

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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Audit stirs up parents; Maumelle Middle School doesn't make the grade (Maumelle Monitor)

Several Maumelle parents of Maumelle Middle School students are upset over a state audit of the school that they said shows the school failing in more areas than it passes.

Russ Galbraith said he's just one of several parents who were so concerned when they learned of the audit conducted last fall that they created a Facebook page to call attention to the issues and to help organize parents.

The page is called Demand Better Schools, Maumelle and although it is less than two weeks old it already has nearly 200 likes and plenty of postings about perceived problems at the school.

Galbraith said one look at the results chart prepared by the Arkansas Department of Education shows how the school is performing.

"Red is an indicator of failure and the chart is full of red," he said.

Those same parents are also upset that it took them so long to learn about the results of the audit while one of the state's recommendations is that the audit results be widely shared with parents and the community and their support be enlisted to help the school get better.

Jerry Guess, superintendent of the Pulaski County Special School District said while the school did rate poorly in several areas, most students at the school are still doing exceptional work.

The state changed its method of assessment; Guess said and placed more emphasis on a small segment of non-performing students.

It was a tough evaluation and its findings are factual but the emphasis simply changed, he said.

Still, he said he welcomed the evaluation by a team of highly qualified educators and the district is planning on helping the school overcome the deficiencies noted.

Guess said he knows and respects the team members and appreciates the job they did finding problems. He said they were tough and looked hard to find problems and areas that needed improvement.

He said the district's job is to correct those deficiencies.

Maumelle Middle School has enjoyed a reputation as one of the best, if not the best middle school in Arkansas.

How did it go from being a top school to one needing much improvement?

Guess said the state department of education is now taking a more global perspective and developed a new accountability system.

The subgroups that scored poorly have always performed at about the same level. By the same token the majority of students at the school are performing much better than average and that hasn't changed.

What has changed Guess said is that the state is using a new standard where the lower performing group of students is attracting much more attention and is the focus of the state.

The state has also created a sense of urgency and highlighted the performance of a subgroup of students that historically hasn't done well for a variety of reasons.

The state expects the district to bring that performance level up much higher and the district welcomes suggestions from the state, especially the audit team on how it can accomplish that, he said.

The audit team has his utmost respect as professionals and they looked hard to find areas that can be improved.

He also said he also welcomed the input and attention of Maumelle parents.

"Every school needs to improve," Guess said.

He said especially those who have such a gap between the best students and those who need the most help.

The audit has been helpful in focusing attention on what needs to be done, he said. But he also noted the district "already knew what needed to be done."

This new system of accountability will be focused on bridging that gap between the best and brightest students and those who need more help.

What the audit does is identify Maumelle Middle School as a focus school, he said.

The school historically has had several special education classrooms for students who have those needs and he said he's proud the school has taken a lead in providing that training and education to special education students. He said the school should help all students in their area where they have the greatest need for improvement.

The audit that was conducted last October is designed to be used by school staff to create a better accountability program and to use its recommendations to improve at all levels, he said.

Guess urged parents not to lose sight that the school still has a "lot of kids performing at a high level" and those students will be challenged to do even better and won't be hurt by the emphasis on the poorer performing students.

Some of the parents who have commented publicly worry though that their brighter students may be held back and that the level of instruction will be "dumbed down."

Guess reassured parents that is not the case. He said brighter students wouldn't suffer because they try and do a better job for the students who need the most help.

While he said he thinks it's unfair to label such a good school as needing so much improvement, he said he understands and supports the efforts to improve the quality of education for all students.

The new evaluation system is a different ballgame than what educators and parents have experienced in the past and he said there'd be a learning curve for everyone involved.

He also said he hopes parents will get more involved in their children's schools and take a much more aggressive interest in watching what their own child is doing and how they are performing.

The new system is a positive if it results in more participation on the part of parents, he said.

Little Rock Public Meets Superintendent Finalist Hathorn (KARK, Channel 4)

Monday's, this is the first of four interview days set up by the Little Rock School District for the public, parents, and an advisory council to meet and greet with each of the finalists, so they can ask questions and form an informed opinion when the decision needs to be made.

"I'm proud to be back in Arkansas," said Dr. Connie Hathorn.

Hathorn is currently the superintendent in Youngstown, Ohio. He was front and center as the public asked questions about how he would do things differently in the Little Rock District.

"What do you see as your top five leadership qualities?" a question was asked from the public.

Despite currently overseeing a much smaller school district, Hathorn pointed to past experience in Akron, Ohio, overseeing curriculum, hiring, and student services for some 30,000-plus students.

When it comes to combating a lack of parental involvement, Hathorn suggested making the district a more welcoming place for families, and he sees gaps in student achievement that need to be immediately addressed.

"Keep in mind that whoever comes won't be able to be here until July first, so the program is already in place. But what I could do is create a sense of urgency, higher expectations for our students and hold people accountable for the job they are supposed to do," Hathorn said.

There are three more interview days those are on Tuesday and Wednesday of this week, and the final meeting on March 4th.

Northwest Arkansas Schools Struggle with Decision to Declare Snow Day (KARK, Channel 4)

Most of Tuesday's winter weather made its way into Benton County, especially in rural areas, and whether or not to declare a snow day has been a controversial decision for some schools to make.

In Decatur, that decision wasn't based on snow accumulation as much as it was the timing, and how fast it fell.

"The snow started coming down faster than it could melt off the streets," said Superintendent Larry Ben.

But before the flakes started falling, Decatur school buses were ready to roll out.

Superintendent Dr. Larry Ben says drivers began reporting that streets were getting slicker by the second.

"We just had to change the plans," Ben said, making it an official snow day for about 500 students.

"That's the latest we've called, made that decision that I know of," Ben says.

The Decatur School District covers about 50 square miles, with six bus routes that can be miserable to maneuver through with snow on the ground.

"There are dirt roads that we have to navigate, and some hills," Decatur Police Chief Terry Luker says. "They're usually worse than the city streets because for some reason they don't thaw out as quick."

Chief Luker says road conditions seemed to improve just as quickly as they had worsened, despite being in such a rural part of Benton County.

"City roads and the highways here in the city thawed out fairly quickly," Luker said.

Superintendent Ben stands by the decision to play it safe after Tuesday's snowy start, but as for Wednesday, it was a little too early to tell.

"We should be OK for tomorrow, but I thought we were going to be OK for today, too. So, you never know this time of year," Ben said.

NWA School Districts Face Cuts From Sequester (KNWA, Fayetteville)

Video available at http://nwahomepage.com/fulltextfox?nxd_id=408492)

In Northwest Arkansas schools are already crunching the numbers to find how hard the sequester would hit the district's wallet.

The white house released a breakdown of sequester cuts by state.

In Arkansas, education faces some of the largest cuts.

More than 10 million dollars to state schools this year alone, putting about 150 teaching jobs at risk.

Individual districts are preparing for cuts to be anywhere from 5 to 10 percent of federal support.

\$243,000 dollars. That's how much money is on the line in Fayetteville Public Schools if congress doesn't have a plan by Friday.

"It's not a huge part of our budget, but it is a significant cut," says Alan Wilbourn, with Fayetteville Public Schools.

That comes out to about 5% of the budget, taking money from Title One Schools, special education and career education.

"It's hitting those people who really need those funds, so we're hoping Congress and the President can work something out before this takes place."

Eight out of 14 schools in Fayetteville are considered Title One, meaning a large percentage of students qualify for free and reduced lunches.

"So they're coming from situations where they don't have the advantages that other students might have," says Wilbourn.

And Fayetteville would lose \$145,000, money that helps level the playing field for students in poverty.

Special education would take a \$91,000 hit

"It provides additional teachers, it provides additional technology, additional materials."

With the lack of action taken by congress, Fayetteville administrators are just trying to be ready if the federal dollars stop rolling in.

"We've made no concrete decisions. We'll try to minimize any personnel loss and we'll try to take the cuts through materials, technology, those kinds of things," says Wilbourn.

Keeping teachers who really do mean a world of difference in the classrooms they serve.

"Particularly in special education and some of these other places a lot of these type teachers are tough to find and they're in high demand so we try to hang on to them as best we can."

House speaker wants \$150 million in tax cuts (Log Cabin Democrat, Conway)

LITTLE ROCK — The House speaker proposed Tuesday that lawmakers pass \$150 million in tax cuts this session.

Speaker Davy Carter, R-Cabot, announced his proposal to the House Revenue and Taxation Committee, which also voted Tuesday to endorse a proposal to impose a cap on annual growth in state spending.

"There are over \$2 billion worth of tax-cut bills that have been filed. They all cannot reach the House floor," Carter said told the panel.

Carter asked the committee to send \$150 million in tax cuts to the House in increments, beginning with a \$50 million package and followed by packages of \$25 million each.

"In addition, and separate to that, Mr. Chair, I'm asking for some consideration to be given to a capital gains cut in the context of the health care debate that is ongoing regarding Medicaid," Carter said.

Aside from the capital gains tax, Carter did not specify what taxes should be cut.

Carter also made appearances in other committees Tuesday morning, urging lawmakers to get to work on the major issues of the session. To date the session has been dominated by measures to expand gun rights and to limit abortion.

"We're at halftime of this session, and third quarter starts today," Carter said.

Gov. Mike Beebe said Tuesday that lawmakers will need to show how they propose to pay for the tax cuts.

"I've presented a budget, and it's there for the world to see," Beebe told reporters. "You see where the money is going and where it's coming from. We can't even afford my No. 1 tax cut right now immediately, which is the groceries tax cut, and still meet these obligations. So if they're going to cut any more taxes, they have an obligation to say who they're taking it from."

Beebe has proposed cutting the state sales tax on groceries from the current 1 1/2 cents to one-eighth cent per dollar spent. The reduction would not take effect until certain budget obligations, including desegregation payments to three Pulaski County school districts and payments on certain bonds, decline by at least \$35 million for six consecutive months.

The House revenue and tax panel also gave a "do pass" recommendation on Tuesday to an amended version of House Bill 1041 by Rep. Bruce Westerman, which would limit year-to-year growth in state spending.

The committee previously recommended the original version of the bill, which would have required that total general-revenue expenditures increase from one fiscal year to the next by no more than 3 percent or the average percentage of increase in the gross domestic product over the preceding three fiscal years, whichever is smaller.

The version endorsed Tuesday would provide that annual spending could not exceed the average rate of change of total personal disposable income in the state over the previous five years as reported by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

"I believe this is a good bill that will make Arkansas a leader in the country ... maybe the top in the country, in budgeting and having responsible management of our state budget," Westerman told the panel.

A motion to endorse the bill carried in an 11-5 vote. All five Democrats on the 20-member committee voted "no."

The bill goes to the House. Westerman told reporters he believes the measure has enough support to pass there.

Gov. Mike Beebe, who called Westerman's original proposal a bad bill, said Tuesday he still opposes the measure.

"We've got a great budget system. ... It's been good for, what, 70 years, and some guy that's been here a little while wants to change something like that because he doesn't like what's going on in Washington. I just don't see that as appropriate," he said.

Arkansas' Revenue Stabilization Act, passed annually by the Legislature, mandates a balanced budget and prioritizes state spending.

Harrisburg student accused of threatening school (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

HARRISBURG — Authorities have arrested a student at Harrisburg High School on accusations he threatened to "shoot up" the school.

Poinsett County Sheriff Larry Mills says the 18-year-old student was arrested last week on suspicion of first-degree terroristic threatening.

Mills tells the Jonesboro Sun that a witness heard the student's verbal threat against the school. The school's superintendent and principal then contacted police.

The sheriff says the student was not at school Friday, and authorities arrested him at his house.

The student has not been formally charged. He's being held in lieu of \$100,000 bond in the Poinsett County jail and is due in court Thursday.

Harrisburg Superintendent Danny Sample said the school has zero-tolerance policy when it comes to threats.

LR schools 'phenomenal,' superintendent finalist says (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — Stefanie Phillips, a candidate for Little Rock School District superintendent, described the school system Tuesday as a "phenomenal" one with good teachers and a community interested in helping the schools thrive.

"Student achievement is growing here. I've seen the trends," Phillips told civic leaders Tuesday morning. "I think that some of the experiences that I have had and the opportunities I've had in the past will allow me to move that trend forward, hopefully, in an accelerated way."

Phillips, 44, who was most recently deputy superintendent for almost four years in the Clayton County, Ga., public schools, is the second of four finalists to interview with the Little Rock School Board for the job now held by Superintendent Morris Holmes. Holmes will leave the district when his contract expires June 30.

Connie Hathorn, superintendent of the 5,600-student Youngstown City School District in Ohio, interviewed Monday.

The board will interview Dexter Suggs Sr., chief of staff in the Indianapolis Public Schools, today.

Just as Phillips and Hathorn did before him, Suggs will have a full day. He is scheduled to visit one or more Little Rock schools, interact with a superintendent search advisory committee made up of government, business and education representatives, and take questions from the media, the general public, parent groups and employees before dinner and the board interview.

Suggs will take questions from the public from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. at the district's administration building, 810 W. Markham St. It will be broadcast on Comcast Channel 4 and U-verse Channel 99. The event also can be seen via streaming video on the district's website: lrzd.org.

The session for the PTA Advisory Council and parents is from 4 to 5 p.m. Additionally, the finalist will be available to the public at a coffee session from 7:30 to 8:15 a.m.

The fourth finalist, Walter Milton Jr., who is leaving his job as superintendent of the Springfield, Ill., public schools next month, will go through the interview process Monday.

Phillips is a 13-year educator. She started her career in state finance and budget forecasting in California before moving into school-district finance and earning a doctorate in education leadership from the University of Southern California. Her dissertation was on using teacher evaluations to improve classroom instruction.

“To the extent that I have come to this place nontraditionally, I don’t apologize for that because I think it has given me a broader perspective. And maybe bringing a different perspective to the table is what is necessary to get us to a better place,” said Phillips, who has taught at the university level but never served as a classroom teacher or principal.

“I understand the end result of what we need for our students to go into careers,” she told about 50 people at a public session. “I understand what is necessary from our students for higher education. I have this passion, this understanding, of what good instruction looks like, whether that be at the university level or at the kindergarten level. I make it my business to know what’s happening in [the] classroom and what good instruction looks like.”

Phillips’ experiences include being the chief negotiator and a negotiating team member in collective bargaining with school district employee groups. She has played a role in bond issues and the design of new and renovated schools.

She emphasized the importance of accountability for herself and other employees, including the leadership team she would inherit.

“Everyday I come into contact with someone is a day that I am able to evaluate talent. It doesn’t take long,” she said. “You can’t fake it forever.”

In response to a question about leadership skills, Phillips described herself as a good listener, observer and analyst who will read all she can on a subject to find and understand the root of a problem. She also said she is a good communicator who speaks simply about problems that need to be addressed and then works collaboratively to resolve them.

She is proudest of her efforts in Clayton County - where she oversaw the day-to-day operations of the 52,000-student system - to raise student test scores on college entrance exams and state tests while cutting \$198 million in expenditures over a four-year period, she said. That was done without cutting services to students, she said.

Phillips also highlighted what she said was a double-digit gain in average scores on state tests over a 20-month period for special education students in Clayton County. That was the result of training and pairing special education and regular teachers to teach the regular curriculum in classrooms made up of both regular and special-needs students, she said.

Asked whether she would be supportive of expanding schools into neighborhoods where none exist and consolidating low-enrollment high-maintenance schools, Phillips told the audience she would have to do an analysis of Little Rock enrollment data and school locations. That analysis would be key to her success, she said.

“I don’t believe that you should just continue to spend money and overhead when you could better use that money by redirecting it into classrooms or other places where it is needed,” she added.

Michael Sanders, a parent and member of the superintendent search advisory committee, asked Phillips about efforts to improve student behavior. Phillips described the development in Clayton County of a virtual alternative school in which students who were not successful in traditional schools can work at home and at their own pace with guidance from teachers and counselors.

“Alternative learning shouldn’t just be another classroom on the other side of town,” she said.

Advisory committee members had several questions about how to improve achievement in chronically low-performing schools and how to improve public perception of schools. Phillips responded that teachers who aren't successful must be given help, but if they continue to struggle and are unable to teach or are unable to teach a particular demographic group of children, "They've got to go."

Joy Springer, a former desegregation monitor in the district, said past superintendents introduced new programs to the district that cost millions of dollars.

"I've learned over the years that programs don't work here in Little Rock," Springer said. "You have to do something else. Are you bringing a new program?"

"I don't have a pet program," Phillips said. "What I believe is that people change organizations. People teach children. People get the job done. What I will be able to do is assess our people in how effective they are and what resources are needed ... to further student achievement."

Board members question consultant (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — Individual members of the Little Rock School Board complained to consultants assisting in the search for the Little Rock School District's next superintendent about the quality of one of the finalists in an exchange of e-mails last week.

The lead consultant in the search process defended the finalist, Walter Milton of Springfield, Ill., in the e-mails that were released to the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette on Tuesday in response to a Freedom of Information Act request made late last week.

The School Board voted unanimously on Feb. 18 after a two-hour executive session to interview four finalists from a pool of nine applicants for the position now held by Morris Holmes. The four were recommended to the board by the McPherson & Jacobson executive search firm that the board had hired to recruit and vet candidates. Loe Dunn, of Bastrop, La., is the lead consultant in the search and is aided by Kieth Williams, an Arkansas superintendent

On Feb. 20, after the Feb. 18 vote on finalists, board member Jodie Carreiro emailed Williams, saying that Milton is proving to be "a giant distraction" just as Carreiro had predicted to Dunn would happen.

Carreiro then questioned Williams about how much vetting was done into Milton's background.

Milton has been superintendent for six years in Springfield and two years each in Flint, Mich., and Fallsburg, N.Y., schools. He is leaving the Springfield district by the end of next month in an agreement with his school board at a cost of almost \$178,000 to the district. His contract would otherwise have expired in June 2014.

News articles are circulating in Little Rock about audit findings and Milton's personnel decisions, among other issues, in the districts he has led.

"Dr. Milton provided the same three pieces of paper to the [Democrat-Gazette], based on today's article, that were shown to us by Loe as proof positive that everything that had been written about Dr. Milton was false or exaggerated," Carreiro wrote. "This would lead one to conclude that the only vetting done was asking Dr. Milton for his explanation instead of independent verification."

Carreiro went on to say that he didn't want to disrupt the selection process because he believed it will work but he also said the Little Rock board is "taking big hits" because board members "decided almost before going" into a closed session on Feb. 18 that "we would hear the top candidates that were brought to us."

Shortly after noon on Feb. 21, Dunn responded to Carreiro, saying that the consultants don't tell the board who to hire but "only asked that board members have a conversation with these finalists." She said she was sorry that Carreiro had written off one of the finalists "because of the media."

While she didn't cite Milton by name, she posed a long series of questions regarding him to Carreiro: "Have you discussed ALL of his successes and accomplishments?" she wrote. "Did you tell them about his success in raising the achievement level? Do you know that he is a change agent?"

Among her other questions to Carreiro: "Did you tell them how culturally sensitive he is and that he was the first African-America superintendent in an 'all Jewish' District who did not want him to leave? Do they know that he was superintendent for six years in Springfield 'a majorityCaucasian district?' (He had to do something right to stay that long, and they hired him despite the negatives.)," she continued.

"Would you want someone to decide you are unworthy before ever meeting you?" she asked, adding that distractions occur when they are allowed.

Board member Leslie Fisken wrote to Dunn on Thursday, telling Dunn that she was "still confused as to why an applicant like Dr. Milton, with a questionable background, would be recommended to us."

Fisken said Milton has a history of "questionable decisions and judgment calls."

"I find his application a distraction and an insult to the applications" of the other finalists, Fisken wrote.

Board member Norma Johnson wrote to the consultants and copied the board early Friday morning, praising Dunn for her work on the search and urging her board colleagues to "leave her [Dunn] alone."

"If you are not pleased with a candidate, then don't vote for him/her but don't keep attacking Ms. Dunn. My goodness, what is wrong with you guys."

She followed with a second e-mail that went to consultants and board members asking board member Greg Adams, the chairman of the district's new Anti-Bullying Advisory Board, "does any of this border on 'Bullying?' I am almost sure there is a better and more respectful way of conducting business."

Board President Dianne Curry wrote to her board colleagues on Friday morning, saying that all conversation on the matter should cease unless the board wants a board meeting to vote on the situation.

"Each board member agreed to allow me to handle the process," she wrote. "No one wants to be back doored," she continued, "this has gotten to be unfair to me."

Curry ended by asking the board members to stop writing to the search firm.

"Just call me and I can get anything addressed for you," she said.

Some of the other e-mails among board members took note of the establishment of a Facebook page by one or more parents about the superintendent search. Board member Mike Nellums questioned why the page was using the district's logo.

In other e-mails, Curry provided different sets of questions for the superintendent candidates.

Other e-mails addressed how best to respond to candidates not selected for interviews.

There are also a few e-mails from Springfield, Ill., residents writing on Milton's behalf.

PB elementary in danger of closure (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

PINE BLUFF — The Pine Bluff School District is facing a tough financial road ahead and must make serious cuts to avoid a state declaration of fiscal distress, Superintendent Linda Watson said Tuesday night.

Greenville Elementary School could be on the chopping block as part of those cutbacks, Watson told about 75 people gathered in the school's cafeteria. The group, made up of teachers, parents, students and community members, became loud at times, voicing disapproval of the possible shuttering of Greenville Elementary.

"This is not something we want to do, but we must do to stay financially sound," Watson said. "We are barely getting by now."

The School Board will make a decision in March or April about the future of the school, Watson said.

Watson said the district's declining student enrollment is behind the financial woes.

The Pine Bluff School District has lost more than 700 students since the 2006-07 school year, according to the State Department of Education. This year's student enrollment is 4,452, according to the state agency. The losses of students have cost the district more than \$7 million in recent years, Watson said, adding that if student numbers continue to decline more schools may face closure.

The superintendent said that, district wide, some classes only have around 14 or 15 pupils in them, well below state standards that set a maximum of 25 pupils in first through third grades and 28 pupils in fourth through fifth grades.

Greenville Elementary has been chosen for possible closure because the school needs expensive repairs, Watson said. For one, the school needs a new heating and air conditioning unit, which could cost upward of \$100,000. The building also needs a new roof. That's another \$120,000, she said.

"This is tough, there is no doubt about it," Watson said. "No one wants to see a school closed. When I was a student, I experienced that firsthand, and I cried my eyes out because of it. But to remain fiscally sound, we must do something."

Should Greenville Elementary close at the end of the academic year, no one will lose their jobs, and parents of students there will have an opportunity to choose which school their children attend, Watson said. Broadmoor Elementary, Oak Park Elementary, Southwood Elementary and 34th Avenue Elementary would each accept pupils from Greenville, she said.

Greenville has 310 kindergarten through fifth-grade pupils and 35 faculty members. Watson said the district typically loses about 40 teachers annually due to retirement or other reasons. If Greenville closes, its staff and faculty members would be reassigned to other schools.

LaTanja Black, who has a fourth-grade student in special education at Greenville, said she was concerned that her child may not receive the same quality of education if he's forced to change schools. Other parents voiced similar concerns Tuesday night.

"My child has had trouble reading, but his teachers here have really made progress with him," Black said. "In fact, he has taught me a few things. I would hate to see that progress lost if we have to change schools. I am very, very worried about that."

Watson told Black that she has made efforts districtwide to better train all faculty members in teaching reading skills.

"If you can't read, you can't learn," Watson said. "Reading is so important, and I have made that a focus."

Greenville Principal Karen Enright told the group that she understands their frustrations and concerns, but "I know this is about money and low enrollment. We hate for this to happen to our kids. We are like a family here at Greenville."

A second meeting concerning the fate of Greenville Elementary will be held at 6 p.m. March 4 at the Pine Bluff High School Little Theater.

Students travel to state capitol (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

DECATUR — Twelve Decatur High School students attended the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign Education Advocacy Day at the Arkansas Capitol Building in Little Rock on Feb. 20.

A total of 200 people, including teachers and students from across the state, participated in the rally, according to teacher and trip sponsor James Garner.

Students had the opportunity to watch committee sessions and see people give testimony to promote legislation, Garner said.

"It was a good experience for them to see that process," he said.

Students also had a chance to listen to the speakers at the rally, held inside the old Supreme Court building, he said.

Arkansas Opportunity to Learn is a part of the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign. It is a collaboration of local, state and national organizations, grass-roots community leaders, policy-makers, youth organizers, business leaders and philanthropic partners working to ensure that every public school in the nation provides each child with the opportunity for a high-quality education, according to the organization's website, www.otlcampaign.org.

Speakers at the rally discussed proposed legislation that would allow students to have vouchers at private school as well as opposition to House Bill 1040, that would give out-of-state charter companies authority to take over low performing districts.

Bobby Shaw, a senior at Decatur High School, said the most interesting part of the trip was listening to the speakers at the rally talk about education.

“You could honestly tell they really cared,” he said.

The bills are set up where the kids are the ones who lose, said Haley Burden, a freshman at Decatur High School. The people who are pushing for the bills stand to make a profit, she said.

“I’ve never really been around a group of people that really cared about education that much,” Shaw said.

Shaw said it was the first time he had a chance to see the inside of the Capitol building, although he’s driven past it before.

“It was really nice to go down to see the Capitol building and see how it works,” he said.