

Excerpt of text from President Obama's first address to a joint session of Congress on February 24, 2009:

“...And I think about Ty'Sheoma Bethea, the young girl from that school I visited in Dillon, S.C. -- a place where the ceilings leak, the paint peels off the walls, and they have to stop teaching six times a day because the train barrels by their classroom. She has been told that her school is hopeless, but the other day after class she went to the public library and typed up a letter to the people sitting in this room. She even asked her principal for the money to buy a stamp. The letter asks us for help, and says, “We are just students trying to become lawyers, doctors, congressmen like yourself and one day president, so we can make a change to not just the state of South Carolina but also the world. We are not quitters.” We are not quitters...”



First lady Michelle Obama hugs eighth-grader and special guest Ty'Sheoma Bethea of Dillon, S.C., before President Barack Obama addresses a joint session of Congress on Tuesday, February 24, 2009, in the House of Representatives Chamber of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. (GEORGE BRIDGES/McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE / February 24, 2009)

Dying S.C. school sees Obama stimulus plan as lifeline

Place president cited in speech prays bill may mean new building

By Howard Witt | Chicago Tribune correspondent

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DILLON, S.C.—Ty'sheoma Bethea went to the public library in this struggling South Carolina town Tuesday night to write a letter to Congress about the economic stimulus bill.

The 8th grader had never thought about writing to Congress before. She didn't even have a clear idea what a "stimulus bill" is. She went to the library because her family has no computer at home, and the handful of computers at her crumbling middle school — hand-me-downs once used by felons in the state prison system—were unavailable.

All the 14-year-old knew was that powerful people in faraway Washington were debating something that might directly help her school, where stained rugs cover holes in the floor, rain pours from the ceiling, classroom temperatures hover in the 50s in the winter and freight trains passing along nearby tracks shake the building so violently that the lights go out several times a day.

"People are starting to see my school as an hopeless, uneducated school which we are not," Bethea wrote, awkwardly but with passion. "We finally want to prove to the world that we have an chance in life just like other schools and we can feel good about what we are doing because of the conditions we are in now we can not succeed in anything."

On Wednesday, congressional leaders reached agreement on President Barack Obama's \$789 billion economic stimulus package, including billions of dollars in aid to states, some of which will be used to repair decrepit schools.

The school money might seem like just another obscure line item in the massive recovery bill. But the students and teachers at the J.V. Martin Junior High School—a school so academically deficient that some of Bethea's 8th-grade peers can't recognize the letters of the alphabet—are hoping the federal money will be a lifeline.

The local school district, already running a \$1.2 million deficit this year just to keep teachers' paychecks from bouncing, does not have anything close to the \$40 million it would take to rebuild J.V. Martin. The school consists of a partially condemned main building constructed in 1896, a "new" wing built in the 1950s and a handful of portable classrooms scattered across the muddy, grassless school grounds.

Obama visited J.V. Martin as a presidential candidate in August 2007 and returned again last year, each time pronouncing himself appalled by the conditions he found here.

"When a child goes to a school that's crumbling, is it any wonder that she gets a sense her education is not important?" Obama said during his first visit.

The president mentioned the school again during his news conference Monday night, securing J.V. Martin as the emblem of the deteriorating schools across the nation that Obama wants to rebuild using stimulus money.

Students and teachers here well remember the moment when Obama, standing on the buckled floorboards of the 1926-era gymnasium where teachers must spread eight trash cans to catch the leaking water whenever it rains, nailed a perfect 3-point basket.

"He said back then, 'No matter what happens, I will not forget you,' " said Principal Amanda Burnette. "And he proved this week that he remembered us."

It's not yet clear how much money the Dillon schools can expect from the stimulus bill. But any amount will help, officials here say.

For 16 years, Dillon School District No. 2, along with 35 other rural and largely black South Carolina school districts along the Interstate Highway 95 corridor, has been waging a protracted court battle against the state, seeking an equal share of school funding from a system that leaves wealthier, whiter communities far better off.

This year, for example, Dillon School District No. 2 has a total of \$8,624 per pupil to spend—half of what the state's wealthiest districts receive. For some of the plaintiff school districts in the lawsuit, which were featured in the 2005 documentary "Corridor of Shame," such limited funds have meant underpaid teachers working in overcrowded schools where raw sewage puddles in hallways and students often must wear hats and gloves in unheated classrooms.

"In South Carolina, the folks with the most votes and the most power are taking care of their kids in their areas," said Ray Rogers, superintendent of the Dillon No. 2 District. "But they are leaving our kids, and lot of others across the state, to whatever fate may bring."

In a state where the Confederate flag still flies in front of the Capitol building, some South Carolina civil rights leaders assert that racism lies behind the school-funding disparities.

"It's by design," said Lonnie Randolph Jr., the chairman of the state NAACP chapter. "It's made that way because it's very similar to what the slavemasters did: Keep the blacks backwards and illiterate so they can't read and understand their rights."

State officials dismiss charges of racism and the assertions of structural inequality contained in the lawsuit. They say they are doing all that is required under the state constitution, which mandates only that the state government provide a "minimally adequate" education to schoolchildren, leaving local communities free to raise and spend more if they choose. The case has been awaiting a decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court for months.

But in a rural town like Dillon, where the local unemployment rate is estimated at 17 percent and 90 percent of the middle-school students come from impoverished homes, raising additional school funds is nearly impossible. Property and sales taxes have long been depressed by the faltering local economy.

And a local bond issue approved by voters in 2007 to construct a new J.V. Martin school building ran aground of the national credit crisis: No bank will loan the school district the construction funds.