) came along in 1997; and most recently the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) ratings were released under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal legislation.

Also, beginning in 1994, five years after McCracken's arrival, major school facility renovation projects were initiated at Narrows Elementary Middle School; then Macy McClagherty and a second NEMS project; culminating in the simultaneous projects at both Narrows and Giles high schools. In addition, there had been major projects at Eastern Elementary Middle School costing over \$400,000 in local funds.

McCracken pointed out that even with ongoing renovations at these facilities, along with the changes to standardized testing, student tests scores continued to improve.

As a strong example of the team effort he's talking about, McCracken points to the parents that have served as committee members in the school personnel selection process. "That's a real big institutionalized change that a lot of districts would never consider," said McCracken.

McCracken said he had probably not missed five regular meetings of the Giles County Board of Supervisors in fifteen years. His purpose at these meetings has been to communicate what is going on in the school system as well as any issues that need to be worked on.

He said the two boards get along and have a good working relationship. "There's conversations that go on individually and when we meet formally together we're not in there on personal agendas," said McCracken.

When talking to McCracken about Giles County schools, there seems to be one overriding factor that is always mentioned - community ownership of "their" schools.

While consolidation of Narrows and Giles high schools has been discussed several times over the past 15 years, it has never been considered as a really viable option for the county. A major reason has always been the community opposition to consolidation – neither community is willing to give up its high school. McCracken points out that his research indicates that consolidation would not be cost effective for the county. "When you take one class of 14 students and combine it with another class of 12 students you wind up with a class of 26 students and you've lost a teaching position," said McCracken. "In addition, due to the county's geography, transportation costs would have to be increased."

His example clearly shows that student count does not change with school consolidation but losing teaching positions would reduce state and federal funding while some associated operational costs would probably increase.

The "community ownership" factor will also be a factor as full implementation of the NCLB federal legislation approaches.

"NCLB does not force a parent to move a child from a school that fails to achieve AYP," said McCracken. "It will be the parent's choice and based on my experience in Giles few parents would move a child simply because a school fails to meet AYP in one of 13 areas."

In discussion of standardized testing McCracken said he never thought five years ago that in 2004 he would be considering Virginia's SOLs as the good old days.

He said that there has been major common sense legislative changes in the state's SOL program. In addition, principals and teachers have implemented programs that enable better student preparation for these tests.

"With a lot of effort over the past few years we have been very successful in meeting the 70% standard for SOLs. But the NCLB 100% standard in all areas is unrealistic," said McCracken. "The 100% pass rate in each cell is a great goal to work towards. I'm not aware of any other testing standard that requires a 100% pass rate."

He points out that without common sense legislative changes to the current NCLB legislation, after 2006 any school that fails to meet AYP in any area for two consecutive years will be put under control of the state and the staff would likely be fired. That concerns McCracken because he sees potential problems for school systems similar to Giles County that have a strong sense and spirit of "community ownership" for local schools.

As a result, McCracken said he would get on his soapbox at every opportunity to talk about the need for changes to the NCLB legislation before full implementation in 2014. He did say that other superintendents are starting to share his concern since the AYP results were released last fall.

The county's school administrator internship program is another area that McCracken said has been a very important factor in filling many leadership positions that opened up due to retirements over the last two or three years.

The program was implemented when a review of the staff in the central office as well as several principal positions indicated major losses over a short period of time. Under this program, teachers who show an interest in moving into school administration positions are given an opportunity to gain experience by working some administrative duties after school hours as well as college course work while still teaching in the classroom.

As a result of this program, there was a ready pool of very capable candidates available to fill the positions as they came open. McCracken points to Terry Arbogast as an example of how the program has worked. Arbogast served as NHS assistant principal and principal before moving to the central office staff where he serves as assistant superintendent. He will succeed McCracken as Division Superintendent on December 1, 2004.

Between now and the end of November, McCracken said he will be working to ensure a smooth transition for the new superintendent. After November, he will be available to the school board on a consultant basis if needed. He will also continue to serve as an adjunct professor at Radford University.

McCracken concluded, "It's been an honor and will continue to be so for the next ten months, to serve the board, the schools and the county."