

Senate Education Oversight Subcommittee Summary Report on the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School March 2017



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.

Agency at a Glance

The school that bears Dr. Wil Lou Gray's name is located in West Columbia on the site of the former Columbia Army Air Base. It operates three terms of 14 weeks annually. With enrollment expected to exceed 400 students this year operations are approaching maximum capacity. For FY 15-16, the school had a recurring general fund appropriation of \$5.9 million and total funds appropriation of \$7.1 million. For FY 14-15, the agency had \$6.96 million in total expenditures. Wil Lou Gray has 95.41 authorized FTE's of which 86.15 are state-funded positions.

Issues

TECHNOLOGY

The school has limited information on its webpage and had not been posting board meeting notices or meeting minutes on-line.

- **Agency Recommendation** While the school has responded to some of the Office of Senate Oversight's recommendation, the school should increase the amount of information available on the website.

STUDENT FOLLOW-UP, TRACKING AND REPORTING

The school expressed concern that school districts are reluctant to refer students in danger of dropping out because this would negatively impact the district's dropout rate under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The State Department of Education reported that, under ESSA, students who attend a state-approved GED program and achieve the GED within two years are not counted as dropouts. However, it was ultimately determined that because 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 method the school utilizes for tracking student outcomes relies on surveys and polling students who return for graduation. Staff were unable to provide the rate of non-responses to its surveys.

Agency Recommendation: While the confusion about GED reporting has been resolved, 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. The school should also work to improve the tracking of students completing the program.

IMPROVED FORESTRY PRACTICES PROVISIO

Proviso 5.4 which authorizes the Trustees of the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School to carry out improved forestry practices on the timber holdings at the school. However, the authority provided in this temporary proviso has not been exercised in at least the past twenty years.

- **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.**

BOARD POLICIES

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

Agency Recommendation: Board policies should be reviewed and updated as needed to reflect current operating procedures at the school.

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 meeting minutes for the past two years verify their absence at meetings.

- **Legislative Recommendation: Revise the composition of the Board of Trustees.**

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.

- **Agency Recommendation: The school should consider restarting the foundation.**

BOARD GOVERNANCE/TRAINING

The Board of Trustees meets only three times annually. 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 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."

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