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Classes overflow to armory

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is the third in a series on the needs and conditions of Baldwin County public schools.

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They're in the army now. Well, figuratively speaking, anyway.

Two teaching units at Fairhope High School have been drafted, due to lack of space on campus, and are serving a tour of duty in Ft. Riel Armory adjacent to the school.

But they've got it good compared with another class housed in — a janitor's closet? That's right. And one in a storeroom, three in trailers, one in a corner of the library and — now this is really cooking — one in the old kitchen of the former cafeteria.

And for a look at some kids who are really going places, just drop in on the two homerooms which are held *in school buses* each morning.

In all, the high school is short 17 classrooms.

"Floating teachers," 10 of them, have no rooms to call their own and must drift from vacant classroom to vacant classroom as they conduct classes throughout the day. With no regular rooms of their own, these teachers can accumulate no teaching materials, can leave little in the way of displays on bulletin boards and no work on chalkboards and have no regular or private place to meet with students and parents for guidance purposes, explains a school official.

And the crowding problem is not confined to classrooms. The school office complex, designed to serve 250 students, must handle the needs of 1,496 pupils.

The gymnasium, which has no stage, is the only assembly area at the school and all facilities for such specialized instruction as music, science and driver education are either too small, too few or nonexistent, continues the school representative.

Uncomfortable overheated rooms and wasted energy are one result of an inadequate heating system in the original school building, constructed in 1953. According to the school system spokesman, the heat distribution system is "of a design not compatable with this climate."

The high school serving the Eastern Shore is not the only school in the area with problems. At the Fairhope Middle School, the newest of the city's school complex, there is no gymnasium, band instruction is held in a makeshift addition to a tractor shed (both built by school workmen) and there are no laboratory facilities for science instruction. Assemblies must be held in the cafeteria and a single classroom houses the library. Storage space for school supplies also is inadequate, says the school representative.

In sunshine or rain, fourth and fifth grade students at Fairhope Intermediate School load and unload from buses without protection from the weather. Once in their classrooms, these same pupils must compete with noisy and energy-consuming heaters, since most buildings lack central heat.

At the 1924 vintage primary school, a half-century's use has created the need for major repairs. According to Baldwin school records, a 1974 state inventory of school facilities lists this building as requiring capital funds for repair rather than maintenance funds.

With the building's 39,000 square feet of floor space, the costs of this kind of renovation would be one-third the cost of constructing a new building, or some $.5 million, says an architect for the school board.

School officials say they were "just lucky" during the winter of 1980 when the 40-year-old steam boiler just made it to March before breaking down, giving repairmen the summer to install a replacement. Luck continued to hold out for the elementary school when, delayed by strikes, the boiler finally arrived in October and was installed just before winter set in.

Since the 47-year-old steam distribution system has no individual classroom controls on the radiators, the entire building must be heated "until the coldest area is comfortable." For this reason, some classroom windows must be "opened wide" before a comfort level is reached in other rooms.

"To say that such a system is inefficient is stating the case mildly," exclaims the school spokesman.

Here, as at the Intermediate School, students meet buses in the rain, crowd into the makeshift library and adhere to restricted outside play regulations since there is no gymnasium.

The one advantage the Primary School has, if indeed it is an advantage, is that it houses the only auditorium left in any 13-grade school in the county. However, the auditorium must serve the entire enrollment of the four-school Fairhope complex.

Moving up the bay to Daphne, one finds many of the same problems at the elementary and junior high schools. Old and inefficient heating systems, too little library seating space, classes in the auditorium, bus loading zones unprotected from the weather, termites, drainage problems, obsolete and poorly designed facilities. The list seems endless.

In discussing the Spanish Fort Elementary School, one of the newer schools in the county system, school officials spent a couple of minutes tracing the migration of the campus library from cafeteria to trailer to temporary classroom.

No school, regardless of size or age, has escaped all of the problems plaguing the system. For some, the battle may be just beginning. For others, catastrophe seems to lurk behind every new calendar page.

Time can be a great healer, it is said. But sometimes, time just runs out.



