

Benny L. Gooden
1304 North 50th Street
Fort Smith, AR 72904

April 25, 2016

Board of Education
Fort Smith Public Schools
Fort Smith, AR 72902

Dear Board Members:

A half century, five decades, fifty years—all these time designations sound so long, but in actuality the past 50 years have been but a blur because I have had the opportunity to work with some of the most dedicated individuals while engaging in something which matters. That said, fifty years of work in the field of public education—while no small achievement—is reason to require one to contemplate a transition from the press of full-time work.

The last 30 years as superintendent of the Fort Smith Public Schools have been exciting, rewarding and challenging as we have seen a community change demographically reflecting a business economy moving from manufacturing toward a more diverse climate which requires new thinking and skills for the future. Educationally, the demographic shift from a middle income dominance has seen the free/reduced meal indicator among our students go from 30% to more than 70%. Simultaneously the racial/ethnic composition of the student population has gone from a predominantly Caucasian group to a diverse group of students in which no group represents a majority. While all these changes have challenged the community and its schools, a continuing focus on meeting the needs of all groups of students has guided the work of the Fort Smith Public Schools and its educators.

FSPS is a school district in which no new campus has been developed in the past 30 years. In view of a controlling attitude by some community members it appears to be unlikely that a change in the current configuration of schools will occur soon. The slow and steady growth of student population and the school facilities—more than half of which are more than fifty years old—has required a focused plan for building additions and renovations. Improvements at every campus and the addition of special facilities which today's educational programs require have been the order of the day and must continue into the future. While our work to provide additional space has concentrated on classrooms and other instructional spaces, the fact remains that adequate facilities for student performances and large assemblies is a critical need to make our community competitive with other school districts. Saying it is not so does not change this truth.

Advancements in technology to bring a robust fiber network to every campus, wireless access to every classroom and more than 13,000 1:1 devices to support teaching and learning have made FSPS comparable with more affluent districts. Access to advanced programming leading to college offered simultaneously with career preparation has made student opportunities accessible

to all. Outstanding fine arts programs in band, orchestra and chorus serve a record number of students in all our secondary schools. Interscholastic athletics and other student activities

provide opportunities for students from every economic level and ethnicity. These programs are important additions to the academic core and a great source of community pride.

In every group of students, there are those who struggle to succeed. The array of “safety nets” to help students refocus their academic and personal lives means the difference between possible success and certain failure for some students at all levels. Alternative options from kindergarten through high school have helped to address the personal baggage which students bring or to provide ways to regain a positive learning trajectory. Adult education programs even carry this service imperative past high school.

While the Fort Smith Public Schools are financially sound, maintaining this condition has been the result of a delicate balance of fiscal management strategies as the FSPS tax rate is the lowest among large school districts in Arkansas and has been unchanged since 1987. Using many sources of revenue and balancing a low debt ratio against growing needs will continue to present formidable challenges. Competitive salaries for staff, facilities comparable to other districts in the region and the resources to expand programs are all prevailing needs which must be at the forefront of the future.

The future of public education in Fort Smith will be just as bright as those who lead the schools and community resolve and work to make it. Students who come from homes of advantage will succeed regardless of the course the system as a whole follows. However, for those who lack the resources which relative affluence brings, a strong and balanced array of public school opportunities delivered in an uncompromising manner is critical to their successful futures. Real school choice for them lies in the comprehensive PreK-12 program that is Fort Smith Public Schools. Private options, charter schools with a narrow focus, virtual programs and other niche offerings will receive attention and may excite some who seek something “different,” but they will not replace the comprehensive focus of the wide range of Fort Smith Public School options. It is worthy of note that the FSPS options take all students and address their needs whether they be disabilities or advanced instruction in a variety of areas.

After reflecting on your stated desire for a new direction and with a realization that there are other pursuits for me which the obligations of the job have prevented, I have decided that it is time to transition from the 24/7 life of a school administrator to a less-confining lifestyle. I am not “quitting work,” but there are other things I can do which will be rewarding and productive.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your superintendent of schools for the past three decades. I believe in the future of public education in Fort Smith—just as I believe in the future of this great community and its people. I will retire effective June 30, 2016.

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Benny L. Gooden". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "B".

Benny L. Gooden, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools