

Film gives sad story of schools

When it comes to funding rural public schools, the state isn't doing enough. Just watch a gripping new documentary that's starting to make the rounds and you'll know why.

"Corridor of Shame: The Neglect of South Carolina's Rural Schools" should make you feel ashamed. It shows old, crumbling, rural schools where rusted water fountains don't work, ceilings fall in, sewage backs up during big rains and rags are stuffed at the bottoms of rotting doors and walls to keep out the cold.

Not only are the facilities a third-world wreck, but poor, rural school districts have a host of other problems highlighted in the film: difficulties in retaining good teachers, an eroding tax base that can't keep up with needs and a lack of modern materials, such as science labs, computers and new books that are readily available in wealthier school districts in urban and suburban areas.

About a dozen years ago, eight poor, rural districts decided they had had enough. They filed suit against the state for not providing a "minimally adequate" education for students in their areas, stretching mostly along the Interstate 95 corridor from Dillon County to Jasper County.

A spotlight shone on the issue during a trial that was finally held last year with more than 100 days of testimony. A decision is expected this summer.

But most people didn't see the trial in Clarendon County. Many may not have understood the depth of the problems in these counties based on news reports of what went on in the trial.

But in just 58 minutes, the film by Columbia public relations professional Bud Ferillo changes that perspective. Not only does it show disturbing images of inadequate facilities and unacceptable conditions



spotlights administrators who pull out their hair to try to offer the best they can.

"I have to look parents in the eye and say it's the best we can do," Dillon School District 2 Superintendent Ray Rogers said in the film. "It's not the best we can do, and we're selling them short."

He said poor rural counties were appealing to the legislature to help.

"Would they allow their children to go to school in the state they've made it so hard to live in? No. It's wrong and we need to do better."

Marva Tigner, the director of curricula of the Jasper County School District, told how her twin sons, both juniors in high school, face challenges.

"One aspires to go to Duke," she said, barely holding back tears. "Because he's being educated in Jasper County, his chances are greatly diminished."

Ferillo, whose project was funded by a blue-ribbon group of state philanthropists and leaders, said the dozens of interviews and days of filming the project provided one of the most moving experiences in his life.

"I felt like I had wandered into some long-abandoned concentration camps, but instead of finding the morbid remains of tortured souls, I found angels — men and women and children who strive for more under these conditions every day."

That statement wasn't

for learning in the 21st century, it tells moving stories of parents who expect more from the state. It highlights teachers who are committed to help children. And it

political rhetoric. It was a fair characterization of what's really happening in poor, rural South Carolina.

"If we turn our backs on these rural school districts, we lose another generation," Charleston Mayor Joe Riley said in the film. "We'll lose our small towns and see them turn into wastelands."

The film, the result of an idea by former Santee Cooper chairman John Rainey, recognizes that regardless of the results of the court case, state lawmakers have to do something to deal with the inequities of education in the state.

Later this month, state lawmakers will get a DVD version of the documentary. Hundreds of other copies will go for free to libraries, school boards and community groups. A screening is scheduled for April 18 at Francis Marion University, along with screenings in Columbia and at Lander University and Wofford College. On Tuesday, the film opens at Columbia's Nickelodeon Theater.

In May, S.C. Educational Television plans to broadcast the film and host a panel discussion afterward, said SCETV President Moss Bresnahan.

"The decision that our legislature has to make is either going to doom rural South Carolina to poverty and second-class education from now on or we're going to stop and say we cannot leave a third of our population out there without adequate education," Rogers said.

For too long, state lawmakers have been taking a moral holiday on providing an adequate education for poor, rural South Carolinians. It's time for that to stop.

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