

Known As A Unifier, Boggs Seeks Peace In Guilford Schools

By SCOTT SHANE
Staff Writer

When Alexander County school Superintendent Robert M. Boggs pulls in off the mist-shrouded highway and takes a booth at the Coffee Shop, a sort of community hub for the county seat of Taylorsville, nobody's overawed.

The regulars, most of them plain folk from local furniture factories, textile mills and tobacco farms, grip his hand and grin. Some set their coffee down and wave. One man stops by to show Boggs the Christmas ornaments he's fashioned from sand dollars he found at the beach last summer.

"They're pretty," says Boggs, in an impeccable tobacco-country drawl. "Real pretty."

Another man walks up and claps his hand on Boggs' shoulder. "Tell me it ain't true," he says.

Boggs tells him it is true: After 2½ highly successful years running the school system in this rural county in the Brushy Mountain foothills, Boggs is moving Jan. 4 to the top Guilford County school post.

His easy manner with the working people of Taylorsville shows a talent for unimposing leadership that has served him well there; and in five previous years as superintendent in Clinton in eastern North Carolina.

In both places, he rallied parents and educators around the schools, patched up old divisions, and won public backing for a thorough upgrading of school buildings and the curriculum.

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— Robert Boggs

Can he do the same in Guilford County, where the school system is five times the size of Alexander's, the population more diverse and the divisions far deeper?

Boggs thinks he can.

"I appreciate the difference in scale," he says. "I don't expect to be doing all the same things in Guilford County that I'm doing here. Maybe I can't go to every PTA on a cycle of six months. But I'm going to every PTA if it takes me five years."

He's not disturbed that he'll be working for a school board that removed the former su-

perintendent, Douglas Magann, and has split bitterly over many major votes in the last year.

Boggs is associated with the board majority, whose four members feel the dynamic and sometimes abrasive Magann brought too many changes, too fast, to conservative rural Guilford. But the three Magann loyalists in the minority, after repeatedly complaining that the finalists culled from 21 applicants had no experience in a large school system, last

week put their doubts aside and unanimously appointed Boggs.

Boggs is confident that he can parlay that 7-0 vote into the beginning of a new unity for the Guilford schools.

In two grueling interviews with the Guilford board, "I saw seven conscientious board members who are concerned about children," he says.

(See Boggs: B-6, Col. 1)



Boggs

From B-1

He will give the board plenty of alternatives on major decisions, marking one choice as his recommendation, he says. Board members who disagree with him won't become opponents, he says. "Each board member has to vote their convictions. I respect that."

And, he says, they won't be locked out of the "communication system" that will be his first priority when he arrives.

The people who have worked with Boggs in the past share his confidence. They are uniformly enthusiastic about his administrative skills, his willingness to work, and his flexible approach to human relationships.

"Dr. Boggs is very progressive," says Ann B. Glover, an administrator at Sampson Technical College and chairwoman of the Clinton school board. "He pulled our (staff) people out of stagnation. He was able to pull our community together. We saw total involvement of parents for the first time."

"He can get down with grassroots people and be a good old boy," says Marie S. Rudisill, who worked as one of Boggs' top assistants in Alexander before moving to the state Department of Public Instruction in Raleigh a year ago. "But he can also hobnob with the country club set."

"He's a go-getter. It's amazing how he gets things done," says Frederick P. Bard, principal of Stony Point School in a corner of Alexander County that has often felt neglected by school administrators in the past. "He's been in every classroom at my school at least twice already this year."

The object of all this praise was born 40 years ago in Lewisville, a tiny Forsyth County town now swallowed by Winston-Salem suburbs. His father, who died nine years ago, was a workman for the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. His mother runs the cafeteria at Southwest Forsyth Junior High. His brother, Eddie, is a printer in Winston-Salem.

"We worked anywhere from three to 10 acres of tobacco," says Boggs, a tall man with graying hair parted near the middle and strikingly bright blue eyes. "If I wasn't picking our own tobacco crop, I helped other people."

At age 12, he won a ribbon in Guilford County's Oak Ridge horse show, riding the family's strawberry roan. It's a hobby that's stayed with him: he now relaxes on weekends by riding his appaloosa horse, Johnny.

At Southwest Forsyth High School, Boggs played bass in a rock-and-roll band called the Rhythm Kings, drove a school bus and worked part-time at cafes and filling stations. When he graduated, he sold his string bass for \$75 and his '48 Chevrolet coupe for \$225 and put the proceeds down as tuition at Appalachian State University.

While working at Reynolds between terms, Boggs met his wife Catherine, now a first-grade teacher in Alexander County. They have an 11-year-old son, Bart.

Boggs had to do some student-teaching to complete his social studies major at Appalachian. "After about three weeks of it, it was in my blood," he recalls. "I couldn't think of anything in the world I wanted to do more. I clearly love teaching. I still do."

But his rise through the educational ranks took him rapidly out of the classroom.

After three years teaching world history at a Yadkin County high school, he became principal of the neighboring elementary school. After two years there and two more as principal of a Caldwell County elementary, he became assistant superintendent in the Yadkin school system.

In 1975, he took his first superintendency in the 3,500-student Clinton city system. Four years later, he moved on to 5,000-student Alexander.

Meanwhile, he completed a master's and a so-called sixth year degree at Appalachian. In 1979, after five years of night and weekend classes and a dissertation on teacher involvement in school system decision-making, he earned a doctorate in educational administration at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Boggs says he likes to read — most recently he re-read "The Autobiography of Malcolm X." ("What he was trying to say in that book was 'Please listen to me.' You can learn something from anybody," Boggs says.) He likes country music, though he never bought another bass.

He reads poetry — Robert Frost's collected poems sit on the shelf behind his desk in his modest, windowless office. He writes a little, too, calling it "therapeutic," and once gave a book of his poems to his son.

But he doesn't have as much time for horses or poetry or waterskiing as he'd like. Colleagues call him a hard worker and a demanding boss.

"He'll work a board of education to death," says Glover of the Clinton school board. "He's almost a workaholic. I don't know how he stands up under it," says Alexander school board chairman Gene M. Linney, who says Boggs may have to learn to delegate more of the work to others in Guilford County.

In Alexander County, he replaced a county native and long-time principal who had been superintendent for eight years. Relations with the public were poor. "People were anti-schools," says James R. Simeon, former director of the state Department of Public Instruction's regional center serving Alexander County. "They'd defunded a bond issue. They weren't willing to pay for what was needed."

Principals and teachers felt the administration wasn't listening. Traditional sectional divisions — which split the county into the Taylorsville area, the southwest corner near Hickory, and the southeast corner toward Statesville — were becoming a threat to school system cohesion. "We were in a terrible fix," sums up one principal.

By all accounts, Boggs turned the situation around.

With the school board, he started a series of public meetings at every school where parents could sound off. Hundreds attended. A "Citizens First Committee" was formed to drum up support for a new bond referendum.

"The desire (for change) was here already. But it was Dr. Boggs who sparked it," says school board Chairman Linney, 49, who runs a pulpwood operation for the Champion International Paper Co. "People took an interest, simply because they felt like someone was taking an interest in them."

Boggs took the schools' case to the public on a bi-weekly radio program and started an annual written report to the people.

For teachers, he established a "Superintendent's Council" with one teacher representing each of the nine schools. Without principals present, teachers could air gripes and make suggestions.

By repeated visits to county classrooms, Boggs got to know dozens of teachers personally. "He will remember who you are just about every time and he'll use your name," says Fran Jones, a remedial reading teacher at Stony Point School.

Boggs also struck a balance between independence and control that the principals liked. "He respects other people's opinions," says Clark Morton, in his seventh year as principal of the county's only high school. "He's flexible. He does not dictate to you. But on the other hand he has ideas on curriculum and management that he makes sure are put into practice."

"He backs his principals if we have problems," says Stony Point Principal Ballard. "But at the same time if he thinks we could do something some other way, he'll take us aside and tell us in private."

Boggs' efforts paid off most obviously in October 1980 when a \$4.75 million school bond referendum passed by a margin of 2.5 to 1, winning every precinct. People voted for it despite the knowledge that the debt will mean an almost certain rise in taxes, Linney says.

Less dramatically, Boggs began work on a series of curriculum "continuum," subject-by-subject revisions of what was being taught to assure consistency from kindergarten through 12th grade. Teacher workshops have proliferated. The county's geographical split is no longer a serious problem.

During his time in Alexander County, Boggs forced the departure of at least two principals and two administrators whose performance he and the school board considered inadequate, according to school system sources. But he handled the changes with such discretion that no public uproar resulted and even some of the employees involved bear him no grudge.

Indeed, interviews with a score of present and former colleagues and employees of Boggs turned up no one seriously critical of his skills as a school administrator. "He's no Einstein," one says. "He's not the most sophisticated person in the world. But brilliance isn't always the most important thing. He can get along with people, and that's what matters."

So the folks who know him are betting he'll do well in Guilford County.

After less than three years in Alexander, "he's still in his honeymoon period," Linney notes. "He's got so many projects going that no one has time to get mad at him. But I think he'll be able to do just as well in Guilford County. You just have to put some more zeroes on the numbers."

"I wager he'll have that board pulled together and you'll have one of the best school systems in North Carolina," says Glover, the Clinton board chairman. "I think he can do it. If he can't, nobody can."

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