



The Greater Searcy County Chamber of Commerce
P. O. Box 1385
Marshall, AR 72650

24 Jan, 2023

Arkansas State Board of Education,

The Greater Searcy County Chamber of Commerce serves all Searcy County as the primary Searcy County economic developer and Tourism Bureau. The chamber strongly asks the state board to **keep the isolated St. Joe K-12 school intact!**

St. Joe K-12 is the best public school in Searcy County and in the Ozark Mountain School District (OMSD) as released in the annual Report Card by the Arkansas Department of Education! This is NOT a failing school!

St. Joe does need a plan for the future, but the school district is NOT in fiscal distress. It is way too early to talk about the consolidation of grades 7 to 12 to Western Grove! As the unequivocal business leader in all of Searcy County, our chamber was never approached by the school district to help the St. Joe School increase its enrollment or to collaborate as a community member to come up with ideas to help the school. This is a step that should be taken now. It is too early to talk consolidation without enlisting the help of the community, including the chamber. We have taken our own initiative to get involved since the threat to the school was revealed. We ask for a chance to help the school before any talk of consolidation or closure actions.

A chamber member in Marshall, Simmons Bank, has even offered \$100,000 to the St. Joe School to buy time so the stakeholders can find a solution to declining enrollment. The chamber is currently working to attract two potential large job producers for the county, that even if one is realized, brings the potential of new students for the St. Joe school.

Dismemberment and eventually closing the St. Joe School is bad for the school kids as they will have earlier wakeups, a longer bus commute, later returns home, and less exercise and play time after school. Searcy County has poor health outcomes already and the current plan will act against the health interests of the students.

Consolidation of grades 7 to 12 also causes a loss of jobs in St. Joe, is detrimental to area businesses, and takes badly needed economic stimulus out of the Searcy County economy. Searcy County is a Persistent Poverty County, and the proposed action will add more damage to the poor people who live here. Searcy County, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, is the dead last county in all of Arkansas in average weekly wages, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The loss of school jobs will make the situation even worse for us. How unfair to tax this poor county and then transport the jobs that are badly needed here out of the county! We ask you to **vote for St. Joe Parents and Families and to Vote against consolidation!**

St. Joe Parents exercise their right to choose St. Joe as the best education option for their children! In this age of pervasive broadband education opportunities, but also increasingly expensive transportation costs that price poor people out of transportation, schools should be located closer to the communities that fund them. Poor, rural Arkansas has little in the way of public transportation in order to allow parents to be involved in their child's education and to commute to school activities. Consolidation is an archaic 20th century tool for 21st century realities! Please don't disenfranchise these families! Please also respect that St. Joe voters, businesses, and taxpayers want you to please Vote No! Local businesses pay a lot of taxes that benefit the school. Please don't do them unnecessary harm!

Finally, the poisoned well of consolidation will most likely drive more OMSD students out of the district to homeschool options, and into other close districts like Marshall, Yellville, etc., calling into question the viability itself of the OMSD in the future. The likelihood that the OMSD can pass future millages will also be gravely affected. Thank you for your consideration!

Respectfully,

Darryl G. Treat, Executive Director

The Greater Searcy County Chamber of Commerce, 870-448-2557

Searcy County, Arkansas – Always in Season

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