



Visit by Army Chief Energizes Education Discussion

Education Support Needed to Match Explosive Growth

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Educators, elected and business leaders, and economic development professionals throughout the Tennessee Valley are being challenged by the U.S. Army's senior official to adequately prepare for opportunities coming with the ongoing Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process.

Secretary of the Army Francis J. Harvey received a briefing Tuesday from Redstone Arsenal Garrison Commander Colonel John Olshefski, who anticipates as many as 9,000 new students for Tennessee Valley schools as a result of BRAC jobs moving to Redstone.

"Local schools were already overburdened even before BRAC," said Col. Olshefski, during a brief presentation to Secretary Harvey illustrating the steady increase in student population over the past decade in North Alabama school districts. "The greatest impacts are on the districts around Redstone Arsenal and the Huntsville area," he added. From 2000 to 2005, Huntsville and Madison were ranked first and third respectively, in Alabama population growth.

U.S. Senator Jeff Sessions, U.S. Congressman Bud Cramer, Alabama Governor Bob Riley, Huntsville Mayor Loretta Spencer, Madison County Commission Chairman Mike Gillespie and Madison Mayor Sandy Kirkindall also took part in the briefing, which was attended by more than 125 community leaders from northern Alabama and southern Tennessee.

"The fact is, the Tennessee Valley is not providing the resources our schools need relative to the economic success we enjoy," said Dave Hargrove, chairman of the Huntsville/Madison County Chamber of Commerce. "School buildings need expansion and repair and we're not fully implementing nationally acclaimed education initiatives that were developed right here in Alabama. We talk a lot about the threat of our nation losing its technological status in the world, but we're also at risk of losing our status in the nation as a top technology region," added Hargrove.

Col. Olshefski estimates a \$230 million price tag to address building needs at Huntsville City Schools, Madison City Schools and Madison County Schools. That total does not include public schools outside Madison County also impacted by BRAC.

"It will take community support to match this explosive growth," said Governor Riley, who commented that at the state level, per student spending in the last three years has risen 50 percent. "Even with a 50 percent increase, it's difficult to keep up with explosive growth," he added.

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Riley advised local leaders to help create an educational model illustrating what can be done in the U.S. He referenced the success of programs such as the Alabama Reading Initiative, Alabama Mathematics, Science and Technology Initiative and Access Distance Learning. He remarked that, "We lead the world in technology," and added that Alabama can lead the nation in education innovation.

"Local education resources must match education requirements," noted Secretary Harvey in his brief statements. School representatives attending the meeting concurred that they desperately need federal, state and local financial support to build and repair facilities and implement programs with proven results.

"Our communities must elevate this discussion to the level of urgency it deserves," said Hargrove.

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