Meeting Notes – Feb. 11, 2025

The LaFayette Rotary Club held its weekly meeting on Tuesday, February 11, 2025. The Club was honored to have in attendance our Rotary Assistant Governor, Paul Golden. Mr. Golden extended an invitation to our club members from the Talladega Rotary Club and Talladega City Schools to a special event featuring Dr. Eric Mackey, Alabama State Superintendent of Education. Dr. Mackey will provide an educational update and insights into the “State of Education in Alabama Schools". The event will be held Thursday, February 20, 2025, at 11:00 AM in the Harwell Auditorium located at 414 Elm Street, Talladega, AL. Mr. Golden also encouraged club members to register for and attend the upcoming Mid-Year Conference in Gardendale, to be held on February 21st.

Rotarian Dr. John Caldwell was responsible for the program today and invited as his guest Dr. Sharon Weldon, the newly elected superintendent of Chambers County Schools.

Dr. Weldon spoke of her and her husband's desire and commitment early in their marriage to remain in Chambers County. She recounted her career, beginning as a classroom teacher, teaching grades 6-12 (with 8th grade being her favorite!), then becoming an assistant principal, a principal, moving to the central office first as a School Improvement Specialist, then as the Secondary Director, then returning to the classroom in the 2021-22 school year. She was elected as superintendent in November 2024 and took office in January 2025. She feels strongly through each of these moves that God has been ordering her footsteps to lead her to where she is now. The decision to run for Superintendent was reached prayerfully and with the support of her husband Tommy, who has been her coach, cheerleader and confidante throughout the process.

Dr. Weldon shared some of the unanticipated experiences she has had since taking office in January. These include talking to and answering questions from a federal judge, dealing with inherited legal problems, and inheriting issues which she wanted to change, but finding out she had no authority to do so. The focus of her administration will be on academics. She also wants to prioritize the overcrowded conditions at Eastside JP Powell Magnet School and Fairfax Elementary School. She explained that any projects she may want to initiate must first be approved by the Justice Department, the Federal Court judge, the Legal Defense Fund attorneys, the State Department of Education, and our local board of education.

She spoke of the windfall of revenue in the form of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds that came into the system as a result of COVID. With those extra dollars, building improvements were made and extra teachers and staff were hired. Now that the money is no longer available (as of this school year), she and the board must find a way to maintain or adjust that level of staffing and building improvements.

Dr. Weldon spoke on school consolidation. The Chambers County School District includes 603 square miles. The original 1993 school desegregation order required a centrally located high school. The current federal court ruling did not uphold the centralized location. The location of the new high school was determined prior to Dr. Weldon taking office and since no appeals were filed by the Legal Defense Fund or the Justice Department within the permitted time frame, the location cannot be changed now. In March of 2024, all agreements with parties involved in the construction of the new high school were stopped. Dr. Weldon has been working to rekindle some of those agreements. Every 60 days the district must file a progress report with the federal judge and state measurable goals for the next 60 days.

Dr. Weldon is also working to finalize an agreement with an underwriter to help manage the massive task of building a new high school, as well as working on bond issues to finance the construction. The projected cost of the new high school based on the previously approved plans is $105-110 million, which is more than the system can currently afford. She has discovered that Decatur County has built a high school for under $60 million and is working to learn more about that. Dr. Weldon says it is a priority for her to keep the new high school and career technical center located on the same campus. Currently, Valley High School (VHS) students lose almost an hour a day of instructional time due to the time it takes to transport them from the VHS campus to the Inspire Academy (career technical) campus located in LaFayette.

Diane Sherriff