

## The Superintendent

JAMES H. VANSCIVER

### Let the Competition Begin

Rural schools are facing a threat that could mean the end of public education in our small towns and countryside: competition among unequally funded schools.

This threat stems from the growing number of influential voices advocating free-market competition among schools. For example, in the December 13, 1987, edition of the *Wilmington Sunday News Journal*, Thomas Toch, former editor and writer for *Education Week*, described the advantages of introducing the magnet schools concept to public education:

The competition among public schools increases quality of education for all. . . . A chorus of influential reformers has called for measures that would put public schools in competition for students. Allow students to be consumers, they have argued, allow them to choose where they get their education rather than assign them to an institution on the basis of where they live, and schools will be compelled by the marketplace, by the threat of dissatisfied "customers" taking their "business" elsewhere, to ensure that the education they offer is a good one.

Unfortunately, Toch and others fail to realize that if we want free enterprise in public education, we must consider an essential component of the free enterprise system: resources. For the magnet school theory to work, we must provide comparable resources for *all* schools. Otherwise, those schools with greater funding will have an unfair advantage; inevitably, they will attract students away from schools with less funding, thereby widening the gap between wealthy and poor schools. Well-to-do suburban schools will flourish at the expense of urban and rural schools.

Competition among schools is fair only if it takes place on a level playing field—with equal funding. But in

many areas, and certainly in Delaware, the playing field is *not* level. In Delaware, school funding is based on the property tax, thus handicapping poorer school districts.

To illustrate: One small rural school system fighting to survive is Lake Forest School District in Kent County, Delaware. There are many reasons why Lake Forest is in such dire financial shape, most of which are beyond the control of school officials. Our district does not have miles of ocean-

front property; we have little industrial growth; we do not have pockets of dense population. For the most part, our district is rural farmland, not prime pickings for real estate brokers.

Decisions made by the Kent County Levy Court, the governing body of our area, have compounded our problems. The land use plan for Kent County earmarks about half of Lake Forest's land as either farmland or conservation land. The farmers place much of their land in the Farmland Assessment Program, making it tax-exempt. Senior citizens and disabled persons have been granted substantial tax relief by the county. The Delaware State Fair and the Harrington Raceway, two major businesses in Lake Forest, were granted tax-exempt status by the county. These decisions have seriously impaired the school system's ability to compete with other schools in Delaware and in surrounding states.

Another obstacle to funding our schools is the fact that the school tax is the only one people can vote on. Unable to cast their ballots for or against federal, state, or county taxes, residents respond negatively to proposed school referendums; consequently, they are nearly impossible to pass.

These conditions are not unique to Lake Forest. They stifle the ability of most of those laboring in rural schools. Still, Toch insists that competition among public schools will increase the quality of education for all.

The free-market approach will work *only* if all public schools have equal resources. Give us equal resources; then let the competition begin! □

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**James H. VanSciver** is Superintendent, Lake Forest School District, Harrington, DE 19952.

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