



Letter to the Editor, Sierra Vista Herald

Topic: Fort Huachuca Accommodation Schools and HB2821

From: Larry Portouw, President, Fort Huachuca 50

Thursday, February 21, 2008, the Fort Huachuca 50 celebrated its twentieth year solely dedicated to the economic development of the Sierra Vista area and the continued development of Fort Huachuca. We were particularly pleased with the Sierra Vista Herald's lead editorial that morning praising our work over those many years. The organization's many volunteers who have given substantial amounts of time, money and hard work to build the '50's reputation and effectiveness appreciated it.

Our guest speaker at our annual dinner that evening, Anna Chavez, Governor Napolitano's Assistant Chief of Staff and military affairs advisor, reminded all of us, "That while many do believe another round of BRAC will never happen, in reality, it will come again and you need to remain focused." Our community's focus in the last BRAC is responsible for the Fort's success. Data collection in the last BRAC round was extensive and detailed.

One of the topics that garnered much attention was Arizona education. It took tenacious and direct engagement by Fort and community leadership to convince the "bean counters" that direct examination of the local schools, especially the accommodation district, was the correct way to evaluate education in relation to Ft Huachuca and its families. This moved a tick mark from the minus to the plus column.

Many people do not appreciate that at any given time 700-800 active duty men and women from Fort Huachuca are deployed around the world. Many children of these deployed soldiers are in the accommodation schools and their anxieties naturally run higher than their student counterparts do throughout much of the country. Despite a long military career with many deployments, for the first time I am now at home with a family member deployed—a brother in Fallujah, Iraq. It's more difficult than I appreciated and renews my respect for the burden carried by those at home.

The BRAC analysts came to appreciate the rather unique role of the Fort's accommodation schools and the challenges faced by many of their students. To remove the ability to apply federal impact aid where it is needed will return our

P.O. Box 2898 • Sierra Vista, Arizona • 85636-2898

www.huachuca50.org



schools to the “minus” column, and more importantly, increase the already heavy burden on the children of deployed service members.

The State Auditor’s Office ruling in 2007 caught many off guard, especially since year after year the accommodation schools received good financial reviews. While I disagree with the ruling, its retroactive application, and its deleterious impact on the schools’ students, we are fortunate to have our local elected representative, Jennifer Burns, leading an effort to correct this problem. I salute her and the other legislators who are sponsoring HB2821 and encourage all to get behind this bill to ensure passage.

I will not belabor how one got to HB2821, but the legislation does offer to fix some glaring problems. The first is the creation of a 5-member Governing Board instead of the present one-person school board. Second, it again restores federal impact aid to its rightful role for maintenance and operations without an equal offset of state monies. And third, it eliminates the retroactive provision back to 2004 to adjust for the supposed over expenditures found perfectly acceptable by state auditors in previous annual audits. These are the major elements of the proposed legislation. A copy of the bill and a fact sheet are available on the Fort Huachuca 50 web site (www.huachuca50.org) in the documents library.

Now is the time for local residents to get behind this bill. The legislature is in session. I encourage every reader to contact these legislators and ensure HB2821 is passed: John B. Nelson, Chairman of the Counties, Municipalities and Military Affairs Committee at inelson@azleg.gov or call 602-5872 or fax 602-417-3112; Mark Anderson, Chairman of Education (K-12) Committee at manderson@azleg.gov or call 602-926-4467 or fax 602-417-3018.

I would also encourage readers to contact Jennifer Burns’ office and thank her for her efforts on behalf of the students at the accommodation schools and their parents. She may be reached at jburns@azleg.gov or call 602-926-5836.

Passage of HB2821 is important for a number of reasons, the least of which is the continuing viability of Fort Huachuca and our community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lawrence J. Portouw".

Lawrence J. Portouw
President