

State citizens need to see S.C. schools documentary

Legislative move to spike it from ETV is out of bounds

South Carolina ETV is the perfect place to air a new documentary about shocking conditions in the state's poorest public schools.

But one state legislator's reaction was to introduce a bill to fire the public television network's seven-member board.

That is nonsense, and the General Assembly should ignore the move by Rep. John Graham Altman, R-Charleston.

Citizens see the statistics almost every day and are left wondering why South Carolina's schools have so far to go to catch up to other states. The new documentary, "Corridor of Shame: The Neglect of South Carolina's Rural Schools," shows why as it turns on the camera and opens the mic in communities up and down the Interstate 95 corridor. It shows the residue of poverty. It may be easier on the sensibilities to look the other way, but the documentary is unfortunately true and the truth cannot be wished away.

The documentary tackles a big issue, and one that is being dealt with in other states. In fact, the issue of school funding is about to explode in South Carolina.

How the legislature funds the state's poor, rural school districts was hashed out for more than a year in a Clarendon County courtroom. Testimony is over, but the ruling has not been made. A group of poor districts are seeking to force the state to put more money into school districts that lack a strong local tax base. The ruling could have broad implications on all public schools and all taxpayers.

ETV leaders are to be commended for stand-

ing by the decision to air the film on May 22 and May 29. The 58-minute film is to be followed by a half-hour panel discussion, where both sides of the school funding issue will be aired.

Altman sees it as an "advocacy" film meant to pressure the legislature. He does not think ETV should be used for that purpose. It is well suited for ETV. But, perhaps more importantly, ETV programming should not be dictated by majority rule in the legislature, and intimidation from the legislature is totally out of bounds.

Should the legislature kill the court system? The documentary can barely scratch the surface of all the testimony offered in court that the rural schools need help.

Should the legislature abandon school accountability? Should schools quit collecting achievement data, or quit making it public? After all, it's the statistics that show precisely what schools are in trouble.

Can John Graham Altman quash reality?

No, he can't. He can ignore it, but that does not make it go away.

Nearly two dozen colleges, universities and community groups are sponsoring screenings across the state. The film, sponsored by a bipartisan group of state leaders and philanthropists, is drawing large crowds in Columbia. The American Association of University Women is coordinating showings around the state.

For dates, times, and locations, see the Web site: www.corridorofshame.com.

The only thing worse than having poor schools would be to deliberately ignore the problem.