

Senate Education  
Oversight Subcommittee

Report on the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School

March 2017



Members of Subcommittee:

Senator Greg Hembree, Chairman  
Senator John Matthews  
Senator Darrell Jackson, Sr.  
Senator Tom Young, Jr.

The Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School is charged with serving as an alternative school for persons interested in continuing their elementary or high school education or in taking refresher courses preparatory to college, with emphasis on personal development, vocational efficiency, and effective citizenship. The school assists 16-19 year old students who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out in advancing their education with the goal of attaining a GED and transitioning to the workforce or higher education in a quasi-military residential environment. The school should increase the use of technology in recruitment and information dissemination. The board policies should be updated to represent current practices of the school. The school's Board of Trustees should take a formal role in the management of the school by adopting the budget and policies of the school through a vote of the board members.

## ***I. Agency at a Glance***

### *Mission*

The Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School's mission is derived from state law and further refined by a series of temporary provisos in the state appropriations act, as well as from policy decisions by the leadership of the school. Code §59-51-20 states that Wil Lou Gray will "serve as an alternative school..." and that it will "provide training for persons interested in continuing their elementary or high school education or in taking refresher courses preparatory to college, with emphasis on personal development, vocational efficiency, and effective citizenship". While proviso 5.1 requires that the school provide services for students 15 and over deemed truant and cooperate with Department of Juvenile Justice, the Family Courts, and School districts to transfer students to the Opportunity School, proviso 5.2 states that students 16 and over may be eligible to take the General Educational Development (GED) if they are unable to remain enrolled due to the necessity of immediate employment or for enrollment in post-secondary education. The stated mission and practice of the school seems to be more narrowly construed than the legislation would allow.

As the role of the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School has evolved, the agency has interpreted the mission to be serving South Carolinians between the ages of 16 and 19 who are at risk of:

- Being retained in their grade.
- Dropping out of school and not completing their education.
- Not making the transition from public school to the workforce.
- Being truant from school, or whose home, school or community environment hinders rather than enhances the chance that they will stay in school and become prepared for employment.

### *History*

Dr. Gray opened and operated seven Opportunity Schools in 1915 including Young's School in Laurens County and in 1921 started the Tamassee DAR School. Over the next several years, the opportunity schools continued to meet on various college campuses that chose to host them. However, the school in West Columbia that bears Dr. Gray's name began operation in 1947 after the General Assembly appropriated \$65,000 to establish a year-round Opportunity School on the site of the Columbia Army Air Base. The original property consisted of 998 acres and 200 buildings. In 1957, the property was officially transferred by the federal government to the state. Also in that year, the SC General Assembly established the school as a body politic with a Board of Trustees eventually designating 107 acres of the property as the Opportunity School campus. Since then, portions of the property have been parceled out for other purposes, leaving the current 87 acres for the campus.

## *Operations/Programs*

The Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School is a residential alternative school utilizing a military model to assist 16 - 19 year olds in improving their academic ability, personal development and vocational skills to allow them to pursue higher education opportunities and/or succeed in the workplace. The school has three terms annually of 14 weeks each. While most students only attend a single term, a student may attend for subsequent terms if they are making satisfactory progress and exhibit a desire to succeed. The primary goal of the school is to have students attain a GED upon completion. All students attending the school participate in Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC).

## *Governing Authority:*

Per S.C. Code §59-51-30, the Board of Trustees of the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School consists of 14 members, 12 of whom are elected at-large by the SC General Assembly. The other two members are the Governor and State Superintendent of Education, who serve ex-officio with full voting privileges. Elected members of the Board serve a term of four years.

<b>Current Member</b>	<b>Position Title</b>	<b>Elected By</b>	<b>Appointed Date</b>	<b>Expiration Date</b>
Bennett, Earle M.	Member	The General Assembly	5/27/2015	6/30/2019
Blalock, Deborah S.	Member	The General Assembly	5/27/2015	6/30/2019
Edwards-Taylor, Marilyn	Member	The General Assembly	4/2/2014	6/30/2018
Collar, Robert Nicholas	Member	The General Assembly	5/27/2015	6/30/2019
Hamilton, Thomas B. Jr.	Member	The General Assembly	4/2/2014	6/30/2018
England, Bryan	Member	The General Assembly	4/17/2012	6/30/2016
Adams, Doris M	Member	The General Assembly	4/17/2012	6/30/2016
Cooner, Douglas Stewart	Member	The General Assembly	5/1/2013	6/30/2017
Hanyak, Angela M	Member	The General Assembly	4/27/2016	6/30/2017
Thomas, Reginald J."	Member	The General Assembly	4/27/2016	6/30/2020
Hart, Russell E.	Member	The General Assembly	5/1/2013	6/30/2017
Sims, W. Wayne	Member	The General Assembly	5/1/2013	6/30/2017
Governor	Member	Ex Officio		
State Superintendent of Education	Member	Ex Officio		

## *Education*

The school uses the Testing for Adult Basic Education (TABE) exam to assess the student's level of academic attainment upon entry into the program. Students are then grouped by their measured academic ability. All students attend the same seven daily classes, Mathematics, Social Studies, Science, Language Arts, Pre-Vocational, Physical Education and JROTC, during the 14-week semester. Students stay with the same classmates throughout the day as they move from class to class. The academic day lasts from 8:30 in the morning until 3:45 in the afternoon. Although student results vary, the primary goal of the academic program is to prepare students to take and pass the GED test in order to attain a high school equivalency diploma. This certification is often the minimum requirement for employment or to pursue goals in higher education such as technical college or four-year college programs. The director states that students average 1.5 years of academic progress over the course of the 14-week semester and some make drastically greater gains as measured by the TABE at the end of the semester. The schools report card indicates academic improvement of 21 months in reading and 18 months in mathematics for those students ineligible to take the GED.

## *Vocational Training*

In keeping with the mission of preparing students for transitioning to the workforce, the school offers several vocational training opportunities. This includes the OSHA 10 Cards, which is a Department of Labor-approved ten hour online training program in either construction or general industry. Students 18 and over are able to earn a National Safety Council Forklift Training certificate. Additionally, the school collaborates with the Lexington 2 school district to administer the WorkKeys certification testing. This widely-used tool assesses an individual's basic employment skills. On-site career and technology classes include Media Arts, Building Construction and Automotive Technology. For students with disabilities, the school has a full-time SC Vocational Rehabilitation counselor to assist eligible students through assessment and opening cases for transfer to their local Vocational Rehabilitation office for additional career guidance and placement.

## *Health/Guidance*

As a residential program, the school must also address any health and guidance needs the students have while enrolled in the program. The school employs a staff of nurses and guidance counselors to manage the students' physical and emotional issues as they occur. The administration reports that as many as 80% of the students may be taking prescription medications in a semester. While the health issues and prescriptions vary widely, the most common medications taken by the students are to address symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Injuries that occur while students are enrolled are also treated in the school's infirmary.

## *Athletics*

Students participate in a physical education class five times per week and physical training three times a week before school. The school has two tennis courts and a recreational field for other sports on the campus. Students are encouraged to take part in a variety of physical activities including running, bicycling and team sports such as basketball and softball. The school also has strength training equipment and aerobic exercise machines available to students in the gymnasium. During physical education activities, the students are supervised by cadre staff and recreational specialists.

The school also has a ropes course on the grounds of the campus. This course is intended for personal development and team building. All students go through the ropes course during the semester. In addition to the physical aspect, completing the course also requires problem solving and teamwork to negotiate many of the obstacles. Typically, a full day is needed to complete all aspects of the course.

### *Behavior modification/Military aspect*

While not in statute, the school adopted a quasi-military model in 1998 when they partnered with the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program. After ten years, this partnership was not renewed in 2008. However, since separating from the National Guard program, the school continues to require students to participate in JROTC, wear uniforms and march to class. As part of the behavior modification process at the school, other aspects of daily life are regimented such as no talking during meals and requiring students to clean the dormitories. The administration believes that in addition to the primary goal of attaining high school equivalency credentials, it is also important to provide structure and discipline to help students prepare for participation in the workforce.

The staff who supervise the residential program are referred to as “cadre”. Most of these individuals are former military and/or corrections employees. The cadre ensure discipline and resolve any behavior issues among the students. The school states that they have had no significant incidents in recent years. The school report card reports no suspensions or expulsions for violent offenses in 2015.

The school employs a student discipline code and refers matters of a serious nature to the local police. The school makes a distinction between “school boy fights” (i.e. pushing and shoving between two students and rarer more serious physical confrontations. The former is handled by the cadre staff while the latter results in calling the local police and having the student removed from the school.

### *Physical Facilities*

Residing in West Columbia on 87 acres of the former Army Air Base just off of Boston Avenue, the campus of the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School is somewhat secluded. The grounds have four dormitories which can house approximately 35-38 students each. Three of the dorms are for male students with one reserved for female students. The campus also has a separate cafeteria building where meals are prepared and consumed, a multipurpose building for assemblies, a gymnasium and an administration building. All of the buildings that the administration displayed on the tour provided to oversight staff were very clean and in good physical condition. Two of the buildings on the campus are rented to the adjacent Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. Although one of these buildings was originally built as a dormitory and could be converted to that purpose, its proximity to the female dorm raises concerns about housing male students at that location.

### *Other Educational Opportunities for academically at risk youth*

School districts in South Carolina offer multiple alternative school opportunities for students at risk of failing or dropping out of school, but these are not residential programs nor are they based upon a military regimen. The academic goals of these programs are often broader since they are geared towards either getting students back into their home school or providing the Carnegie credits required for graduation as well as preparation for GED attainment if appropriate.

The only public entity in the state that utilizes a military style program for assisting dropouts is the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe program. Previously housed at the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School through a partnership agreement, this program accepts 16-18 year-olds who have dropped out or are in danger of failing. The Youth ChalleNGe Program is evaluated by the National Guard Bureau and must follow the national directives in the operation of the program. Currently operating in 37 states, the Youth ChalleNGe program is funded with 25% state funds and 75% federal funds. They conduct two 22-week classes annually. Once a student completes the residential 22-week class at Camp McCrady on Ft. Jackson, the student must spend a year in a mentoring program in his/her home community. While the Youth ChalleNGe program also provides a core educational curriculum to assist students in obtaining either a high school diploma or GED, the focus of the program is on life skills and

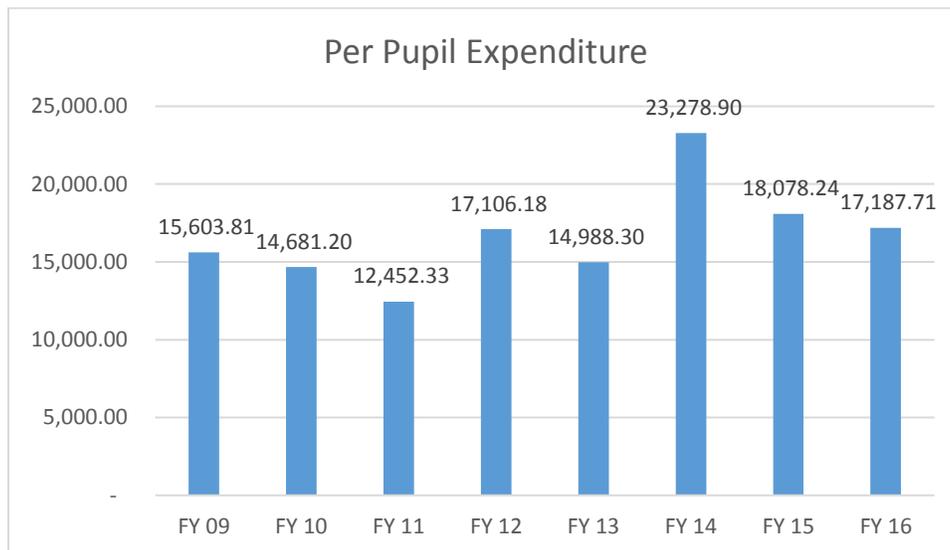
changing behaviors. Unlike Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School, this program also accepts non-violent, court-involved youth. The program graduates between 250-300 students annually with a certificate of completion though not necessarily a GED.

***Finance:***

***Expenditures***

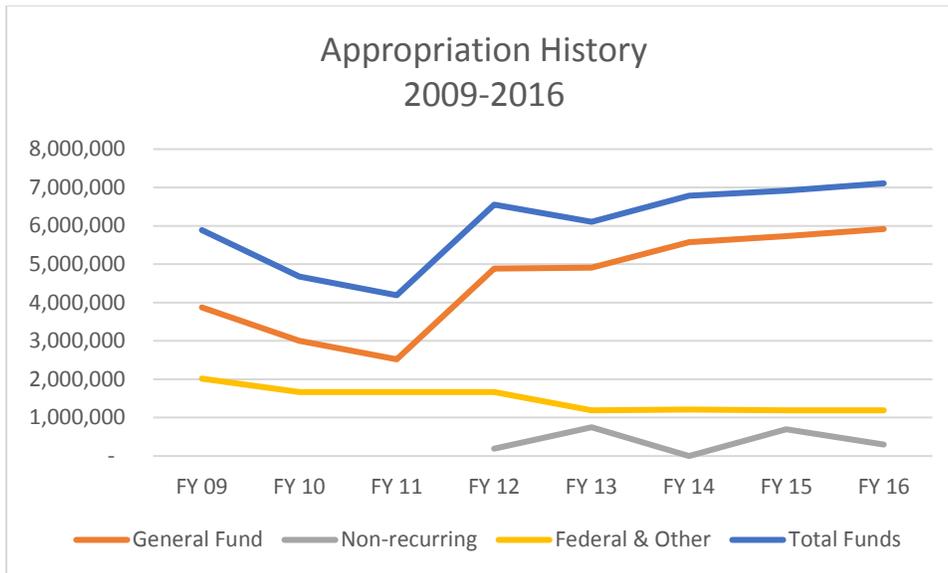
For FY 14-15, the agency had \$6.96 million in total expenditures. Approximately 59% of all expenditures were directly related to salaries and fringe costs. The total amount of federal expenditures was \$158,552, or 2% of the total and were related to food services. The academic program accounted for \$1.67 million or 24% of all expenditures. Expenditures for vocational education only accounted for 3% of the agency’s total expenditures.

Per pupil expenditures at the school have varied over the years. Fiscal Year 2014 appears to be an anomaly as the school engaged in spending on capital improvement projects with non-recurring funds that were appropriated in the previous year. At the same time, 2014 saw an actual decline in the number of students served.



***Funding History***

Since FY 08-09, the school’s recurring General Fund appropriation has increased by 53%. The single largest increase was immediately following the recession in FY 11-12 when the school received an increase of 94% over the reduced recurring base of \$2.5 million. Since FY 11-12, the school’s general fund base has had an average annual increase of 5%, resulting in 20% growth over the past four years. In addition to these increases in recurring funds, the school also received non-recurring appropriations of \$750,000 in FY 12-13 for window replacement, \$700,000 in FY 14-15 for paving, asbestos mitigation, cybersecurity and other infrastructure needs, and another \$300,000 in FY 15-16 for additional infrastructure improvements. For FY 15-16, the school had a recurring general fund appropriation of \$5.9 million and total funds appropriation of \$7.1 million.



*FY 16 based upon estimated students and budgeted*

### *Budget Request*

For FY 16-17, the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School has requested \$500,000 in non-recurring funds for capital improvements including new tile in the kitchen cafeteria and the shower areas of the dorms. The school has also requested to transfer funding from the “other operating” portion of the budget to “personal services and fringe” in order to hire an Information Technology Support Staff position and a Public Information Officer position. Although not reflected in the agency’s original budget planning document, the school subsequently revised their request to include two proviso changes which were both granted in the House and Senate versions of the budget. These included having the school added to proviso 117.65 (Healthcare Employee Recruitment and Retention) and the deletion of proviso 5.9 (WLG: Capacity).

### *Staffing*

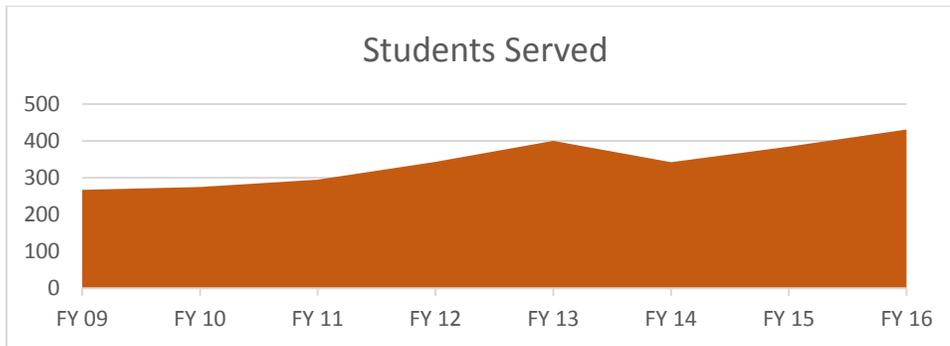
Currently, the school has 95.41 authorized FTE’s of which 86.15 are state-funded positions. The authorized FTE’s include 16.15 unclassified positions. A full forty-nine percent of the classified positions have the title of Human Services Specialist II. This refers to the cadre staff who supervise students in the dormitories and outside of the classrooms. In FY 14-15, the school had a turnover rate of 16.09%. This is slightly lower than the state-wide average for non-higher education state agencies. All of the teachers at the school returned from the previous year. The school’s report card indicates that all of the teachers at the school are certified and have advanced degrees. The administration reports that they do not have difficulty in filling vacancies with the exception of nursing staff because they cannot compete with the private sector in paying nurses. The school requested to be included in proviso 117.65 (Healthcare Employee Recruitment and Retention). This would allow the school to pay healthcare staff a bonus of up to \$10,000 annually. The House and Senate added the school to this proviso.

### *Student Population*

The school accepts students from across the state but the distribution of the students is somewhat uneven due to a variety of factors including population variations. When asked if the school’s marketing strategy targeted areas of the state with higher dropout rates, the administration explained that they recruit through state-wide advertising with an emphasis on more populated regions.



of House Ways and Means Committee. The proviso was deleted this year in the version of the budget passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate.



## ***II. Issues***

### ***A. Technology***

The school has limited information on its webpage and had not been posting board meeting notices or meeting minutes on-line. The school's policies and myriad other information generally posted by school districts and charter schools are not available on the school's website. The director explained that they have had difficulties with the vendor that they used to maintain the website but planned to bring this activity in-house to be performed by a staff person at the school. Since the stated target demographic of the school is 16-19 year-olds, and these are high consumers of social media, it appears that the school underutilizes this medium for recruitment and providing information to families, friends and interested parties. The most recent post to the school's Facebook page was in October 2015 and the most recent post to its twitter account was in May 2014.

- **Agency Recommendation:** While the school has responded to the Office of Senate Oversight's recommendation by posting the Board of Trustee meeting notices and minutes on the website, the school should increase the amount of information available on the website and improve the use of social media for the purposes of recruitment and information. The school should proceed with plans to maintain the website in-house and consider posting information on both the website and social media. The additional staff the school plans to hire (Information Technology Support Staff and Public Information Officer) could be used to accomplish this recommendation.

### ***B. Student Follow-up, tracking and reporting***

The method the school utilizes for tracking student outcomes relies on surveys and polling students. The school was unable to provide the rate of non-responses to its surveys. Consequently, the data reported in the accountability report and elsewhere for student outcomes may over represent positive outcomes. The school also expressed concern that school districts are reluctant to refer students in danger of dropping out because this would impact the district's dropout rate under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). However, the State Department of Education reports that, under ESSA, students who attend a state-approved GED program and achieve the GED within two years are not counted as dropouts. The Department indicated that the reluctance of school districts to refer students in danger of dropping out is because Wil Lou Gray does not adequately report the GED results of students to the school districts in order to report for ESSA compliance. However, once this confusion about the reporting was raised in the oversight report, the school contacted the appropriate staff at the

Department of Education and determined that because the student's GED results were being reported via the Lexington Two school district, which administered the test, they were showing up as part of that district's reporting. The school has now worked out a reporting system that will ensure that student's test results are adequately reported for ESSA purposes. This will resolve the concern that public schools in the state are reluctant to refer students due to the potential for an adverse reflection in the federal dropout rate.

- **Agency Recommendation** The school's administration should continue to coordinate with the staff of the SC Department of Education to ensure that the GED reporting adequately meets any federal and state reporting requirements. Additionally, the school should work to improve the tracking of students completing the program for a year after completion and include in the student results data indicating what portion of completing students are being reported versus those not tracked.

### C. *Improved Forestry Practices Proviso*

Proviso 5.4 authorizes the Trustees of the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School to carry out improved forestry practices on the timber holdings at the school and apply the revenue derived from these activities for further improvements. However, the authority provided in this temporary proviso has not been exercised in at least the past twenty years. Also, the director indicates that there are no plans to carry out forestry practices in the future.

5.4. (*WLG: Improved Forestry Practices*) *The Trustees of the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School may carry out improved forestry practices on the timber holdings of the school property and apply the revenues derived from them and any other revenue source on the property for the further improvement and development of the school forest and other school purposes.*

- **Legislative Recommendation** Delete proviso 5.4. Should the school elect to undertake forestry practices in the future, then the school can request that the proviso be reinserted.

### D. *Board Policies*

It appears that the most recent revisions to the policies occurred in 2000. The policy manual references numerous outdated policies. For example:

- In multiple locations in the policies, the population to be served by the school is described as citizens of South Carolina 16 to 18 years of age when in fact the school now serves 16 to 19 year olds as mentioned in the school's mission statement.
- The school term designated in the Board Policy Manual is two terms which include 90 days of instruction each. The school actually operates on a schedule of three terms of 14 weeks each.
- Under the student Code of Conduct, the Policy Manual states that, "Discipline is handled through the approved discipline code (see JICDA-R). All disciplinary decisions made under the Youth ChalleNGe Academy are final." The Youth ChalleNGe Academy is no longer part of the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School and is currently physically located at Fort Jackson under the auspices of Adjutant General.
- **Agency Recommendation** Board policies should be reviewed and updated as needed to reflect current operating procedures at the school. The school could use the resources of the SC School Boards Association, of which it is a member, to assist in the revision of the policy manual. Once the policies have been updated, the Board should review, revise and adopt the updated policies through a vote of the

Board. As policy changes are adopted by Board in the future, the Policy Manual should be updated to reflect these changes.

### *E. Composition of the Board of Trustees*

Although the Governor and State Superintendent of Education are ex officio members of the Wil Lou Gray Board of Trustees, with full voting privileges, the current director (who has worked at the school for 40 years) does not remember either of these officials ever attending a board meeting. The minutes for the past two years verify their absence at meetings. This means that two of the fourteen positions on the Board are effectively vacant.

- **Legislative Recommendation** Revise the composition of the Board of Trustees. The statute could be amended to revise the Governor and State Superintendent of Education’s participation in the Board to one of the following options:
  1. In their absence, allow them to have a designee perform their duties as board members.
  2. Give each of them an appointment to the board in lieu of serving themselves.
  3. Remove them from the membership of the Board of Trustees.

### *F. Inactive School Foundation*

The school’s administration reports that a 501 (c) (3) foundation had been established at one time but has subsequently become inactive. The success the agency has had in persuading the General Assembly to fund the school’s budget request has rendered the need to raise funds from outside sources unnecessary.

- **Agency Recommendation** The school should consider restarting the foundation to allow it to raise funds through charitable activities/events and to accept donations to help defray some of the capital costs of maintaining the school. Students could participate in these sponsored activities/events as part of their community involvement activities.

### *G. Board Governance/Training*

The Board of Trustees meets three times annually and holds a legislative luncheon in lieu of a February meeting. Two of the six meetings conducted over the past two years took place without a quorum of the members present (both in May). The minutes from the meetings indicate that they have not taken any votes on the agency’s budget, budget request, or any substantive policy matters. The only Board actions reflected in the minutes include adoption of the minutes from the previous meeting and approval of personnel actions. The average length of the meetings was 46 minutes. The governing statutes of the school state that, “The Opportunity School is under the management and control of a board of fourteen trustees...” But, their powers and duties are very limited. Instead, the director is given the authority to “...prescribe the courses of study and make all rules and regulations for the government of the school, within board policy, and is responsible for its operation and management within the limitations of appropriations provided by the General Assembly.” Per S.C. Code §59-51-50

While the director maintains that the Board is kept informed of activities of the school, the lack of votes on issues indicates a limited role for the Board in setting policy to be implemented by the administration of the school and a misunderstanding of the traditional role of a Board of Trustees in the governance of an agency/school.

School district boards and charter school boards have the following requirements for board orientation:

**SECTION 59-19-45.** *Orientation for school district boards of trustees and county boards of education.*

(A) *Within one year of taking office, all persons elected or appointed as members of a school district board of trustees after July 1, 1997, shall complete successfully an orientation program in the powers, duties, and responsibilities of a board member including, but not limited to, topics on policy development, personnel, superintendent and board relations, instructional programs, district finance, school law, ethics, and community relations.*

(B) *The orientation shall be approved by the State Board of Education and conducted by public or private entities approved by the State Board of Education such as the South Carolina School Boards Association.*

**SECTION 59-40-155.** *Orientation programs for board members and administrators.*

(A) *Within one year of taking office, all persons elected or appointed as members of a charter school board of trustees after July 1, 2006, shall complete successfully an orientation program in the powers, duties, and responsibilities of a board member including, but not limited to, topics on policy development, personnel, instructional programs, school finance, school law, ethics, and community relations. The orientation must be provided at no charge by the State Department of Education or an association approved by the department.*

However, the legislation for the Wil Lou Gray Board of Trustees contains no similar statutory provision for orientation. The school has been an associate member of the SC School Boards Association for the past 12 years but has not participated in any board training provided by the Association.

- **Agency Recommendations** The school's Board of Trustees should take a more active role in setting policies for the school by taking recorded votes on substantive matters, such as the school's budget request, the internal budget of the school, and any proposed new or revised policies for the school. The board should also assume a role in the student appeals process to allow students to appeal to an authority separate from the administration of the school whose initial decisions are being challenged.

Board meetings should be scheduled for a time and date when a sufficient number of the members are able to attend to constitute a quorum. Since the May meeting has not had a quorum for the past two years the date for this meeting should be shifted to a date and time that would accommodate the schedules of the Board Members.

The school should arrange for the board members to receive approved orientation/training regarding the powers, duties and responsibilities of a board member.

- **Legislative Recommendations** Amend S.C. Code §59-51-40 to mandate orientation for members of the school's Board of Trustees.

Amend S.C. Code §59-51-40 Powers and duties of board to clearly state that the Board of Trustees has the responsibility for the supervision and control of the affairs and government of the school, including the requirements for the admission of pupils and the rules and bylaws needed for the management of the school.