

Magann's Future In County Uncertain

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Consider for a moment the plight of Guilford County School Superintendent Douglas Magann.

A school board majority that consistently supported him on major issues was replaced in April by a majority that regularly rejects his advice.

The new majority approved May 12 a school budget for next year that slices his professional supervisory staff from 42 to 28 and that he has publicly called "an educational disaster."

Board meetings routinely disintegrate into name-calling matches. Communication with some board members is non-existent.

His associate superintendent and personal friend, Willis B. McLeod, Thursday accepted the superintendency of another school system.

With Magann nearing the end of the third year of his four-year contract as superintendent of the 25,000-student rural Guilford system, many school watchers are asking how long the dynamic, combative superintendent will last in the job.

Analysis

Will Magann, not yet 40, resign and move on to another post? If not, will the board majority dismiss him? Short of dismissal, might the board act on or after July 1, as state law permits, to inform the superintendent that his contract will not be renewed when it expires a year later?

Or — on the other hand — has the rigidity of the 4-3 board division that has prevailed on major votes since April been exaggerated by the press? Will tempers cool when the grueling budget process is completed next month, permitting the re-establishment of decorum at meetings and cooperation between Magann and the board on important educational issues?

Magann himself and his supporters on the board, former Chairwoman Evon Dean, Nancy Jo Smith and Dot Lambeth, stress the potential for reconciliation. Smith emphasizes that Magann has not refused to administer the budget that would decimate his staff. "He has indicated that he would run the schools as the board directs him."

But the board majority that approved the budget — Chairwoman Ann Talbert, Betty Smith, Carolyn McGee

and Vance Pegram — sounds less certain that the rift between them and Magann can be patched up.

Asked whether the board should act to buy up the remainder of Magann's contract and, in effect, dismiss him, Betty Smith said: "I don't know. That's something I'd have to think about. I'd have to be convinced that it was fiscally responsible to the people of the county."

Betty Smith, the Guilford College real estate agent whose election last November set the stage for the shift of the board against Magann, is probably the most pessimistic of the board majority about the chances for reconciliation. But the others are non-committal.

For his part, Magann was conciliatory in an interview this week. "You've got a majority of four. But each of those four is motivated differently," said Magann. "It's not a monolith. To say all four are hostile to the superintendent's philosophy is an oversimplification."

Only Pegram, a Greensboro teacher who frequently reiterates his desire to keep administrators and supervisors to a bare minimum, has a theory of education that is clearly opposed to his own, Magann said.

(See Magann: B-2, Col. 1)



Douglas Magann

B2 Greensboro Daily News/Record, Sun., May 24, 1981

Magann

From B-1

"I think there is a bona fide, genuine difference of philosophy" between Pegram and himself, the superintendent said. "But he's the only one I'm sure about."

Magann applied for vacant superintendencies in Alabama and Louisiana late last year but later withdrew the applications for what he called "personal reasons." He now says that no other jobs are under consideration and that he believes his differences with the school board are reconcilable.

"I like to think that nothing where human beings are involved is irreparable," he said. "There's always the possibility of coming to some agreement we can live with."

Such an agreement would be made considerably easier if the Guilford County commissioners chose to grant the county schools a budget increase next month that would make layoffs unnecessary. The cuts to administrative staff — as well as to the ranks of teachers and other employees — have been proposed by the school board as a way to comply with the commissioners' demand for a budget for next year at this year's dollar level.

Even if the commissioners grant no budget increase and one-third of Magann's staff is cut, the superintendent can arrange the remaining administrators and supervisors as he chooses. That right is guaranteed him by a clause in his contract, as he reminded the school board in an executive session last Monday, according to school system sources.

The very fact that he raised the issue of staff rearrangement suggests his determination to make the best of what he considers a bad situation.

Whether other aspects of Magann's four-year contract, which expires in July 1982, were discussed in the executive session is not known. No school board member questioned Friday said he or she has proposed or plans to propose that Magann be dismissed.

Such a dismissal could occur in two ways. If the board majority decided there were "good and just causes" for dismissal, it could hold a hearing and simply fire the superintendent. He then would have to go to court to seek his salary for the remainder of his contract as well as any damages.

More likely, the board would simply buy up the remainder of his contract at the rate of his current annual salary of \$46,740. Magann would be retained as a consultant or sent on his way but would no longer act as superintendent. This method of effective dismissal has been used in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Greensboro systems in the past.

Asked whether she has discussed the possibility of buying up Magann's contract with other board members, Chairwoman Talbert replied: "I'm not at liberty to say all the things board members discuss."

Magann's most inveterate critics on the board, McGee and Pegram, both said they have not discussed the idea of Magann's dismissal with anyone. They declined to comment on whether the board should buy up his contract.

If such non-committal statements sounded ominous for Magann, they were counterbalanced by some other statements. Talbert said, "I can tell you categorically that I don't think the vote on the budget was aimed at Dr. Magann. When the travel budget was cut, for instance, neither his nor Dr. McLeod's travel money was cut."

Pegram said similarly, "At no time have my votes on any matter been based on getting anybody's scalp. I have not targeted anyone."

All four members of the board majority denied charges by the opposing faction that their votes to cut Magann's staff were influenced by several principals who have fought the superintendent since his arrival. "You've got to understand that Dr. Magann has given a mandate that board members are not to talk to principals and principals are not to talk to board members," said McGee.

A change in school law two years ago provides a possible course for the board majority that falls short of dismissal but might have the same effect. Under the new law, a school board can extend or give notice that it will not extend a superintendent's contract any time during the last year of the contract. Thus the board could give Magann notice July 1 that it would not renew his contract when it comes due a year later.

Magann might then decline to stay on as a lame-duck administrator.

But no such permanent break necessarily follows from the strife of the past few months, said Dean.

"All school people have problems and I don't think ours are insurmountable," said Dean. "We don't have to agree with each other and we don't have to agree with Dr. Magann. We just have to be able to work together."

The next test of future board-superintendent relations may be a special board meeting scheduled for 5:30 p.m. Tuesday. The board will consider various options proposed by Magann's staff for student reassignment to alleviate overcrowding at a number of county schools.