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Lewis and Gilmer counties bridge gap with school to serve both areas

by **Lydia Nuzum**

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- In November, workmen will begin laying the foundation of Leading Creek Elementary School -- a school that will serve as the foundation for the future of West Virginia's educational landscape, one that "blurs the lines" between county school systems.

"If there's a way we can expand our money, make it go further, expand our operations and create more effective operations, it's to look between county lines," said Mark Manchin, executive director of the state's School Building Authority.

Leading Creek, a 35,762-square-foot facility that will enroll as many as 240 students from pre-school through the sixth grade, is the result of a groundbreaking partnership between Lewis County and Gilmer County.

The school, which should be complete in the summer of 2015, will replace the aging Troy Elementary School in Gilmer County and Alum Bridge Elementary School in Lewis County. Those schools were identified by the SBA as two of the state's 15 most "in need" schools, but the cost to build two new schools would be nearly \$20 million and did not meet the cost-effectiveness guidelines that the Authority looks for in its projects, Manchin said.

"The cost of a school for 100 students is not greatly different than the cost of one for 250," he said. "To build a new Alum Bridge would have cost \$9 million. To build a new Troy would have cost \$9 million."

So in November 2011, both counties and the SBA broached the idea of building a new school together.

Manchin said that Leading Creek is unprecedented. West Virginia has several multi-county vocational schools, but Leading Creek is the first of its kind in the state, and the \$10.5 million project has found a location that takes its dual-county partnership to a new level.

"They managed to find a site that sits right on the county line," Manchin said. "There will be a physical marker on the property, and students will actually attend classes in one county and then the other."

The logistics of the Leading Creek project were not simple, but Manchin said the state code that governs every school board had provisions that covered nearly every aspect of the project, from curriculum, to personnel, to funding.

The SBA developed a document that outlines the responsibilities of both counties. Each county contributed to the purchase of 20 acres of land for the school.

A council with both county superintendents, a member from each county's board of education, a representative from each county's Local School Improvement Council and the president of each existing elementary school's PTA will govern Leading Creek.

The council will make recommendations concerning personnel that will be forwarded to the Lewis County board of education. As the designated "receiving" county, Lewis County holds the title to the new school and will gain students from Gilmer County, the "sending" county. Gilmer County will not be able to count the students it sends to Lewis County as its own after three years, but it will not be responsible for the upkeep of the school. Lewis County will eventually become responsible for Leading Creek, but will receive the customary state aid for each student, and the joint advisory board will remain in place.

Joseph Mace, superintendent for Lewis County Schools, said every teacher currently employed at Troy and Alum Bridge will have a job at Leading Creek. Gilmer County teachers who teach at the new school will retain their seniority in Gilmer County and gain seniority in Lewis County, and will continue to accrue both as long as they work there.

"All of the staff at both schools will get priority when hiring for the new school," Mace said. "The only person that we have two of are principals, and we will have to decide which principal, the one from Troy or the one from Alum Bridge, will become the principal there. We'll go through that process when it's the right time to do it."

There is a chance there might be a lesser need for maintenance personnel, but Mace said the project is a solution the Lewis County school board is behind. The board voted unanimously to approve the project.

"I think when those buses go out on the first day, people will see what a beautiful school it's going to be," Mace said. "We had a committee made up of people from Troy and here and we discussed playgrounds, parking configurations - we looked at a lot of things in great detail. The people of Gilmer County are proud of this school, just like our county, because it's the people's school; it's the kids' school."

Unlike in other Lewis County schools, which are pre-K through the fourth grade, Leading Creek will adopt the Gilmer County system and have fifth and six grade classes, as well, Mace said. Students sent to Leading Creek will enter middle school in Lewis County in the seventh grade instead of the fifth unless other arrangements are made, and Gilmer County students at Leading Creek will be given the option to continue attending middle school and high school in Lewis County.

Ronald Blankenship, superintendent for Gilmer County Schools, said Troy Elementary School is nearly 100 years old. Like many older schools, Troy has outlived its expectations, and Blankenship said the partnership was something he and Mace had discussed as a positive one for both counties.

"We knew that by submitting each school individually, we weren't going to get them funded -- they just don't meet the economies of scale," Blankenship said. "We actually decided almost three years ago to go in together on this project."

Blankenship became the superintendent of Gilmer County Schools three years ago, after the county school system was taken over by the state board of education. The WVBOE entered into the Leading Creek agreement on Gilmer's behalf, but Blankenship said he believes other counties will see the advantage of inter-county schools.

"I'm optimistic that this won't be the first and last; there will undoubtedly be other opportunities for it," he said.

Manchin said he believes the funding shift for the SBA will be toward more inter-county schools in the future. He recently approached the Putnam and Mason County school boards with a similar proposal to join to elementary schools near the county line.

Leon Elementary has roughly 150 students and is seven miles from the Putnam County line, and Buffalo Elementary has about 250 students and is three miles from Mason County. Manchin estimates the cost of building two new schools would be around \$25 million; the potential joint school would cost an estimated \$13 million.

The Putnam County BOE voted earlier this month to contract architectural services to evaluate the project. Chuck Hatfield, superintendent of Putnam County Schools, said he has invited the Mason County board to attend the next Putnam board meeting, which will be held Monday in Winfield.

"Our board is certainly interested in exploring it," Hatfield said. "It's still a possibility, but it's very early in the process."

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