

# GREENSBORO DAILY NEWS

## The Greensboro Record

Vol. 74, No. 179

GREENSBORO, N.C., SUNDAY MORNING, JUNE 28, 1981

C

Fifty Cents

### *Anatomy Of The Downfall Of Superintendent Magann*

By SCOTT SHANE  
Daily News Staff Writer

When the Guilford County school board last week voted 4-3 to pay Superintendent Douglas Magann \$55,000 from a tight budget to relinquish his job a year before the end of his contract, Magann made a telling remark.

"What we arrived at," the 39-year-old superintendent told an impromptu press conference as the television cameras whirled and a dozen reporters scribbled notes, "is something not totally unlike a domestic divorce agreement."

The rise and fall of Doug Magann had elements of an Elizabethan tragedy, in which the hero's downfall is the result of scheming malcontents and the hero's own character flaws. Rumor filled the role that poison might have played on the 16th-century

stage; school board votes took the place of the executioner's ax.

Or the power shift that resulted in Thursday's vote might be compared to a Third World coup, in which the victorious tribe triumphs over its opponents by purging and humiliating their former chief. Sprawling, diverse rural Guilford is indeed a developing country of sorts, divided uneasily between the farm and the subdivision.

But Magann's metaphor is the most apt. Even the statement Chairwoman Ann Talbert read after the vote that ratified Magann's exit echoed the language of dissolved marriage, speaking of "differences, some subtle, others more pointed" that destroyed "the necessary feeling of mutual trust and respect."

When a divorce is announced, friends of the split

couple look for reasons the union failed. What were the seeds that grew into Thursday's vote, with Talbert, Betty Smith, Carolyn McGee and Vance Pegram ousting Magann over the objections of former Chairwoman Evon Dean, Nancy Jo Smith and Dot Lambeth?

\*\*\*

The causes of Magann's premature departure are myriad. But reasons given by both supporters and detractors fall into certain patterns, including the following:

#### Hostile Principals

Dissenting from the vote to oust Magann, Evon Dean laid the blame for the opposition to him primarily on the school principals she said have worked against him. "Certain people have agitated, have planted seeds of hatred and have nurtured them

against the administration," she said.

She tells of an incident that capsulizes her theory of Magann's downfall.

One Saturday in the fall of 1978, about two months after Magann had arrived from Columbia, S.C., as the new Guilford superintendent, Colfax Elementary School Principal Oakley A. Mabe knocked at her door, Dean says.

Mabe said, according to Dean, who adds that his words are given "as close to verbatim as I can recall." "Magann has got to go. I will personally lead the rebellion. One or two infractions will not get him fired. He will die from a thousand cuts."

Dean says she was surprised, because Mabe, who had been one of her closest advisers, had briefed Magann and sized him up before he was hired. Mabe

(See Magann: A-14, Col. 1)



Magann

# Magann

From A-1

recommended that Magann be hired, only to change his mind and make the alleged threats a few months later, Dean says.

In the interim, Mabe had applied for one or more jobs in the new administration but had been turned down, Dean says and others confirm. He felt betrayed and began to work against Magann with rumors and indirect resistance, Dean says.

Magann's supporters on the board and his top aides invariably say that the principals who most persistently opposed Magann were Mabe, 39, now principal of Southwest Elementary; L. Sam Dockery, 53, principal of Southwest High School; and Henry C. Walters, 59, principal of Western Guilford High School.

Dockery and Walters, old-timers who enjoyed greater independence and power before Magann's arrival, resented the young outsider's demand for accountability and consistency in curriculum, Magann's supporters say. The last straw came last year when Earl H. Crotts, a Greensboro principal with much less experience than either Dockery or Walters, was hired as principal of Northeast Senior High at a salary about \$1,500 higher than theirs. They filed grievances against the school system that are still pending before the school board.

Says T.G. Madison, director of secondary education under Magann and himself a veteran high school principal: "I'm sure there are those (principals) who've been non-supportive of the administration. Some have their own personal reasons. Sometimes it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks."

Madison, who declines to mention names, says, "There's more than one way to be non-supportive. If you hear something that's not true and you don't correct it, people go on believing it." Such "people" include board members, Magann's backers note, although the four members who voted to end Magann's contract all deny that any principal has influenced them.

Dockery declined to comment on Magann or his departure. Repeated attempts to reach Mabe were unsuccessful. He did not return calls to his home and office Friday.

But Walters, complaining that Magann's supporters have maligned him in the press, said, "Someone has given (Magann) a lot of bad information about Mr. Dockery and myself. When he first came, we were among his strongest supporters."

And now? "Maybe you could say we're neutral," Walters said. "I think Doug Magann in a lot of ways is a qualified man. He had a lot of good ideas. The way he implemented them was another thing."

Walters, who started his career as a teacher in Granville County when Magann was 5 years old, says he wants to put past quarrels behind him. "It's time for everybody to get back together," he said. "It was a good system before Doug Magann came here and it's a good system now."

## 1979 Rezoning

When Magann arrived he inherited two empty, brand-new schools, Southwest Elementary and Southwest High. Creating an attendance zone for them and addressing problems of underuse and overcrowding elsewhere required an extensive rezoning for the 1979-80 school year.

Like most school rezonings, this one created for the superintendent and the school board some lasting enemies. Most of the strongest critics were residents of the system's western zone who resented the transfer of some students.

Representative of the bitterness of some is a January 1980 letter Graham A. Pope, a western zone resident, returned along with a completed questionnaire to Michael D. Priddy, the school system's director of research.

"I traveled across the county ... during the rezoning episode and filled out your questionnaire and there was no evidence that this survey did anything more than satisfy yours and Dr. McGann's (sic) ego," Pope's letter said. "I have seen the total disregard that you have for people's feelings during rezoning .... On one hand, you say that you support the neighborhood school concept; yet everything that you do destroys it."

The hard feelings of Pope and his neighbors eventually spawned the school board campaign of Betty Smith, a Guilford College real estate agent who finished second in the voting last November. Smith readily acknowledges that her interest in the

board and its performance grew from her dissatisfaction with the rezoning.

Looking back, Magann sees the beginning of his end in Smith's election, which created a 4-4 split on the board. The 4-3 majority that ousted him actually was created later, when board member Bill Gragg, a Magann supporter, left the board when his original, appointed term expired in April.

"The die was cast Nov. 4," Magann said Monday night.

## Personality Conflict

One afternoon nearly two years ago, Magann received a call from an angry Ann Talbert, the superintendent recalls.

She had seen workers retarring the roof of the school system administration building and wanted to know why the roofs of several schools scheduled for retarring weren't given priority.

Magann lost his temper. He was irked at what he perceived to be Talbert's accusatory tone and assumption that the administration was putting its interests ahead of the children's. In fact, the roofers were at the administration building because it was a sultry day and their supervisor thought the tar fumes might disturb the children, Magann says.

The incident, which ended when Talbert burst into tears, takes on some significance in light of more recent events. Talbert came to the board as a devotee of Evon Dean and a committed supporter of Magann and his policies. But over the past year, she has gradually shifted allegiance, voting with increasing frequency against Magann's requests and recommendations.

Pure personality conflict apparently played at least as important a role as deeper philosophical difference in Magann's undoing. Minor clashes have led to long silences between board members and Magann; the silences have bred mutual misunderstandings; and the misunderstandings have led to distrust.

Asked in a recent telephone interview why she had not confronted Magann with what she believed to be an error in an administration report on staffing, Carolyn McGee said, "I don't talk to him anymore. Apparently my questions intimidate him. He certainly intimidates me."

The gulf between Magann and the four board members who removed him has grown steadily wider over the past six months. Eventually, neither party was willing to cross the gulf — not even to confront the other party with accusations and suspicions, much less to seek reconciliation.

## Professional Superintendent Vs. Amateur Board

The present school board comprises a teacher (Pegram), a real estate agent (Betty Smith), an administrative assistant in the development office at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (Dean), and four housewives.

No member has had experience operating an organization as large or complex as the county school system, with its \$60 million budget and thousands of employees.

It is probably a typical board. Most became interested in running for office through involvement in parent-teacher associations or anger over a particular principal or issue.

In theory, the board sets broad goals and policies for the school system, while the superintendent runs the system on a day-to-day basis. In practice, board members frequently become involved in minor problems at individual schools and neglect their larger, policy-setting duties.

When the board singled out 14 positions on Magann's staff for elimination last month in order to balance the 1981-82 budget, Magann privately objected that it had overstepped its proper role. The board should simply say how much it wanted cut from the central office, he said, and leave him the choice of which jobs to cut.

The board majority disagreed.

Board-superintendent conflict has become more common not only in Guilford County but also in the rest of North Carolina and all over the country. More than 20 of North Carolina's 144 school superintendencies have changed hands in the past year, according to Tom I. Davis of the state Department of Public Instruction — in many cases because of problems with the school board.

The turnover has been faster in recent years because of budgetary problems, said William W. Peek, assistant to the state superintendent of public instruction.

"We were in an era of an expanding economy and increasing enrollment," said Peek. "Now there's decreasing enrollment, with costs not declining as fast as enrollment, and an emphasis on economy in government. That puts a lot of pressure on local boards of education."

Indeed, the sharpest recent clash between Magann and the board majority — over the decision to cut the 14 supervisory positions — was forced by budget problems. School board watchers agree that if the traumatic budget-cutting process of the past four months had not been necessary, Magann probably would still be superintendent.

\*\*\*

When a divorce involves children, parents worry about its effect on them. In the parting of Magann and the school board, the future of 25,000 Guilford County schoolchildren is at stake.

What will Magann's departure mean for them?

It's too early to say. Rumors that the board majority intends to appoint Dockery superintendent (he says he doesn't want the job) or to run the schools themselves for a year have been denied by all four members and apparently have no basis.

Those rumors suggested that Magann's departure would be followed by a purge of the central office and a reversal of his policies requiring centralized, consistent hiring practices and control of curriculum.

Now it appears the changes he has brought to the county schools will last. Among his other legacies, he is given most of the credit for pushing the Guilford County Board of Commissioners toward boosting local funding for the county schools to the level of the Greensboro and High Point systems.

Test scores have risen steadily during his three-year tenure — progress that Magann's critics say would have been made in any case but that his backers say result from his aggressive review and revision of the curriculum. A new elementary reading program was started this year; a new elementary math program is being developed.

Asked at the press conference after the vote to remove him whether he had advice for the board, Magann said simply, "They're going to have to learn to work together toward the vision we all share." The search for a new superintendent will be a test of what the nature of the board members' vision is and of whether the gulf between board factions can be bridged.

## Drug Approved By FDA To Treat Valley Fever

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — An experimental drug for treating valley fever, a sometimes fatal disease common in the Southwest, has been approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

Ketoconazole is the first FDA-approved drug that does not cause serious side effects during treatment for the flu-like illness, according to the agency.

The oral medication is to be distributed under the brand name Nizoral.

## CHAPTER I WHO DOES THE BRIDE CONFIDE IN?

She can tell her fondest dream Consultant at the Bridal Gift Registry who will assist in coordinating the fashions, useful or decorative accents, anything at all she'd like new home. Then her wishes waiting when family and friends in to make their selection. At registration, Thalhimers has a her: a copy of the lovely, info "Bride's Wedding Planner." Registry, Friendly.

## CHAPTER II WHO'S THE BRIDE'S BEST FRIEND?

Next to her Mother, it's our Consultant who knows all at wonderful world of weddings, help her choose her gown and for her attendants. Bridal Friendly.

## CHAPTER III