

Construction underway at state's first inter-county school

August 7, 2013 · The newest experiment in public education is in its early phases for two state counties. That experiment includes the building of a brand new facility that will house the consolidation of two elementary schools, but this experiment is testing more than just new efficiencies. It's testing how well county school systems can work together to support a common goal: providing a quality education.

Leading Creek Elementary School is not your typical consolidation. The school will take students from Troy Elementary in Gilmer County and Alum Bridge Elementary in Lewis County—about 225 total—and put them in one building. A brand new, \$11 million facility that literally straddles the county line.

“The line goes smack dab through the middle of that site so when you put the school there, we'll put it on both sides. So, you can't get any better relationship, you can't get anything better than the school literally sitting in both counties,” Mark Manchin, executive director of the state School Building Authority, told members of the Commission on School District Governance and Administration Tuesday.

The commission, created by the state Board of Education, is tasked with finding ways counties can begin to work together regionally to provide a more efficient, more effective education for its students, which Manchin said is exactly what this new project is doing.

By combining the two schools, which now sit only miles apart, Manchin said first, the project saves the state money by preventing them from having to build two small schools in the same area, but, maybe more importantly, also gets kids out of unsafe buildings. Buildings, Manchin said, were in such poor condition they were literally on the verge of being condemned.

That's what SBA Director of Architectural Services, Scott Raines, believed acted as the catalyst to get these two counties to think differently about how they provide a quality education.

“In my nine years I’ve probably visited more 50 percent of the schools in the entire state and these two buildings were the worst facilities that I’ve ever stepped foot in. So, each county realized, one, we can’t afford to keep these small buildings open and to operate and maintain them with our current budget so we have to do something,” Raines said at the commission meeting.

“They also realized these were the worst schools in the state. They’re falling down, they’re getting condemned, we have to do something there as well. The limited amount of funds that are at the SBA and at the state and local level, we can’t build a \$10 or \$11 million school in each area.”

So, with the idea and the funding in place--\$11 million approved and provided by the SBA in April of last year-- Manchin, along with lead architect Ted Shriver of the firm Williamson Shriver Architects in Charleston, had to come up with a plan of action.

Shriver began by holding community meetings and creating an advisory council made up of both Lewis and Gilmer County’s superintendents, educators and community leaders.

That council had an input on things like the school’s name, colors and motto as well as design ideas. For instance, the council chose to have a full art studio and music room instead of a library, as Shriver explained.

“(The lack of) a library doesn’t mean there’s not going to be books,” Shriver said after the presentation. “There are still going to be books stored on carts. So, instead of the children going to the library, the library is going to the children.”

Leading Creek is also forgoing a media center; something Shriver said is no longer necessary because of the amount of computers in each classroom.

But there are so many more issues that come up when consolidating.

The issue of transportation, Shriver said bus routes will stay almost exactly the same with some children having to travel only two or three extra miles on the bus.

Then there's the issue of personnel.

"Each Troy and Alum Bridge basically has one classroom per grade level. This new Leading Creek will have two classrooms per grade level so essentially if you're a third grade teacher today, you're going to remain a third grade teacher," Shriver said. "The only difference today might be if you're in administration."

But Shriver said that issue will likely work itself out because of retirements before the school is complete.

Through all of the discussions, Manchins said nothing in state code, not a single policy enacted by the State Board of Education, nothing in SBA standard procedures had to be changed. State laws and policies already provide for inter-county schools, making Manchin hopeful similar projects can be done in the future.

"We envision that in the future we'll be working with many, many different counties as we start to blur the lines between school construction and provide the services in an efficient and effective manner that will provide the quality education and the scarce resources that need to go into these buildings," Manchin said.

Leading Creek Elementary will be the first inter-county school to open in West Virginia. Construction is set to be completed in late fall of 2014, moving the children into their new building during Christmas break of that year.