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May 23, 2016

PRESS RELEASE – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

By: Steve J. Smith, Superintendent

Cochran, GA – Thank you for your support of Bleckley County Schools as we bring the 2015-2016 school year to a close. Congratulations to the 22 graduates of Bleckley County Success Academy ("BCSA") and 145 graduates of Bleckley County High School ("BCHS")! The BCHS Class of 2016 had more honor graduates than any class in school history, and we send off all of our graduates with well wishes and high expectations.

We have many new initiatives and changes coming, and this article will shed light on those and the successes of this past school year.

CCRPI

A recent article in the *Macon Telegraph* provided a comparison of state indicators of Middle Georgia school districts. Unfortunately, the article only considered counties adjoining Bibb County to be considered Middle Georgia counties. The data used the relatively new College & Career Readiness Performance Index ("CCRPI") to compare school districts, and we wanted the reporter to know that Bleckley County Schools would have been a top performer in the article if he had only included our scores. I updated his table to include our district CCRPI scores for the past four years. You will note below that Bleckley County Schools had the best score of those presented in three of the past four years, with a second place in the one year where we did not place first. Here is the table:

Middle Georgia School Districts-CCRPI				
	2012	2013	2014	2015
Bibb	57.3	62.9	62.2	60.8
Bleckley	81.8	81.0	81.2	84.6
Crawford	68.2	65.6	63.2	54.4
Houston	80.9	80.2	76.6	78.0
Jones	73.1	77.8	76.2	80.8
Monroe	77.9	82.2	80.8	73.1
Peach	61.5	71.1	62.3	66.2
Twiggs	57.7	55.9	61.4	58.3
STATE	74.1	75.8	72.3	75.5
High Score in BOLD				

Out-of-County Students

We are pleased so many parents in surrounding counties realize that our school system is the best-kept secret in Middle Georgia. With just over ten percent of our enrollment coming from outside Bleckley County, many ask if we should charge tuition. Currently, the amount of state funding we receive for these students more than covers the cost to educate them, and these students have helped create 15 additional teaching jobs in our school system. We also require those students to meet our attendance, behavior, and coursework requirements, and we can withdraw them at any time for failing to meet our expectations.

Transparency

One of our goals has been to increase transparency at all levels of administration. We successfully launched a new site on eBoard, where all Bleckley County Board of Education agendas, minutes, and supporting documents for board meetings are posted. You may access the site here:

<https://eboard.eboardsolutions.com/Bleckley>.

Strategic Waiver School System / Strategic Plan

Every school system in the state was required to choose an organizational structure among: Charter System, Strategic Waiver, and Status Quo. We chose Strategic Waiver, and as part of that process we updated our strategic plan. We are now considered a Strategic Waiver School System ("SWSS"), and we have some much-needed flexibility in how we comply with certain state laws and Georgia State Board of Education Rules.

Calendar

For the first time in school system history, we approved a school calendar for the next two years. We hope this action will allow parents, teachers and leaders to plan better. Both calendars may be found here:

<http://www.bleckley.k12.ga.us/District/Links-Forms>

Technical College

Oconee Fall Line Technical College ("OFTC") will officially receive its SACS Accreditation soon, and this milestone will bode well for our students. Many classes will not only receive high school and OFTC credit through dual-enrollment, but those OFTC credits will transfer to any college in the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia. Even the college-credit classes will not affect a student's lifetime HOPE scholarship limit. This fall we will expand our offerings of dual enrollment classes taught on the BCHS campus, and we will explore the possibility of creating our own College & Career Academy in Cochran.

Technology

We purchased and deployed 241 Google Chromebooks in our schools this year after completing a large-scale upgrade of our wireless capabilities at all schools except Pre-K (coming this year). These laptop computers access instructional materials through the Internet, and they were used extensively in our standardized testing this year. We anticipate adding at least 250 additional Chromebooks in FY17.

Grants

Our schools have received funding under a Striving Readers grant for the past three years, and continuation funding should be approved at next month's State Board of Education meeting. This grant provides the tools to achieve one of our top goals – to see every student reading on grade level by the third grade.

Our 21st Century Community Learning Center resumed operation after a one-year hiatus, and our after-school program continues to help struggling students. We are thankful for our partnership with the Communities in Schools/Family Connection Collaborative, and we appreciate how each of their programs positively impacts our students.

SPLOST

On March 15, the voters overwhelmingly approved to continue our 1¢ Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (“SPLOST”) by a margin of 3-to-1. We appreciate your support, and continuing the SPLOST will insure that the bonds used to finance the new Bleckley County Middle School (“BCMS”) will be paid off in a timely manner without the need for additional property taxes.

Architect

We solicited Requests for Qualifications (“RFQs”) for architectural services, and after a thorough interview process, we named Altman+Barrett Architects (<http://www.altmanbarrettarchitects.com/>) as our new architects. We plan to explore the possibility of expanding our weight room and creating a football locker room at BCHS so the football team can practice there immediately after school without forcing players to drive to the old high school. Having these players rush to practice after school has created safety concerns, and moving practice to BCHS will alleviate those concerns while being much more convenient.

Our Pre-K and primary school classes are held in buildings that are over sixty and forty years old, respectively. We will soon be facing a decision on whether to renovate those facilities or replace them. While the decision cannot be based solely on economics, we cannot ignore the fact that the state will pay a much greater portion of the cost to construct new facilities than renovate existing ones, especially as old as ours. We will be looking to our new architects to guide us in this important decision. Fortunately, we have a few years to work on this project, so we are not under severe time constraints.

Budget

In this edition of the *Cochran Journal* you will find our Tentative Budget for FY17. The final budget will be presented and voted on at the regular meeting of the Bleckley County Board of Education on June 21, 2016. You may notice a change in the format of this budget. In prior years, we had presented only items related to the General Fund. This year, we have added information from our SPLOST fund and our Other Governmental Funds, which include federal programs, nutrition, Pre-K, and grants. We have added this information in order to provide a complete financial picture of our school system.

As we have mentioned in prior articles, most of our operating funds come from the state through the Quality Basic Education Act (“QBE”) appropriations made by the Georgia State Legislature. Unfortunately, QBE funding has fallen short of statutory formulas for the past 14 years. These reductions in QBE funding have been known as Amended Formula Adjustments or Austerity Cuts. Our austerity cuts have totaled in excess of \$15 million since 2003, and despite increases in funding levels over prior years, we still anticipate an austerity cut of over \$250,000 in FY17. The good news is that austerity cuts are declining significantly, and we will experience an increase in funding next school year. We truly appreciate the efforts of our Governor and members of the Legislature to restore public education funding. Many school districts throughout the state still face furloughs and school year calendar reductions. I am pleased to report that Bleckley County Schools has a full student and teacher calendar this year, next year, and the following year!

The Governor initially stated he wanted every district in the state to use any additional funding to provide teacher and staff raises. Once he realized that the reduction in austerity was not sufficient to do that in every district, the discussion moved from requirement to request to suggestion. While we may have surpassed Houston County Schools in CCRPI each of the past four years, we trail them pretty significantly in revenues. We accept that a large property tax base exists in Houston County, but the school district has another distinct advantage. About 30 years ago, eight counties in the state sought to have a local referendum shortly after the state constitution was amended to allow for an additional E-LOST to be used for operations. The ten school districts in those eight counties, including Houston, now have a 1¢ sales tax SPLOST for buildings and

improvements PLUS a 1¢ sales tax E-LOST to pay salaries and operating costs. Of those ten districts, six have the lowest property tax rates in the state.

Each year as superintendent I have petitioned the Governor and Legislature to allow all districts to let their voters decide if they would like to roll back property tax rates (or at least maintain them) by voting on a 1¢ sales tax E-LOST. Although no action has occurred to date, we do believe the Georgia Legislature may take up this matter in the next session. Nevertheless, I hope you understand why Houston County Schools can promise a 3% pay raise for all of its employees, while we are still doing what we can to pay for normal inflation in operating costs.

Despite what might appear to be inequities in funding statewide, I am pleased to report that your school system remains financially sound. We may not have the reserves in place that we desire, and our employees truly deserve a pay raise (which would be their first since 2008), we are thankful for what we do have, and we truly appreciate the property owners in Bleckley County. Your tax dollars help support our school system, because state funding is inadequate to fund our schools. We also appreciate those of you who shop locally, because your purchases generate the sales taxes that fund our SPLOST, and those dollars go to retire the bonds that were used to build BCMS.

Looking Ahead

We have some exciting plans for the next couple of years, and we will continue to do our best to keep you informed. We take our role as stewards of your children and the taxpayers' money very seriously. We celebrate our successes, and we know there is always room for improvement. If you have any suggestions, we sincerely want to hear from you. You may email me at steve.smith@bleckley.k12.ga.us or call my office at 478-934-2821 Ext. 1100 or my cell at 478-230-4198. We appreciate your support, and as I said at graduation: "We are blessed to have been raised in the greatest country on earth and to be part of the best school system in this great state!" We continue to covet your prayers, and if I can ever be of service to you, please feel free to call on me.