

Atlanta Urban League
239 Auburn Ave., N. E.
Atlanta, Ga.

FACTS

Published by
League of Women Voters of Atlanta

VOL. XXIX

April, 1956

No. 4

HOW CAN WE HAVE BETTER SCHOOLS?

Published monthly except August and December by League of Women Voters of Atlanta. Publishing headquarters—415 Henry Grady Bldg., Atlanta, Ga. Entered as second-class matter at Atlanta, Ga., under Act of March 3, 1879. League Membership, \$3.00, which includes subscription to FACTS.

President—Mrs. Harry Dunstan

Editor—Mrs. Robert Granitz

Assistants this issue—Mrs. G. Ray Mitchell and Mrs. William L. Pulgram

HOW CAN WE HAVE BETTER SCHOOLS?

We all believe in the best possible education for our children, but what are we doing about local schools? Are we giving them all the support we can? How much more could we give? Do we know how the money is used? Have efforts been made to let the Board of Education know the citizens are interested and eager to have good schools? Are we prepared to meet a request for higher school taxes? Have we related school needs to the best interests of Atlanta? Has the Board of Education forcefully put its case to the public?

Positive and well-informed answers to these questions will mean better schools for Atlanta. Good schools are important to the city's welfare. They produce better citizens with higher earning power, attract business firms and new industries to the community and hence reduce relief rolls and juvenile delinquency. We need the best schools we can afford.

A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

Atlanta citizens have a special opportunity during the next few years—if they will use it—to participate in the solution of local school problems.

The limit on school taxes has been removed, and starting in 1957, school finances will be separated from city general finances. This is a move toward more responsive and responsible government. It places the power to finance education in the hands of those responsible for providing it. It should give the voters a clearer picture of school needs, administration and resources than they have had in the past.

Several efforts have already been made to help the citizen react intelligently to the changes the financial independence of the schools will bring. Early this year the Board of Education released the School Study Council or "Ivey" Report on the school system, its current and future needs. A study now in progress, the Buehler Report on the city's financial picture, is expected to be out in the early fall. And a budget law—the first for Atlanta schools—has been passed. The new budget law provides for public hearings in advance of the budget's adoption, and the first hearing on the 1957 school budget is scheduled for December, 1956.

THE BUDGET LAW CONTROVERSY

Until Senate Bill 141, the budget law for Atlanta schools, was passed, the city charter contained only a few vague provisions for making and administering a school budget. The charter said a budget should be made; that it could not exceed expected revenue; that salary funds could not be diverted to other purposes; that the Mayor could veto the budget, but that the Board of Education could override the veto. Definite procedures for preparing the budget, estimating revenue, or making amendments during the year were omitted.

The League of Women Voters of Atlanta had long urged a modern budget law for the schools. The schools' coming financial independence pointed up this need, and the Ivey Report listed it as primary legislation. Budget legislation was requested by the Atlanta Board of Education when the General Assembly met last January.

The resulting bill has been a subject of controversy for many reasons, some of which may arise from the fact that there is no model budget law which can be applied to all school systems. Senate Bill 141 is based on the model city charter of the American Municipal Association, Atlanta's budget law and the more recent Fulton County budget law.

WHAT'S IN THE LAW

The main provisions of the new budget law are as follows:

- a. The position of comptroller is created with duties similar to those of the city comptroller. He is to be appointed by the Board of Education.
- b. A Budget Commission is set up consisting of the comptroller, the superintendent of schools, the president of the Board of Education and two members of the Board of Education elected by the Board.
- c. The method of preparing the budget is outlined: The Comptroller, acting for the Budget Commission, interviews department heads, does the physical preparation of the budget and presents it to the Board of Education. The Budget Commission reviews all budget estimates, may hold public hearings on them and may revise them. The Commission must approve the budget, the explanatory message and recommendations before submission to the Board of Education each November.
- d. The budget cannot exceed the expected income, and income anticipations are limited to the previous year's actual receipts plus a budget increase no greater than the percentage of increase in enrollment.
- e. A summary of the budget as first introduced is to be published in the newspapers in November, and a summary as adopted will also be published in January. Public hearings are scheduled in December and January.
- f. Changes in the budget during the year must be proposed at one Board of Education meeting and acted upon at the next. Emergency changes during the last two months of the year can only be made at a public meeting.
- g. If anticipated income is increased or decreased by law or by a change in the tax rate or changes in grants in aid from other governments, the Board of Education shall revise the budget upon certification of the Budget Commission.
- h. No salaries can be changed during the year except salaries fixed by law or those affected by regulations of the State Board of Education.

PROS AND CONS OF THE BILL

At present, the controversial parts of the bill are Sections 8 and 13.

Section 8, which limits revenue anticipations to the previous year's actual receipts, also provides that budget increases must be in the same ratio as enrollment increases. Section 13 says "nothing herein shall be construed to restrain or limit the Board of Education in the amount of taxes that may be levied by them which are otherwise authorized by law."

The sponsors of the law claim that the last provision in Section 8, cited above, which was added after the law was introduced, was intended to allow the Board to increase the budget slightly without recourse to a tax increase. They say it was not intended to freeze per pupil costs of education. They also point out that the budget may be increased if school taxes are raised and that Section 13 guarantees the Board's power to raise taxes.

Members of the Board of Education insist that the bill will prevent increases in per pupil spending and in teachers' salaries next year and hamper implementation of other sections of the Ivey Report. To the suggestion that the budget be adopted and then revised after the Board raises the school tax levy, Board officials say that they do not see how they can raise taxes except on the basis of a larger budget, which they cannot prepare.

The Board of Education also feels that Section 15 of Senate Bill 141 should be modified. Section 15 provides that teachers' salaries cannot be changed during the year except those salaries fixed by law or affected by regulations of the State Board of Education.

The authors of the budget law say this limitation will eliminate small salary increases at odd times, such as the Board of Education had given in the past, and will aid in the development of a long-term fair system of remuneration for teachers.

The Board of Education points out that salary raises to teachers for length of service or summer study are given at the start of the school year in September. These raises will now have to be held over until January, which the Board feels is unfair to the teachers.

The sponsors of Senate Bill 141 believe that after a year's adjustment to the new law, which would probably include a tax raise during the year, the schools will find that the new budget provisions are workable.

The Board of Education currently feels that Section 8 and 15 must be modified at the next session of the legislature.

SCHOOL PROGRESS THIS YEAR

Meanwhile the schools have moved ahead in implementing the Ivey Report this year. A deputy superintendent for the school system, and area superintendents for the six school areas have been appointed. A city-wide Citizens Advisory Council on Education has been appointed to advise the superintendent of schools, and Area Advisory Committees are in the process of being set up.

Of the \$60 a month raise for teachers the Ivey Report recommended, the school system has been able to grant \$37. Of the recommended \$5 per pupil expenditure for teaching materials, the schools this year will spend \$3. Little or nothing was spent per pupil in this area before.

The Ivey Report urged spending \$3 more per pupil for improved maintenance, and the Board of Education has raised its expenditure \$2. The previous maintenance cost was about \$3 per pupil; this year it will be \$5.

The Board of Education is considering a bond issue to alleviate the classroom shortage, which they estimate will be 500 rooms this fall. A constitutional amendment raising the limit on Atlanta's bonded indebtedness from 7% to 12% of the tax digest, 4% of which would be for schools, is to be voted on at the General Election next November. This must pass before the Board of Education can call for a school bond election.

The president of the Board of Education cites that funds are urgently needed for next year to:

1. alleviate the shortage of classrooms
2. increase per pupil expenditures for instructional materials
3. increase per pupil expenditures for maintenance (Fireproofing is needed in many schools.)
4. bring the cafeteria system under central control (While central control and purchasing is expected to save money, initial expenditures would be required for warehousing, trucks and to bring employees under social security.)
5. provide facilities for the special child
6. provide additional resource personnel recommended by the Ivey Report.

With public hearings on the school budget, the public will be able to assess these needs.