

Film examines S.C. schools

Poor, rural facilities focus of documentary



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As a judge deliberates whether to order the state to spend more money on public schools in poor counties, supporters of those schools are taking their case to the court of public opinion.

Alarmed by crumbling walls, leaky roofs, faulty fire alarms and unheated classrooms, some of the state's biggest philanthropists — Republicans and Democrats — put up more than \$75,000 to produce a 58-minute documentary film on conditions in schools in poor, rural counties.

"We want to catch the conscience of the king," said Columbia lawyer John Rainey, the film's initiator.

Rainey uses the quote from Shakespeare to say that conditions in some rural schools are so potentially harmful that the state's politicians need to be shocked into action. The film's footage — of school officials talking of poisonous snakes and sewage in hallways, and photos of unsafe conditions in schools — will do that, he hopes.

"When you have children in gloves and jackets in classes where the temperature is 50 degrees, that's not acceptable," Rainey said.

DVDs and videos of the film, called "Corridor of Shame," will be given within a few weeks to the

state's 170 legislators, Gov. Mark Sanford and community leaders across the state. The \$75,000 from the philanthropists includes the distribution costs.

Rainey said the annual debate over whether more money is needed for public schools — or whether educators waste money — will continue. In the meantime, someone needs to spend money immediately to do things like fix fire alarms, he said.

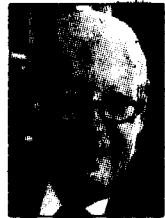
"We have a tsunami right now in these counties. We can't give a few million to them? What is wrong?" Rainey said.

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WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

"It was the most deplorable building condition that I have ever seen in my life. This sort of situation has got to stop!"

— **CHARLIE WAY**, Charleston developer and former S.C. secretary of commerce, about a school he encountered after his car broke down in a rural area



"You have to see it to believe it."

— **ED MCMULLEN**, head of the S.C. Policy Council, who saw sewage in the hallway in a rural school in Florence County

FILM

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No philanthropist gave more than \$5,000 to the film, Rainey said. Contributors included the Nord Family Foundation, the Self Family Foundation, the Sisters of Charity Foundation, the Springs Close Foundation, Gayle Averyt, Kirk Finlay III, Joel Smith, Hayne Hipp, and Charlotte and Alan Kahn.

Many have political connections. Their open support of impoverished schools adds a dimension to one of South Carolina's longest-running political battles — how to improve public education. Rainey, for example, is a major fund-raiser for Sanford and U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint, both Republicans and public school critics.

'THE FACTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES'

"Corridor of Shame" took five months to make. Producers visited six rural counties, shooting 120 hours of tape, most of it interviews with teachers, parents and administrators.

Besides documenting dangerous conditions, the film says good teachers flee poor schools to get higher-paying teaching jobs in wealthier, neighboring counties. It all adds up to a situation in which tens of thousands of children face lives limited by an inferior education, the film's promoters say.

Many of the conditions the film depicts were aired in testimony at a 101-day trial last year. In that case, eight poor, rural school districts sued the state, alleging public education in their districts doesn't meet "minimally adequate" education guaranteed by the state constitution.

Judge Thomas W. Cooper is expected to rule later this year. However, the case, which began 12 years ago, may not be over for years. Cooper's decision will

SEEING THE FILM

■ View excerpts from "Corridor of Shame" online at theatrate.com.

■ Also, starting April 5, the Nickelodeon Theatre in Columbia will show the film to the public. The cost is \$5 per person. Call (803) 771-6106 for times.

be appealed to the S.C. Supreme Court by the losing side.

The crux of the dispute is that much money to pay for public schools comes from local property taxes. Poor, rural counties don't have the tax base to improve schools and attract quality teachers.

No one has put a price tag on how much money would be needed to upgrade rural education. But it is sure to run into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

"Corridor of Shame" puts a human face on the testimony heard in Cooper's courtroom, said Bud Ferillo, whose Columbia public relations firm produced the film.

Ferillo said he felt no obligation to put in the film the state's contention — that children in poor counties already have an adequate education. The state also alleges the poverty in many rural counties is such a handicap to children that putting more money in the schools won't make a difference in student achievement.

"Our film certainly is an advocacy piece," Ferillo said. "But the facts speak for themselves. Conditions in our rural public schools cry out for immediate attention."

'GOT TO STOP'

Ferillo has submitted the film to ETV in hopes it will run on statewide television. He has a good shot. ETV board chairman Robert Rainey contributed to the film.

One of the film's most powerful moments comes when former state Commerce Secretary Charlie Way, a multimillionaire Charleston developer, tells about his car breaking down near a rural school. When he went to the school to telephone for help, Way was shocked.

"It was the most deplorable building condition that I have ever seen in my life," he exclaims on camera. "This sort of situation has got to stop!"

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., tells the camera that rural school needs "are real. . . . Money is not the answer to all problems. But if you ain't got it, it's a good start."

Ed McMullen, head of the S.C. Policy Council, an influential conservative think tank, also appears in the film. Several years ago, while visiting a Florence school, McMullen found sewage in the hallway. "You have to see it to believe it."

State Department of Education spokesman Jim Foster said construction and building maintenance are almost entirely the responsibility of counties. Poor counties often must choose between paying teachers or repairing old buildings, he said.

Sanford spokesman Will Folks said the governor's office has requested a copy of the film. Folks said the governor is committed to improving education by offering parents a tax credit to help pay for their children to change public schools or go to private schools.

State, federal and local governments spend billions on S.C. public education, Folks said. Some poor counties could save money by consolidating multiple school districts, he added. "Money is obviously not making it through the bureaucracy to where it is needed."

Rainey said the debate should stop long enough to help the children. "If this video doesn't do it, that says something about our character."