

New high school exists only online

By [Ryan Quinn](#)

Sunday, June 19, 2011

A new South Carolina high school will open its doors on Aug. 22, but only in a rhetorical sense.

That's because SC Whitmore School doesn't have doors or windows or any part of a building, other than its two-person office in Chapin. The public charter high school is completely online, and it's enrolling now.

Whitmore's curriculum is provided through CompuHigh, which is regionally accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Whitmore will be the fifth virtual high school in the state, but Principal Ellen Ray said it is unique because its classes are mastery-based and year-round instead of semester-based.

Students must make an A or B in a lesson before moving on and can revise their work as many times as needed. Multiple revisions, however, detract from the end grade for the course.

Students can take up to eight courses a year and space out their work at their discretion, provided they don't take a break for three consecutive days. Otherwise, they'll get in trouble for virtual truancy. Parents are sent a weekly report on their children's progress.

Ray said the school appeals to the full spectrum of students, from those ahead of their peers who want to complete high school faster to those who are being left behind in traditional classes.

“In a traditional school, 25 to 30 students are all moved through the course at the same pace,” Ray said. “So the student who failed the first chapter test in Algebra 1 is faced with, most likely, ultimate failure of the course because the class is moving on to Chapter 2. That student is in an ideal position to enroll into SC Whitmore School because we can enroll students any time of year and that student can begin Lesson 1 of Algebra 1 and move through the course at his or her own pace.”

Whitmore will also offer credit recovery and summer school for non-enrolled students next summer. The school expects 200-250 students in its first year and has hired six teachers and several guidance counselors who will interact with students from their homes. Ray said the school would decide whether to hire more teachers as the year progresses.

Ray says she personally knows the benefits of virtual schooling. Her daughter, Alina Ray, now 18, was failing her freshman year at a traditional high school, so she dropped out and began taking CompuHigh courses. She graduated two years early with honors and is now attending an online college.

Even if virtual schools are accredited, students should still consider their post-graduation goals before applying to one. The military does not accept more than 10 percent of recruits with nontraditional high school diplomas. Many colleges accept degrees from virtual high schools only if they are regionally accredited by organizations such as SACS, rather than nationally accredited.

Internet sales tax hot issue

BY CHRIS TOMLINSON

Associated Press

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AUSTIN, Texas — State governments across the country are laying off teachers, closing public libraries and parks, and reducing health care services, but there is one place they could get \$23 billion if they could only agree how to do it: Internet retailers such as Amazon.com.

Gregg Burger, general manager of Precision Camera, an independent retailer in Austin, Texas, has lobbied for legislation that would require out-of-state Internet retailers to collect Texas sales tax. He says this would create a level playing field for local retailers

That's enough to pay for the salaries of more than 46,000 teachers, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In California, the amount of uncollected taxes from Amazon sales alone is roughly the same amount cut from child welfare services in the current state budget.

But collecting those taxes from major online retailers is difficult.

Internet retailers are required to collect sales tax only when they sell to customers living in a state where they have a physical presence, such as a store or office. When consumers order from out-of-state retailers, they are required under state law to pay the tax. But it's difficult to enforce and rarely happens.

“The problem is that some out-of-state e-retailers openly flaunt the law, arguing that it doesn't apply to them,” said Texas state Democratic Rep. Elliot Naishtat, who has offered a bill to require

more Internet sellers to collect Texas sales tax. “It’s about potentially generating hundreds of millions of dollars for our state.”

To avoid having to collect sales tax, Amazon threatened to close its warehouse in Texas, cut off marketing affiliates in Illinois and North Carolina and sued New York claiming the law there is unconstitutional.

Earlier this month, Amazon severed ties with website affiliates in Connecticut after the governor signed into law a state tax on online purchases that is expected to raise \$9.4 million.

Traditional retailers have lobbied for the Main Street Fairness Act, which was reintroduced in Congress this spring by Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Illinois. The act would be “a helping hand to state and local governments at a time that they need it the most,” he said.

While few think the Republican-controlled House of Representatives will pass a bill that critics have called “a tax on the Internet,” the sudden flurry of action in state legislatures and lobbying by big retailers could provide a boost to efforts to pass such a law, even among conservatives.

Those lawmakers find themselves in a bind between opposing taxes and supporting traditional businesses.

“Republicans and Democrats alike recognize that there is an inequity here,” said Danny Diaz, a spokesman for the Alliance for Main Street Fairness.

Board to give final OK on budget

The Aiken County Board of Education will give final approval to its 2011-12 budget at a district office meeting Tuesday at 7 p.m., including decisions on two tax hikes related to general operations and facility needs.

Those proposed actions have generated a lot of interest, both pro and con from taxpayers.

During a budget hearing June 7, the board members tentatively agreed to raise the operations millage by 3.8 mills. That would raise about \$1.2 million and would help fund a number of new initiatives, including an alternative education program expansion and a modest raise for teachers and support personnel.

However, board members say they could have the option of reducing or eliminating the operations budget increase, based on additional state allocations that could be forthcoming.

The board also gave preliminary approval two weeks ago to a 12.8-mill increase for debt service. Currently, the county district gets about \$14.5 million for capital projects through annual bond issues. The millage hike would allow the district to get \$17.5 million each year by 2015-16.

Homeowners would pay \$36 per \$100,000 value for the debt service millage increase and would have no tax obligation for their homes. Business owners would pay \$76 per \$100,000 and a total of \$112.80 per \$100,000 if they also own a residence.

At a budget hearing June 7, most of the speakers objected to the proposed tax increases, arguing that business people can't afford them in a difficult economy.

However, board member Keith Liner said he was glad to hear some speakers support the board's actions.

"We have to be good stewards of taxpayer money," he said. "I don't see there being a lot of overspending or excess or frills. Teachers and nonteachers have weathered the storm with furloughs and no raises. It's nice to have the flexibility to give them a little increase. It's not extravagant."

Claude O'Donovan, the Aiken County Republican Party vice chairman, said in a letter to the editor on Sunday that businesses cannot afford tax hikes - not when businesses have seen a 500 percent increase in unemployment taxes. Teachers shouldn't get a raise either, he said.

"Teachers may deserve a raise and probably need it, but they need to tighten their belts and shoulder these hard times along with the rest of us," O'Donovan

said.

Ann Willbrand, the county's Democratic Party second vice chair, supports what she calls a modest tax increase, especially for facility improvements. Taxpayers have an obligation, she wrote in her own letter to the editor, to provide quality learning environments.

" ... Too many of our schools are overcrowded and outdated," Willbrand said. "If we are going to compete for new jobs, we have to show that we care about our schools."

Elected last November, new board member Dwight Smith is participating in his first budget process. It's essential, he said, that schools like Gloverville Elementary - where Smith served as principal for about a decade - get the improvements they need.

"It's not only my school," said Smith. "Even with the increase (in funds), we are still patchworking. Yes, you can teach in a room with a thatched roof, but with a modern school, you can do more to motivate students and address different learning models."

The School Board simply has no other options to get additional funds for its facilities, said board member Levi Green.

"We have to try to keep up with repairs and facility needs," he said. "This is the hand we've been dealt, and we can't keep saying the timing wasn't right."

In recent years, the public has demanded better academic performance, said board Vice Chairman Ray Fleming. That's what the board members and district administrators are trying to provide, he said, through an expansion of alternative education programming.

"We're working on zeroing in on students that have greater needs and to improve the graduation rate," said Fleming. "But it's not just kids' behavior problems in alternative school. Many have different learning styles, and we want them to learn in the best manner possible."

In other letter to the editor Sunday, the Rev. Jerry Tindall cited the lack of concern that board member have for taxpayers looking at possible layoffs.

"It's easy to play with other people's money as long as it doesn't affect you," he said. " ... If this would have happened at a more stable time in the economy, it would not be as onerous."

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Brochu not letting criticism get to her

Richland 2 chief instead focuses on engaging students

By CAROLYN CLICK
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R2D2 Design Institute This week, two senior associates with the Schlechty Center will lead the first R2D2 Design Institute, aimed at making schools less bureaucratic and more engagement-centered. According to Richland 2, the focus of the institute is to develop an understanding of transformation and how that transformation requires redefining roles, rules and relationships. More than 70 classroom teachers, lead teachers and assistant principals will be participating. It is free to the public. Where: Village at Sandhills Community Room, 481 -2 Town Center Place When: 8:30 a.m. Monday through Friday For more information: www.richland2.org The institute will conclude Aug. 1 -2 at Spring Valley Baptist Church, 91 Polo Road.

After almost a year on the job, Richland 2 superintendent Katie Brochu said she feels at home, even as she faces some of the toughest public criticism of her tenure.

Rumors have swirled that the former Georgia administrator wants to eliminate the district's signature magnet programs, that she wants to purge higher-paid veteran teachers, and that she is more focused on budgets than academics.

Brochu, who assumed leadership of the Midlands' largest school district July 1 during one of the state's worst economic downturns, said the static is the normal fallout that comes with change and a change of command.

"I will just say this, the quality of folks is abundant, is very rich, in the district so it is hard not to feel at home," Brochu said last week. "I feel I have been incredibly welcomed."

If a Facebook page with the blistering moniker of “We don’t want a new sheriff in town!” stings, Brochu isn’t letting on.

The page, posted by a Richland Northeast High student and some parents, was created after Richland 2 board chairman Stephanie Burgess told a group of parents they must prepare for the fact that “there’s a new sheriff in town.”

That page has served as a forum for a group of parents who fear Brochu is moving too fast to change an award-winning district that many say already is working quite well.

The criticism comes on the heels of an efficiency and effectiveness study Brochu commissioned this year. Among other things, the study recommends laying off roughly 140 assistant principals and other staff and streamlining some schools.

Some parents fear Brochu wants to diminish some of the selective academic programs aimed at high-achieving students to focus more on disengaged students.

Brochu said that is not her intention.

Others parents, such as Gina Janvrin, who has children at three district schools, are alarmed that the study says “it’s a bad thing that all our schools are different.” But that is what has kept her and many other families in the northeast Richland County district, where a number of high-end subdivisions have been built in the rapidly growing area in the past 10 to 15 years.

The school board is publicly united behind Brochu, though member Melinda Anderson cheered some parents last week, noting the board will move slowly on study recommendations by the Tampa-based Evergreen

Solutions.

“It is going to be a collaborative effort to make this thing work,” Anderson said. “We are not going to rush through anything.

“It is my hope that people will back up and take a deep breath and understand the old cliché ‘Don’t believe everything you hear.’”

‘Look in the windshield’

Board member Bill Flemming said Brochu, 51, “is doing what we asked her to.”

He said Brochu is being blamed for some changes, specifically the ongoing departures of working retirees that were in the works before her arrival.

Those retirees, working under annual letters of agreement, have been departing in large numbers over the past two years. The Evergreen study, released in April, recommends phasing out about 145 such teachers over the next five years. Brochu and Burgess have said that will create a smoother path for younger teachers to gain experience.

“Katie’s hand on this is not great at this point,” he said.

Flemming acknowledged there are concerns with the study’s recommendations, including its finding that schools in the 25,000-student district are too individually distinctive.

He said he does not intend to back all of the study’s recommendations.

But he added, “I think as far as getting the budget right, getting people in tune to what she wants to do, getting the design team to look at the district as a whole, it’s very positive. It has been only one year and I think, at this point, I am pleased at the progress we’ve made, even though I’m disappointed about the things that people were upset about.”

Still, two former Richland 2 school superintendents — Brochu’s immediate predecessor Steve Hefner, now the Lexington-Richland 5 chief, and his predecessor John Hudgens, who retired in 1994 — took the unusual step of writing a letter to the school board in the wake of the Evergreen study.

They emphasized the importance of retaining the choice and magnet programs that have distinguished the district for many years and made it one of the top in the state.

The magnet programs — from Discovery at Spring Valley High to Horizon and the nascent International Baccalaureate program at Richland Northeast — have enabled the district to hold on to middle- and upper-middle-class parents, white and black, whose children are tracked into college-bound programs.

Currently, Richland 2 is about 30 percent white and 70 percent black, Asian or Hispanic. About 40-44 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunches. (In Richland School District 1, that number is 74 percent.)

Brochu said she has no intention of disbanding magnet programs or developing “cookie cutter” schools, as her critics have suggested. She said she has even pondered ways to expand such programs to encourage more students to participate.

But there is no question she intends to put her stamp on the district by focusing on the disengaged student, technology and the future.

“We’ve been really on a journey to take a good look at who we have been

as a district, what our past has been, and get real clear about where we are presently as we try to put the lens on and look in the windshield rather than the rear view mirror and look very forward,” she said.

Students as ‘customers’

Brochu has assembled an 85-member design team that has been examining district operations, from academics to administration and maintenance, one component of the RSD2 Design Institute, which is aimed at examining all aspects of the district’s operations.

“This is lots of work, developing a shared understanding of the need for change,” she said. “Why would we need to change a really, really great district?”

“Simply put, today we are in 2011. The students that are going to be enrolled in kindergarten in August this year, if there is something called retirement in their future, the earliest period of time that would happen would be 2072,” Brochu said.

“One thing that is very clear to the staff, we have to be about 21st century skills,” she said. “Understanding clearly that students have to be about collaboration, problem solving, critical thinking, communication, innovation and, certainly, without a doubt, finding all that within their passion. The district has to be responsive to the needs of students.”

Brochu particularly is enamored of the education philosophy of Phillip Schlechty, an education consultant and author of a number of books, including “Working on the Work.” Richland 2 is spending just over \$300,000 on Schlechty professional development training this year.

Schlechty, through his nonprofit Schlechty Center, based in Louisville, Ky., focuses on partnering with teachers and administrators to develop curriculum that engages students and ignites a passion for learning.

“In the past, our professional development has really been focused more on providing the teacher with tools. It’s been more of helping the teacher,” said Sue Mellette, the district’s chief academic officer. “Now what we are doing is looking at it from the student’s perspective.”

Making the student the “customer” in this service-oriented age might seem to be self-evident.

But Brochu is hoping the Schlechty model will introduce innovations that will inspire teachers and students, and even lower the numbers at Blythewood Academy, which educates students who have been expelled from other district schools.

“You have to focus on your students, and you have to constantly refine the kind of things you are asking them to do,” Brochu said. “In this world, three years ago, we weren’t teaching kids how to use an iPad because they didn’t exist. The thing is, how do we imbed that in the learning and how does that enhance the learning?”

Although she said she has no intention of throwing out the library books, she believes in employing the latest technology, from laptop computers to flip cameras and Kindle book readers to engage students.

“When you think about that, that’s a pretty dramatic shift ... in just technology, for example,” she said.

Brochu articulates her vision as one that would “address the student as customer, customize the experience for students and create an experience where students learn not just in a compliant way but in a profound way so that what they learn they take with themselves forever.”

And while she acknowledges the unease in the district, she also contends there is excitement for the new approach.

“I do think overall that we have folks who are excited about the future, they are excited about the directional system that focuses on students, but I think you will always have some fear – fear of the unknown, fear of the challenge, fear of the change.”

Camille Stack, a former Teacher of the Year at Windsor Elementary School, said she has been pleased by the results of the new training model.

“What I see changing is the focus shifting from how teachers perform to become more student-focused and student-driven,” she said. “This is going to give us a common language because we are all learning and doing the same things. That is very powerful because when students go from grade level to grade level, they hear the same things from teachers. It is a unifying program for our district, a very global and intense move for our district.”

But there are others who complain a student focus can devolve into simplistic exercises.

At Ridge View High, teachers who attended one of the “Working on the Work” seminars returned to provide colleagues with one example of student engagement, using the Wii Nintendo game system.

During a faculty meeting, three teachers of different ages were selected to compete in a Wii hula hoop game.

As teachers swiveled their hips to the music, there was plenty of silly whooping, said one educator who observed the exercise and noted the prospect of introducing that exercise in a room full of teenagers suggested only chaos.

Gary Brock, a school board member in Brochu’s former district in Whitfield County, Ga., said his district is still involved in the Schlechty programs and

finds them effective.

He credits Brochu with taking the graduation rate out of the basement to where it is now, around 84 percent.

“Most of the majority of people love ‘Working on the Work,’” he said.

Brochu has met with some of the disgruntled parents and is now moving ahead to add parent representatives to committees considering the Evergreen recommendations.

But Gina Janvrin’s 16-year-old daughter Kitty believes the superintendent needs to sit down and tune in to those student “customers” she speaks so ardently about.

Kitty, a rising 11th-grader at Richland Northeast High, is enrolled in two magnet programs. She said she gets upset when she hears that some of her favorite veteran teachers will not return after next year.

“I think she really needs to listen to the students,” she said. “They haven’t asked the students what we want.”

If proposal holds, schools may see additional \$2M

If a S.C. legislative budget conference committee deal holds up, school districts would get an additional \$56 million to boost their per-pupil allocations, including more than \$2 million for the Aiken County School District.

The additional statewide funding is roughly half of the \$105 million that the S.C. Senate had inserted into its budget initially after the Board of Economic Advisors projected another \$210 million in new revenue.

The conference committee agreed to provide \$146 million for paying back some of the debt incurred when the state had to borrow from the federal government to maintain unemployment checks. That move will save businesses from unemployment tax collections by that amount.

On Tuesday, the School Board will vote on a 3.8-mill tax hike for operations.

"We'll have to take (the new funds) into consideration when we talk about the budget, weighing all the options before we take a vote," said board member Keith Liner. "I'm anxious to hear how the others feel too about doing the millage increase or not, based on that information. It would be nice to know if it's a done deal before we make a decision on Tuesday."

That's not likely, however. Earlier this week, Gov. Nikki Haley said she would veto any additional funding for education.

As The Associated Press reported, the current per-pupil school allocation is \$1,617 - more than \$1,100 less than the state's own funding formula. Initial budget efforts improved the allocation to \$1,788. The \$105 million in extra appropriations would have moved it to \$1,959; the \$56 million agreed upon by the committee will provide \$1,880 per student.

S.C. Rep. Bill Taylor, R-Aiken, said he's happy with the conference committee's decision.

"I'm pleased with where we are," he said. "We are paying down the debt and are funding education. It's a considerable step in the right direction for public education. It's difficult to predict what will happen, but there's a great deal of enthusiasm and support for the plan that has been produced."

S.C. Rep. Roland Smith, R-Warrentonville, said the debt payback will prevent the state from being penalized by the federal government. The \$1,880 pupil allocation "is a pretty good increase," he said. "I hope the School Board will take that into consideration and say, 'Hey, we don't have to raise the operations millage.'"

Sens. Shane Massey, R-Edgefield, and Greg Ryberg, R-Aiken, continue to oppose using any of the new funds for education.

"The national economy is teetering toward a return to a recession," Ryberg said. "Squirrels have the sense to keep nuts for the winter."

But the legislature would rather spend the additional funds instead of retiring debt or putting it aside as a contingency, he said. He doesn't know if a veto would be overridden.

"I'm fully supportive of education," said Ryberg. "But it's crazy to be in the same situation and face the same problems that we had four years ago when the downturn in the economy started."

If Haley can make a good argument on saving the money, Massey believes the House would sustain her veto.

"(Legislators) just have to spend all the money that comes in the door," he said. "It's very dangerous to spend it all, regardless of what the project is. I'd like to put it all into a reserve account, just in case the (economic) projections are wrong."

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OCSD 4 names principals at H-K-T, Branchville: Upper, lower schools established

Story

Discussion

By DALE LINDER-ALTMAN, T&D Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, June 19, 2011 7:00

Orangeburg Consolidated School District Four's unit schools, Hunter-Kinard-Tyler and Branchville, will each be divided into upper and lower schools with separate principals for the upcoming school year.

Francina Gerald, who was previously assistant principal of Leaphardt Elementary School in Lexington School District Five, has been hired as principal of H-K-T Elementary. Thomas Drew, formerly the principal at Davis Early Childhood Center for Technology in Lexington School District Two, will be principal of Lockett Elementary School in Branchville.

Superintendent Brenda Turner said in an earlier interview that separating the schools will be a major improvement for students.

"It is very, very difficult for a single administrator to truly understand the needs of elementary, middle and high," she said.

Next year, the elementary schools will be under "the spearhead of a principal who is fully certified in that area," Turner said

Branchville and H-K-T were both divided into separate schools until last year, when they were turned into unit schools.

David Hess was principal at Branchville with Hercules Busbee serving as associate principal over Lockett. Hezekiah Massey was principal at H-K-T with Debra Norman serving as associate principal over the lower school. Massey will remain as principal at H-K-T next year, but the district will be posting the position of principal for Branchville High School, Turner said.

"Mr. Hess, who is a fine leader in our district, is assuming the role of associate principal at Edisto High School for next year," she said.

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Q&A with Mike Bobby, Charleston County School District chief financial officer

By [Diette Courrégé](#)

Monday, June 20, 2011

If the past is any indication of what's to come, don't be surprised to hear Charleston County school leaders say they're expecting a more-than- \$25 million budget shortfall for the 2012-13 school year.

For the past four years, they've kicked off budget discussions by saying there's a projected shortfall of anywhere between \$27 million and \$34.7 million, but by the time the final budget is passed, they've figured out how to make up the difference.

There's no doubt those years have been financially difficult for schools locally and statewide. Charleston County has seen five schools closed and class sizes increased. Still, the question of just how tough it's been -- and the extent to which classrooms and students have been negatively affected -- is debatable.

This year, school leaders said in January they were expecting a \$28.6 million shortfall. They proposed all kinds of potential cuts, such as charging fees for magnet school transportation and eliminating arts programs.

Despite those dire predictions, the board passed a budget last week that didn't increase taxes or furlough employees, and the areas cut were limited mostly to district offices, administrative positions, driver's education and day custodians.

The Post and Courier talked with district Chief Financial Officer Mike Bobby, and here's a condensed version of the conversation.

Q: Has the district been honest about its budget situation, or has it been crying wolf?

A: There's been no conspiracy or artificial creation of a gap. The district has been transparent by making public its list of assumptions on which the budget is built, and its financial staff takes a conservative approach to make the best possible projections. It's normal to gain more information and alter estimates as time progresses. The most difficult cuts were proposed early on so hard decisions could be made then, and some of those, such as furloughs for everyone but teachers, were able to be rescinded when the budget picture improved. The situation also was helped by a one-time \$7 million infusion in additional state money, and the board made about \$10 million in cuts this year.

Q: If the situation was really terrible, how has the district ended the year with millions of dollars in savings?

A: The district monitors expenses throughout the year, and any unused funds go back to the contingency fund, or rainy-day account. The board has depended on that money to balance its budget for the past few years. For the 2011-12 school year, the board will use \$5.2 million from this rainy-day fund to balance its budget. About \$2 million should be added to the fund by the end of the 2010-11 budget cycle, so it could total up to \$19 million.

Q: What kind of cuts has the district made that will affect classrooms next year?

A: The only direct cut to classrooms was eliminating driver's education, but teachers and students may feel the impact of reduced support services going to schools. The board lessened the pot of money that pays for substitute teachers and non-classroom

positions such as secretaries and bookkeepers, and about 70 jobs, from instructional coordinators to maintenance staff, have been eliminated. The goal was to avoid hurting classrooms, but teachers won't receive a step increase, or more pay for an additional year of experience, and no staff member will earn a cost-of-living adjustment.

The revolt to come

By CINDI ROSS SCOPPE
Associate Editor

STATE SENATORS could vote Tuesday to set in motion the demise of one of the most enduring and destructive vestiges of the Legislative State.

I'm not talking about the bill to dismantle the Budget and Control Board; significant as that is, it would merely abolish a 20th century relic. By contrast, the fight over a trio of other, fairly routine, bills could set off a virtuous cycle that deals a crippling blow to the centuries-old tradition of county legislative delegations setting local policies back home.

On its face, the battle is over Gov. Nikki Haley's vetoes of single-county bills allowing the Hampton 2, Florence 4 and Colleton County school districts to bypass state law and issue bonds to pay for day-to-day operations. Supporters say the districts are in crisis and must make disastrous cuts without this admittedly irresponsible funding mechanism. The governor says the funding mechanism is fiscal folly and shouldn't be allowed regardless of the consequences.

I agree with the governor, although the districts do need help that the state has failed to provide. But the debate is not simply about whether such an extraordinary remedy is justified; it is about whether state legislators finally will accept their responsibility to act as *state* legislators.

By tradition, the only people who vote on a single-county bill are the legislators from that county. Except for school bills, they're almost always unconstitutional. The single-county school bills are simply bad policy, because they buttress our practice of writing different rules for different districts, and prevent the Legislature from making the reforms we need to improve public education. The most obvious example is school district consolidation, which would benefit our state in countless ways; the Legislature refuses to order it because most legislators consider the districts to be the sole province of the legislators who represent them.

But when it became clear Thursday that local senators would override the governor's vetoes, tea-party senators revolted, insisting that it was not only their right but their responsibility to weigh in. Sens. Kevin Bryant and Shane Martin said they should vote to uphold the vetoes because the bills would affect their constituents who own property in the districts. Sen. Mike Rose said the bills went far beyond such traditional single-district topics as changing selection methods for school boards and pushed the Legislature onto a dangerously slippery slope that eventually would lead to exempting certain districts from, say, state student-teacher ratios. "At what point," he asked, "are we going to step in and say, 'you can't do that'?"

Senate President Pro Tempore Glenn McConnell said the bills likely wouldn't be considered constitutionally acceptable school laws because they made findings in the name of the Legislature and exempted the districts from state law.

The most surprising thing about the debate was who championed the divine rights of local legislators: Senate Rules Chairman Larry Martin, who warned his colleagues to be careful what they did unto others, lest the same things be done unto them: "I want you to stay out of my business in Pickens County, and I'm gonna stay out of yours."

The fact that this perversion of the Golden Rule would be enunciated by one of the most responsible senators demonstrates just how deeply ingrained the idea remains that the Legislature should control all aspects of life in South Carolina.

Mr. Martin said the three districts were being held to a different standard than seven others that had been given the same authority. That's not an entirely illegitimate argument, but it perpetuates one of our Legislature's worst beliefs: We can't do things the right way because we've always done them the wrong way.

When we talked later, Mr. Martin noted that several senators who were in revolt come from counties with multiple school districts. "If we're gonna

start getting into other folks' business, that gives me license to start consolidating all these school districts," he said. "I can tell you, the very folks that were arguing today to sustain the veto would not want us arguing about how their board is structured."

While I breathe, I hope.

I am not normally a fan of retaliatory politics, because it puts petty grievances ahead of good policy. But do motives really matter so much, particularly when the target of the retaliation is a bad policy?

The reason the Supreme Court says it's generally OK to pass single-county school bills is that — unlike cities and counties — the schools are the responsibility of the Legislature, created to carry out the Legislature's constitutional mandate to provide public education.

That's also why these bills make such terrible public policy.

Our schools don't adequately educate all children largely because the Legislature has abdicated its responsibility to hold school districts accountable for their performance. The Legislature put Hampton 2, Florence 4 and Colleton County in the position of having to resort to such a fiscally irresponsible "solution" — by providing either inadequate funding or inadequate mechanisms for the state to step in when incompetent local officials mismanage districts, or both.

The Legislature should sustain the governor's vetoes. But the districts do appear to be in crisis — a crisis that would have been mitigated if Gov. Haley had not forced Senate budget negotiators to back away from bringing school funding back up to the level it was at in 2000. Although it's difficult, it's not too late to fix that. Just as the Legislature can — and should — add the Budget and Control Board bill to its wrap-up session agenda, it should provide extra funding to get these three districts over the hump — along with immediate state intervention in their management.

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