

# NOW WHO WILL SCHOOL OUR KIDS?

The Marvell-Elaine School District—and all of us—face the imminent loss of our schools this fall by orders of the state Board of Education. The state directed in December that the school district be dissolved at the end of this school year because the state board's experts had determined that the elementary and high schools were failing to give our children the quality of education that the law now mandates for every child in Arkansas. Now that job will be given to one or perhaps two other districts in this region—maybe outside Phillips County—and we now



must hope, and pray, that those districts will have the resources and the skilled people to overcome the obstacles that Marvell and Elaine have confronted and that we are afraid already confront those districts, too, at least in some measure.

By March 1, Marvell-Elaine must make arrangements with one or more other school districts in the region to take the 300 children of Marvell and Elaine and provide the rich education the state says Marvell-Elaine cannot. The state board must approve the plan or develop one of its own by May 1. The likeliest prospects are Barton, Brinkley, Clarendon, Lee County and Helena-West Helena. Helena-West Helena itself, however, was cited by the Board of Education for the same failures as Marvell-Elaine, except it has far more than the 350 students the law now says a school district must have to avoid automatic consolidation. Marvell-Elaine was exempted from the 350-student requirement until now because of its remoteness—the long distance to other schools that meet the state's minimum standards. Those distances make consolidation and busing challenging, but it is a challenge we must find ways to meet for the welfare of the children.

Marvell and Elaine follow many hundreds of communities in eastern and southern Arkansas that have lost population across the last century and with it industry, business, tax base and people with the education, skills and motivation to provide what the state constitution demands: a suitable education for every child. For most of those communities, the consolidation forced by the law has indeed meant a better education for the children in schools with a bigger curriculum, resources and teachers who met qualification standards. But it also usually has sped the decline of those communities. That is a peril that Marvell and Elaine and all of us, including the Boys, Girls, Adults Community Development Center, must contemplate and see what we can do both to enhance our children's opportunities and to save our community.

The report in the state media by the professionals at the Education Department on all the shortcomings of the Marvell-Elaine schools was depressing to read. It recounted the district's unusual difficulties, including the theft of resources by an employee, the very low performance of children on standardized tests, the unusually large shortage of certified teachers and the quality of much of the instruction, especially in literacy. There is no need to repeat all of it here. Nor is there profit in bitterness and continuing protests over the state's action. The educational and social development of children to prepare them for a happy and fulfilling life has been BGACDC's major purpose for all these years, and we are intent now upon finding the best remedy for consolidation. It is the most important task the community has faced in our time.