

# Children we leave behind

By Terry Plumb  
The Herald

"Corridor of Shame: The Neglect of South Carolina's Rural Schools, a 58-minute documentary about conditions in eight school districts, airs today and May 29 on S.C. ETV. Both showings will be followed by a panel discussion of state legislators, educators and others.

The documentary has been both praised for opening the public's eyes to scandalous neglect of schools in the state's poorest districts and condemned as propaganda by one state legislator who wants to remove sitting members of the ETV board and give appointment power to the General Assembly.

State Rep. John Graham Altman, R-Charleston, said that documentary, in effect, is a thinly veiled attempt to lobby the Legislature in hopes it will spend more money on rural

schools. Although Altman's bill has received little support, the documentary clearly takes a stance that puts South Carolina in a bad light in assessing support of its public schools.

In an interview with The (Columbia) State newspaper, Moss Bresnahan, president of S.C. ETV, defended the documentary, calling it a "point-of-view documentary" and said that both sides of the school funding controversy are represented.



*"There were things too grim or unpleasant to film, like the crushed desks and chairs from Mrs. Oxedine's first-grade class at East Elementary School in Dillon Two."*

**Charles "Bud" Ferillo Jr.,  
who wrote, produced  
and directed "Corridor of Shame"**

"Corridor of Shame" documents alarming — if not horrific — conditions, including sewage in school hallways, collapsed ceilings, broken equipment and science books that are so out of date that they refer to a time in the future when man will have walked on the

moon!

"Corridor of Shame" looks at schools in eight districts scattered along the Interstate 95 corridor through the heart of the former slav-

ery belt of South Carolina. The plaintiff districts actually represent 36 school districts, or nearly 40 percent of districts in the state. More than a decade ago, the districts sued in federal court to force the state to provide equal support for all school children.

Testimony in the case, Abbeville v. State of South Carolina, concluded in December, and a decision is expected soon. Outcome of the case won't be affected by "Corridor of Shame," Charles "Bud" Ferillo Jr., who wrote, produced and directed the documentary, acknowledged in an interview last week.

Clearly, its purpose, whatever the decision or the appeal that likely will follow, is to build popular support for changing the way the Palmetto State funds public schools, which educate about 90 percent of our children.

Because most of the money for building and operating schools is generated locally, districts with a low tax base suffer in comparison with wealthier districts such as Rock Hill or Fort Mill.

Average salaries for teachers in poorer districts can be 40 percent less than what teachers make in top districts. The documentary cites such discrepancies as a major factor in the

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## WANT TO WATCH?

"Corridor of Shame: The Neglect of South Carolina's rural schools," a 58-minute documentary chronicling the deplorable conditions of public schools in some of the Palmetto State's most impoverished and neglected school districts, airs at 11:30 a.m. today on S.C. ETV (cable Channel 15) and again at 7:30 p.m. May 29.

Both showings will be followed by a half-hour panel discussion, including S.C. Superintendent of Education Inez Tenenbaum, lawmakers, educators and others.

To learn more about the documentary and how it was paid for, visit [www.corridorofshame.com](http://www.corridorofshame.com).

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## Corridor

from 1E

high rate of teacher turnover in some schools.

About the abysmal conditions of the schools themselves, Ferillo said: "There were things too grim or unpleasant to film, like the crushed desks and chairs from Mrs. Oxedine's first-grade class at East Elementary School in Dillon Two. They were almost flat, still in storage and very graphic, but I chose to have parents describe that day's emotions without using the images of the desks and chairs, which I thought could frighten children ... I wouldn't film the frozen toilets at East either ..."

Despite such deplorable conditions and disparity in pay, it's teachers that give "Corridor of Shame" its power. Anyone who doubts the commitment of public school teachers would be hard-pressed not to be affected by interviews such as:

■ The English teacher at Creek

### Plight of eight S.C. school districts

<b>Plaintiff districts</b>	88.4% minority	86% free or reduced lunch	75% schools rank unsatisfactory or below average
<b>S.C. state average</b>	48.4% minority	55% free or reduced lunch	17.4% schools rank unsatisfactory or below average

Bridge High School, in Marion County, who talks about children who can't afford a pencil but call her house if she misses a day because they are worried about her;

■ The superintendent of Dillon District 2, near tears, as he describes how their athletes visit better-equipped schools in wealthier districts and ask why they are given so much less;

■ The principal of J.V. Martin High School, the oldest school in South Carolina — built in 1896 — who leads a tour of the school auditorium, which the fire marshal has declared unsafe, and pulls the lever on a broken fire alarm.

Ferillo, a Columbia public relations executive, was recruited for

the "Corridor of Shame" project by John Rainey, chairman of the S.C. Board of Economic Advisors, who headed Gov. Mark Sanford's inauguration committee.

The documentary cost more than \$75,000. Ferillo says Rainey took pains to solicit money from both Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives. Among the contributors with York County connections, for example, are the Springs Close Foundation and Larry and Kathy Bigham.

Because a bill to establish tax credits for parents of children attending private school was perhaps the most controversial measure debated by the General Assembly this year, it's logical to examine "Corri-

dor of Shame" in light of the debate.

Ferillo says the Put Parents In Charge Act was not an issue when planning began last year and that he deliberately shied away from partisan issues.

"I read more than 7,500 pages of testimony and wanted to focus laser-like on the issues raised," Ferillo said. "I didn't engage in partisan issues such as a voucher plan or tax credits."

A principal goal of "Corridor of Shame" is to sway a conservative, Republican-dominated General Assembly to be more sympathetic to the interests of rural schools. Rep. Altman's reaction notwithstanding, the project's backers were not out to alienate or embarrass lawmakers.

Indeed, all 170 members of the Legislature were provided DVD copies of "Corridor of Shame."

Originally, 500 copies were planned, but the latest reorder will bring the number of copies to 3,000 — the demand has been that strong, Ferillo said.

The DVD copies been distributed to education leaders, editorial page editors and others in a position to influence public opinion. More than a dozen showings have been scheduled at colleges or universities around the state.

Information on ordering a copy of "Corridor of Shame" may be found at [corridorofshame.com](http://corridorofshame.com).

Ferillo says he personally opposed Put Parents In Charge because instead of helping improve failing schools, the bill would have rewarded people that have abandoned the state's public schools. In preparing the documentary, Ferillo said, "I drove past private schools that displayed a Confederate flag in the front yard," inviting the inference that black students trying to

transfer from public schools would not be welcome.

A longtime supporter of public education, Ferillo says if state leaders had the will to fix South Carolina's rural public schools, they could do so — either by equalizing state funding or by appropriating additional money to build decent schools, raise teacher salaries and pay for remedial programs.

He asks: If nations such as Singapore and Japan, devastated by war and poverty, can turn their schools around in less than a generation, why can't South Carolina? "Corridor of Shame" may scandalize some of us.

Others may be indignant that South Carolina should be so embarrassed.

If it engages in finger-pointing, however, the target is not just the General Assembly. It's all of us.

"Corridor of Shame" is about the children we have left behind.