

Newsmaker: East Holmes superintendent 'just loved to go to school

Published: February 9, 2004 12:00AM

E. HOLMES DISTRICT A couple who served as his high school biology teacher and guidance counselor helped to steer Gary Sterrett toward his career in education. They supported his efforts as a teen-ager to follow through on what Sterrett said is the best advice he ever received, "Get off the farm and go to college." The East Holmes Local Schools superintendent has spent 33 years in the classroom or as an administrator the past 12 at East Holmes, eight of them as superintendent. This year, he is stressing the importance of a five-year, 1.7-mill levy renewal request on the March 2 ballot that will generate \$550,000 a year. "The East Holmes schools are very fortunate to be in solid financial condition at a time when many school districts are experiencing financial difficulties," Sterrett said. "It is extremely important for us to pass this renewal to keep East Holmes schools moving in a positive direction." Although funding stability is always a school administrator's concern, it is the people side of education that sparked Sterrett's choice of career. "I grew up in Perry County," he said, where his father served 28 years on the school board. "I guess I became an educator because of the teachers I had." Sterrett said his two ambitions as a youngster were to farm and to become an educator. "I grew up on a farm ... was involved with 4-H," he said. "It gave me an opportunity to put some money aside (for college)." His Sheridan High School biology teacher and her husband, the school's guidance counselor, helped to decide his future, he said, when they "took me on a couple college visitations." He settled on Malone College in Canton, "where I met my wife (Penny)," Sterrett said. And as a student teacher at Malone, he discovered the other great love of his life working with students in the classroom. "I just loved to go to school ... to work with the kids," he said. His wife must have, also; she retired last year after 34 years in the classroom. Sterrett began his teaching career in 1971 at Garaway's Third Street School, with 12 students in his classroom. "Piece of cake," he said, smiling. The next year, at Miller Avenue School, reality set in when he had a class of 30, he said. "Education has been very good to me," he said, noting he was never laid off. He continued to teach while completing a master's degree at the University of Akron in educational administration, then later did additional graduate work at Dayton University. After Garaway, during 15 years at Newcomerstown, Sterrett said, "I started off as basketball coach and left as superintendent." He's no longer coaching, and the superintendent said he misses the daily classroom contact with students, but Hiland High School basketball remains a major source of enjoyment. "Tonight, I'll be at a boys basketball game; tomorrow night, girls," Sterrett said during a recent Friday morning interview at the district's administrative offices on County Road 77 in Bunker Hill. The district has been "real fortunate in the success of both programs the 12 years I've been here," he said. "This past year, my wife and I have purchased a cabin at Leesville Lake (in Carroll County)," Sterrett said. "We enjoy traveling," he said. "Three years ago, we went to Alaska. ... We also enjoy the quiet life. "I enjoy fishing ... got an opportunity this summer to go to Canada with a group," he said. "I play golf when there's time." He also enjoys hunting, Sterrett said, and plans to "get back into it more after retirement." "I just have been very blessed," he said. "In my career I've had the opportunity to work with a lot of good people. "This community has been very supportive," he said. "The district never had a need but the community responded

and it's been taken care of." With the family's Perry County farm sold just recently, Sterrett said, his soon-to-be 92-year-old mother is "still going strong" at Walnut Hills Retirement Community, whose caring concern for residents, he said, "I think ... typifies this community. "It is a caring community," he said, "an excellent place for someone to begin a teaching career." Reporter Eric Johnson can be reached at (330) 674-1811 or e-mail ejohnson@the-daily-record.com.