

**Statement of Dr. John A. Phillips  
Superintendent, Muscogee County School District  
Columbus, Georgia**

**on behalf of the Seven Rivers National Coalition**

**10:00 am  
March 30, 2006**

**Request for Federal Funding for School Districts Surrounding Military  
Installations Gaining Large Numbers of Personnel**

**before the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on  
Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I am Dr. John Phillips, Superintendent of Schools for Muscogee County, Georgia. I am extremely grateful for this opportunity to speak to you not just on behalf of Muscogee County and the other school districts in the Chattahoochee Valley near Fort Benning, but also on behalf of a coalition of school districts from around the country, called the Seven Rivers National Coalition, facing a similar problem. In short, several major actions now underway within the Department of Defense are going to combine to bring far more school-aged children of our military personnel into our school districts than we can possibly handle.

**Overview**

Fort Benning is located along the Chattahoochee River outside Columbus, Georgia. Given the size of the installation, the students of Ft. Benning personnel attend school districts in eight counties in Georgia and Alabama: Muscogee, Chattahoochee, Harris, Marion and Talbot Counties in Georgia; and Phenix City, Lee and Russell Counties in Alabama.

Meanwhile, I am also honored to represent today a number of school districts around the country that serve children of military families at installations expected to gain a large number of personnel over the next few years. These installations include Fort Riley in Kansas, Fort Lee in Virginia, Fort Carson in Colorado, Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri and Fort Sill in Oklahoma. In all, over 30,000 school-aged children of military personnel will be moving to these six installations during the next four years.

My remarks will focus primarily on the impact facing Muscogee County and the other school districts surrounding Fort Benning. However, all of these other school districts face similar challenges over the coming years, and we are combining our efforts in the hope of securing critically needed federal funding to address this problem.

**Defense Department Actions**

There is a storm gathering over Muscogee County and the other school districts in the Chattahoochee Valley. As we watch it grow in intensity and move toward us, it seems that we are facing The Perfect Storm.

To be accurate, there are three separate storms converging on us. The first is the recently completed BRAC. We are all thrilled that Fort Benning emerged from the BRAC with a resounding vote of confidence and a robust and expanding mission. Most significantly, the Armor Center and School will move from Fort Knox to Fort Benning, where it will join with the Infantry Center and School to create a Maneuver Center of Excellence.

The second storm is the process of transformation that the Army - indeed all of our service branches - is undergoing. With the end of the cold war, our enemies have changed. So we are changing the profile and composition of our defenses, and Fort Benning will play a major role in this, as demonstrated by a significant increase in Brigade Combat Teams.

Finally, the third storm facing us is global repositioning. The Department of Defense is bringing as many as 50,000 troops home from Europe and Korea, and many of them are coming to Fort Benning.

These three actions will result in the arrival at Fort Benning of thousands of new military personnel as well as Department of Defense civilians and contractors over the next four years. These new federally-connected personnel at Fort Benning will enroll over 10,000 school-aged children into our local school districts.

I want to stress again how proud our community is to be serving such an important role in our nation's defense. We welcome these families. We have had the strongest of relationships for years with Fort Benning and those who have served there. Our nation could not have placed its trust in better hands.

### **The Problem**

However, I also must tell you about the very real problems that this surge of new students will cause. The largest challenge facing us, and where we are requesting federal assistance, is the need to construct new schools and classrooms to accommodate this massive influx of students.

Simply stated, without significant new construction, we will have nowhere to put these students. We will not only have to place many of them in trailers, but they also will be forced to attend classes in every available space we have. This means holding classes in the cafeteria, in the media center, the auditorium, former teacher lounges, and converted closets and storerooms. These locations are clearly substandard for teaching, and also lack technology connectivity. In essence, those forced to learn in such an environment will clearly be subject to "second class" status. Our students will also be denied many extra-curricular activities because the space in which these activities were ordinarily conducted will have been converted to classroom use.

Beyond classroom space, this surge in student enrollment will also lead to a variety of other logistical concerns. Lunch periods will likely need to begin as early as 9 am, and continue through late afternoon, in order to accommodate all of the students. Furthermore, the impact on the transportation system will require some students to be picked up and arrive at school well before classes begin, and others to depart school well after classes end.

We will also be forced to adopt double sessions at all levels -- elementary through high school. While such double sessions are not unprecedented in some high schools around the country, they are almost unheard of for elementary and middle school students.

All of these teaching, schedule and transportation issues do not just affect students, but they are also tremendously disruptive to family schedules. Needless to say, they also will have a damaging effect on teacher morale, which will further impact our students' education.

In the meantime, their fathers or mothers may be serving their third rotation in Iraq and Afghanistan. We owe them the assurance that their children are receiving the best education we can give them. We know that when military personnel prepare for each new assignment, among their most immediate concerns are the availability of good housing and good schools. These issues are critical for soldier morale, and are increasingly important as the Army's divorce rate has soared in the past three years and the service faces increasing challenges in recruitment and reenlistment.

We have made several series of visits to Washington to alert federal policymakers of the pending impact on our schools, and have met with a very positive response...up to a point. No one we talked with denies the size and sweep of what confronts us. They all understand that our situation results from decisions taken by the federal government. However, like us, they are overwhelmed by the cost of addressing it...and no one has yet stepped forward to accept even part of the responsibility. The costs are significant -- our current estimate of the costs of the new school and classroom construction facing the Chattahoochee Valley alone approaches \$350 million.

But as I mentioned at the start, this problem touches many others. We have gone out and located the other school districts which serve garrisoning installations and formed a loose coalition known as the Seven Rivers National Coalition.

### **Local Support**

We are not just coming before you with the intention of dumping this whole problem in your laps. We are gathering our information in the most credible and professional way that we can. In fact, the Army has approved our methodology and is encouraging other installations to employ it. We want to be sure you are looking at apples-to-apples numbers, because that is the only way you will truly appreciate what we are facing.

More importantly, we are doing absolutely everything we can to generate funding at the state and local level, and I would welcome the opportunity to sit down with any of you and tell you more about that. I am proud of our effort.

For instance, we generally receive funds from the state of Georgia for Capital Outlay Projects. However, these funds are insufficient to address even our ongoing renovation and modification needs. As a result, our school districts have also approved Special Purpose Local Option Sales Taxes to fund our existing needs.

We realize that our revenue base will increase somewhat because of the soldiers and their families coming into our area. In addition, we also will continue to receive federal Impact Aid through the Department of Education for all of our federally-connected students, and these payments will increase as the number of federally-connected students in our districts increase.

However, we have statistical models demonstrating that these revenue increases do not come close to solving our problem.

For instance, while many of these military families live off-base, their homes in the community do not add significantly to the property tax base. The biggest property tax revenue sources are large, expensive homes (which military families generally do not inhabit) and, more importantly, local businesses. While Fort Benning will certainly expand, its operations are exempt from taxes and thus do not contribute to the local tax revenue. Meanwhile, the operating cost of each student in our school district is roughly \$6,600. Yet, we generally receive only \$225-\$250 per student in federal Impact Aid, and much of this funding takes one to two years to arrive. As a result, the Impact Aid does not even approach our ongoing costs of educating these students, and certainly would not provide any funding for construction of new classrooms.

I would also like to point out that there is a precedent for federal help right here within Muscogee County. During World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, Fort Benning was subject to similar dramatic increases in personnel. During these periods, the federal government partnered with the Muscogee County School District to build a total of 15 new schools and make additions at 8 others to accommodate the increased number of school-aged children of Fort Benning personnel.

Let me also stress that we are seeking federal assistance only to handle this sudden influx of students directly connected to these military actions. I don't want to leave the impression that we are using this unique situation as a way to secure federal funding for our other problems. As I noted, we are already taking other steps to address our existing problems.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, let me say that the people of our area are more than willing to step up to this challenge. We are proud to have the future of these young people in our hands. You will find that we will do our part and more in dealing with this situation.

But in order to fulfill this mission, we need to have help from the federal government in building new schools and classrooms to house these students. Unfortunately, the clock is ticking, and the armor-piercing issue is simple. If we are to maintain a strong, voluntary armed force, we must provide a quality of life for our military families which they so richly deserve. Without federal assistance, it is not within our reach. Again, I thank you for your attention and for the opportunity to come before you today.