

One-fourth of East students live in Gaston

BY ANDIE L. BRYMER
Staff Writer

The merger between Kings Mountain District, Shelby City and Cleveland County schools is hitting some East Elementary students and parents especially hard.

Over a quarter of the school's population lives in Gaston County. According to the state school board, those students would be reassigned to schools in Bessemer City. However, there has already been discussion of letting the students remain at East.

Parent reaction was strong and sometimes emotional at East Tuesday afternoon.

"I don't know what we're going to do. I'll put her in private school before she goes to Bessemer City," said parent Brandy Locklair.

The Locklair family recently purchased a home on Linwood Road

which is both inside the Gaston County line and Kings Mountain city limits.

Convenience is not the only factor driving Locklair's concern. Her kindergartner daughter has heart problems which required surgery. Locklair feels her daughter is safer with her being minutes from the school.

Parent Tammy Westmoreland says she has "done nothing but cry" since the decision was announced Monday. Her son Cody, a second grader, is above grade level in both English and math. She fears the move to a Bessemer City school could jeopardize his success.

"Tell me that can't hurt a child's education, pulling him out of his school," Westmoreland said.

She feels the merger is not about children's best interest but instead money and politics.

While the Westmorelands live four minutes from the East campus, they are not Kings Mountain residents. For the past three years they have paid \$150 annually to allow Cody to attend East.

The other two options were Chapel Grove, a 27 minute drive, or Sadler, an 18 minute drive.

Westmoreland is afraid to send her son to an unfamiliar school. She says she doesn't know the teachers and fears there will be drug and discipline problems in a Gaston County school.

Westmoreland is also afraid of what will happen to East under a merged board. She praises principal Jerry Hoyle but doubts the new board will allow him the funding and flexibility to continue his positive reinforcement program.

Parent Jeannette Hardee has paid the extra money to send both her children to Kings Mountain

District Schools from the beginning of their school days. One child is in third grade at East and another attends Kings Mountain Middle School.

"The school system speaks for itself," Hardee said. "The whole small town feel."

The test scores and the Kings Mountain personnel also impressed Hardee.

She and other parents are talking about options. Hardee began researching charter schools last night. She and other parents may approach Kings Mountain school officials about partnering with them to start a school.

Charter schools are public and funded by the state but are not under the authority of local school boards. There is no fee to attend a charter school.

Other parents are considering home schooling, Hardee said. One

parent also is looking at private schools though Hardee says this is not an option for most families due to the expense.

Danielle and Benjamin Braswell say they like the small school atmosphere at East where their daughter Molly attends kindergarten. The Braswells live less than a mile from East but may have to send Molly to the nearest Gaston County school, a seven mile drive.

Kings Mountain District Schools officials do not have any answers for parents. They do not know if Gaston County Schools will release the students who now attend Kings Mountain schools nor do they know if the new merged system will accept these students.

George Litton, chair of the new board, indicated he is open to accepting the students but said he cannot speak for the board as a whole.

KM Fire Department gets \$47,250 grant

BY ANDIE L. BRYMER
Staff Writer

Thanks to a Federal Emergency Management Agency grant and some help from the city, the Kings Mountain Fire Department will update its communications equipment.

The department will received \$47,250 from FEMA and a 10 percent match, \$5,250, from the City of Kings Mountain.

The grant will be used to buy new pagers for all firefighters and new mobile radios for fire trucks.

It will also enable the fire department to convert its radios to a trunked system if Cleveland County goes to this. Because fire departments across the county give mutual aid, they must all use the same system. Trunked radios allow firefighters to talk to one another without interfering with other emergency agency's radio traffic.

The grant money will pay for a radio repeater which extends the range of walkie talkies. This is particularly helpful when volunteer firefighters arrive at a fire scene before the fire trucks. Without a repeater, the fire department often cannot hear on-scene reports from them.

The city had budgeted for a repeater before the grant came through.

The grant will also improve fire-

fighter safety with a new personnel tracking system. This system will allow the department to know which firefighters are inside a burning structure and how long each has been inside.

Currently, the department uses a dog tag system which does not track time inside a structure.

The device each firefighter wears will contain medical information. In the event a firefighter is injured, this information can be read at the emergency room.

"It's a better way of insuring firefighter safety," said Joey Davis, fire inspector.

Kings Mountain is among four Cleveland departments to receive grant money this year. The others are Waco, Lawndale and Shanghai.

"We're very fortunate," Davis said. The department has 12 months beginning Feb. 1 to spend the money.

Fire Chief Frank Burns said his department is excited about the grant.

"We're able to upgrade all our equipment all at one time. We don't have to piecemeal it like we did before," Burns said.

FEMA has given over \$40 million to help local fire departments purchase equipment, fund firefighter health and safety programs, enhance emergency medical services and programs and conduct fire prevention and safety programs.

GOOD-BYE

From 1A

our schools. I am so proud we didn't have the problems some of the larger systems have. It's been like a family - not like a business.

"I want to thank the community for their support of the schools as we fought a difficult fight," she said.

As a new era begins, Miller urged residents of the Kings Mountain area to "continue to let your voices be heard."

Jerry Blanton called the merger battle "a long fight. We may have lost the battle but we haven't lost the war. It's not over," he said.

"The merger hasn't been about Kings Mountain, Shelby or Cleveland County," he said. "It's about our kids. We've accomplished a lot. Our scores have risen because everyone in the system believes that the battle is for the kids and the battle is still raging. We can be a positive part of the change or a negative part, but we'll be a part of the change."

Vice-chair Stella Putnam, like Miller, couldn't hide the pain and gave a tearful good-bye.

"It has been a blessing to work with the administration, teachers and staff," she said. "You won't find finer people anywhere. My prayers will continue to be for the children of our school system."

Mike Smith said it had been an

"honor to serve" on the board and thanked everyone that voted for him. He was the only Gaston County resident ever elected to serve on the board. Previously, Trace Barnette had been appointed to fill the unexpired term of Melony Bolin, who resigned for health reasons.

"Looking back, I feel like we have done all we can to fight the merger," Smith said. "I am proud of this school system. It did not turn out the way we wanted it to turn out. The Department of Justice decision was a poor decision. I do not think they took into consideration my voting rights or the rights to serve the community."

Terry McClain also thanked the citizens of Kings Mountain and Grover that elected him to an outside city seat on the board. "They entrusted us to do the right thing," he said. "It was all about the kids."

McClain mentioned that there were "issues that divided the community," during his time on the board, "but when it came down to it education in Kings Mountain is as good as it gets anywhere in the state. Our administration was also one of the best in the state. It starts at the top and works its way down to everyone else."

"When I came on the board three years ago I observed a steady growth in our academics," he added. "It was a pleasure and joy to hear the good reports from our schools. We

have a very good supporting group of parents. We don't always see eye-to-eye but the parents have played a key role in the success of the school system.

"Now, we may have to do things differently. I just wish we could give the teachers all the money they deserve for what they do. We entrusted them with our future."

"We have to move forward and try to make the process an easy one. I hope and pray the new board will do what's best for all children. It's not about Kings Mountain, Shelby and Cleveland County. It's all about the children."

Dr. Allen told the board he was "proud of you and the opportunity we've had to work together. The fight was the same from day one. The issue was the livelihood of East Kings Mountain and what happens to those children."

"I hope the new board and the Gaston County School Board will get together and work out a solution if your effort with the State School Board doesn't materialize."

"Families have settled in East Kings Mountain so their children could go to school there," he added. "It is traumatic for them. I feel very badly for them if a solution can't be developed. It's a tragedy for them."

"For other children, this (merger) will be no different," he said. "We're going to have school every day for those children."

INTERIM

From 1A

tations for those students.

In an emotional speech, Jo Boggs expressed similar feelings. She compared Monday when she found out the merger had been approved to the night her father died.

"We no longer existed," she said.

But then she said compared Tuesday morning and the new board to the birth of her daughter.

She expressed gratitude to have Gene Moore lead the new school system. Moore led a similar merged board in Stanly County.

Steve Curtis pledged to work hard for every child, to treat all fairly and equally.

Mary Evans said this day had been "a long time coming." She encouraged everyone to make the new Cleveland County Schools the best in the nation.

Both Litton and Greene said members of the three former boards who no longer serve "by no fault of their own" need to be recognized for their service and their talents should be used.

"We need to find ways to still draw on their expertise," Greene said.

Monday Litton said there had been some question if Hooker would serve on the board because he lost his

Shelby City Schools board seat to Anganette H.

Homsley in November. However, Hooker will serve on the new board because he was appointed by name, Litton said.

Moore thanked the board for the opportunity to be part of the new school system. He said compromise would be important and that all three school systems brought "outstanding factors to the table."

"We've got to roll up our sleeves, come together and try to do the best for the children," Moore said.

The original merger plan contained an election schedule for the appointed board members. Their elections would have been staggered. That schedule expired during Kings Mountain District School's fight against merger.

Either the new board or the state school board will draw up an election schedule, county attorney Robert Yelton said Monday. That schedule will be subject to Department of Justice approval.

The board will meet again Wednesday, Jan. 21 at 4 p.m. to appoint the seat left vacant by Dr. Larry Allen. His appointment as superintendent of Kings Mountain District Schools made him ineligible to serve on the merged board.

LINES

From 1A

his motion. "It's like a good suit. We've got a perfect fit. You start adding and subtracting and you lose quality."

Smith said after the meeting that it would seem the State School Board would not want to lose a top 25 school. East stands to lose approximately 25 percent of its student body if students are sent to Bessemer City and Chapel Grove schools, as indicated earlier by the Gaston County School Board.

Smith is calling on City Council, the Cleveland County Commissioners, local legislators and individuals to make their wishes

known to state officials.

"If you're a top 25 school in the state you do what you can to protect that school in your community," Smith said. "If they start taking kids out it's going to destroy the integrity of this school. There's no reason the State School Board can't redraw the lines."

Although the KM School Board no longer exists, Smith said he will do all he can to keep the Gaston students in Cleveland County Schools. He said anyone interested in helping may call him at 739-4260.

"If enough people would sign petitions or write letters or make calls, or whatever, we can accomplish this," he said. "We have from now

KING

From 1A

organizers shifted the focus, asking students to reflect on the speech itself. They also hoped for more diversity in contest entrants.

Students competed at the intermediate, middle and high school level for the chance to participate

Monday night. Winners will be selected from each age group and will each receive \$100 and a plaque.

Contest guidelines called for a 400-word or less essay.

The event will be held at Barnes Auditorium, Kings Mountain High School. It lasts from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. It is free and open to the public.

until the end of the year to get something done. I'm sure they won't do anything to kids right now, but I'm sure they will when school starts next year."

Smith has already approached Mary Accor, chairman of the Cleveland County Commissioners, to make a similar request to the State School Board, and said he will soon approach City Council about the matter.

"I would think they would support it," he said. "If you've got a top 25 school in the state you do what you can to protect that school in your community."

Smith urges citizens to attend meetings of city council and county commissioners and school boards in Cleveland County and Gaston County and voice their opinion.

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