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An exclusive Q & A interview with new JCPS superintendent Donna Hargens

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As a student growing up in Milwaukee, the high expectations that Donna Hargens' teachers set for her inspired her to become an educator herself.

Now, after working 30 years to raise student achievement in the Wake County, N.C., Public School System, the new superintendent of Jefferson County Public Schools says she wants to pass on those same high expectations to the 99,000 students attending the district's 155 schools.

Hargens, 53, who was named superintendent Tuesday, will take over the nation's 31st largest school district on Aug. 1. She is now negotiating a contract that will determine her salary and the length of her initial term in Louisville.

While those details are being worked out, Hargens agreed to an exclusive interview with The Courier-Journal to discuss her education background and the key issues confronting her when she arrives in Louisville.

QUESTION: First of all, congratulations on being named the next superintendent of JCPS. When we talked Tuesday night, you told me that it was important for you to start Aug. 1, so that you would be in Louisville in time for the start of the new school year. Why is that so important to you?

ANSWER: I am honored to be the next superintendent of JCPS. My husband and I are thrilled to become members of your community.

The start of a new year is an exciting time for staff, students, parents, the Board of Education and the community. A great start sets the tone for the year. I appreciate all the work that Dr. Sheldon Berman and the JCPS staff have done to prepare for the 2011-12 school year.

I know that Interim Superintendent Freda Merriweather and JCPS educators will work in the month of July to finalize the details. I will also review the plans for the first day of school and will be knowledgeable about the plan. I want to be there before the opening and to be in the schools on Day 1 to kick-off the new school year.

Q:What drew you to a career in education? Did you always know you would be an educator?

A: I remember the moments when teachers inspired me through their expectations of me. My first-grade teacher moved me to the highest reading group. My algebra I teacher thought that I should work for NASA. A college professor encouraged me to be a teacher even when there

were few teaching jobs available. I received so much ... through those opportunities to have a quality education. I always felt that it was my responsibility to give to students what I had received. If I could choose again today, I would choose to be an educator.

Q: Where would you rather be — analyzing test scores in your office or speaking to a room full of teachers?

A: I would rather be in a room speaking with teachers about a myriad of issues. Working with teachers to analyze test scores is important. Teachers also, however, are able to describe and discuss the other measures that they use to determine if students are growing academically.

Q: How visible do you plan on being in Jefferson County's schools? Do you plan on visiting each school within a certain period of time? What is your plan for doing that?

A: I hope that you will hold me accountable for being visible not only in the schools but in the community as well.

I do not have a specific timeline, but I plan to visit schools as quickly as I can, with the goal of visiting all 155 schools. I don't plan to race in and out. It is important that I take the time that is necessary to really learn about each of the schools during my visit.

I'll be glad to keep you updated on my progress.

Q: How does Jefferson County Public Schools' academic achievement stack up against other comparable school districts around the country?

A: This is a school system and a community that is not satisfied and should not be satisfied with the current level of achievement. Helping students to grow academically is the reason that a school system exists. It is the core mission.

I know that there are many successful students, but we can't rest until all students are being successful. We also know that we want to raise the bar for all students to ensure that they are able to grow academically and to compete globally. Our goal needs to be for other large urban districts to hope that they could stack up against JCPS. With the resources available to JCPS, there is absolutely no reason we cannot be successful.

Q: What's the best way to improve academic performance at Jefferson County's lowest-performance schools, and how long do you think it will take to substantially improve them?

A: Improvement takes discipline and a focused effort over time. The keys are being able to effectively answer three questions: What is it that students are expected to know? How do we know if they know it? What do we *do* if they do know it or don't know it?

If you are focusing on answering and acting on the answers to those three questions, you will see improvement. It is our job to support and enhance the instructional process.

Q: What role should the teachers' union play in setting the course for improving Jefferson County schools?

A: It is imperative that the teachers' union and the administration work collaboratively with a focus on what's best for students. That is a priority for me and I will be actively engaged in doing so.

Teachers are the variable that can make the most difference. ... Teachers design instruction to meet the needs of students with differing needs. I love to talk with teachers whose students are growing academically and to ask them what they are doing and to visit their classrooms. Teaching and learning is our core mission and the backbone of a school system.

Q: Should JCPS be trying more than one option for fixing the district's persistently low-achieving schools? So far, the remedy has been to restaff the schools and move out the principal.

A: I think that it is fair to say that all four turnaround options (restaffing, closing the school, turning it over to outside management or tying teacher evaluations to student performance) are worthy of consideration. ... and deserve that. I need to take time to do my homework on this issue. Having persistently low-achieving schools in JCPS is of great concern to me, as I know it is to the school board, the staff and the community. I can assure you that it will be a top priority.

Q: Have you had the chance to review the programs and initiatives Dr. Berman has brought to JCPS? Which ones do you plan to keep, and which will you end? How will you review those programs?

A: I read a lot about JCPS before arriving in Louisville. For example, I know that CARE for Kids is about Creating a Respectful Environment and that the GE Foundation has generously invested in improving science and math instruction and ultimately student learning. The 55,000 Degrees (program) is about nurturing a college-ready culture.

I look forward to learning more, to looking at the data and to listening to the perspectives of students, teachers, principals, parents, the school board, the business community and other stakeholders.

Q: Do you support using merit pay or incentives to reward good teachers? Why or why not?

A: This is not a new issue. It is important to understand what teachers consider to be an incentive and to understand what it takes to retain high-quality teachers and to provide consistent high-quality instruction.

Across the nation, the issue of merit pay and incentives is being addressed in a variety of ways. I want to gain a better understanding about how JCPS teachers feel about the subject. I need to learn about the history of merit pay and incentives in Jefferson County and in Kentucky.

Q: In The Courier-Journal's earlier profile of you, a principal in Wake County described you as “data-driven.” Are you an advocate for using test scores and other data to evaluate teachers and schools? Why or why not?

A: I am data-driven. In order to improve, you have to know where you are starting from. When doing any kind of an evaluation, it is important to look at multiple measures and data points.

Q: Some have criticized Wake County's disciplinary policies as discriminatory against African American students. The same criticism has been made of Jefferson County. Why do you think African Americans are so often disciplined out of proportion to their actual numbers not only those school districts, but in many school districts nationwide? How do you think school districts should handle discipline?

A: When you look at the data and you see trends that are disturbing, it is imperative to take action to improve. It is important to monitor the improvement regularly. Policies are supposed to explicitly state the expectations. Both looking at the policies and the implementation of those policies are keys to improvement. I have not thoroughly reviewed and analyzed the data in JCPS. When I do that and am able to come to a conclusion, we will work, using the data, to take any necessary steps to improve.

Q: Can you envision there ever being a situation where you would publicly take a stand against a position taken by a majority of the school board? If so, what would that situation be? If not, why not?

A: I cannot speculate on a particular situation where I might take such a stand. The school board expects me to offer my professional opinion on an issue. I will not hesitate to do so. It is important for the superintendent to ensure that school board members have all the information and input that they need to make an informed decision. My goal is to assist the school board in reaching an informed consensus.

Q: Republican gubernatorial candidate David Williams has proposed legislation that would mandate that school districts allow parents to send their children to neighborhood schools — those closest to their home. What is your position on that idea?

A: Local school boards are entrusted with the responsibility to make decisions regarding student assignment. Decisions are best made by the officials who are closest to the situation. A student-assignment plan should not take the district back to a time when all students did not have the same educational experiences and opportunities.

Q: What is your timeline for reaching a decision on whether you support the current student assignment plan?

A: There is a student assignment plan in place for 2011-12. The staff is committed to a successful implementation of that plan. Dr. Gary Orfield (a leading desegregation expert hired as a school board consultant) will be making recommendations for any modifications to the plan for the 2012-13 school year.

Decisions for the 2012-13 school year need to be made in fall prior to any recruitment sessions and open houses. I will be involved in that process and in the decision-making that will result in making the recommendations.

Q: Should the superintendent's annual performance review be public? The public still doesn't know precisely why your predecessor was let go because it was done behind closed doors.

A: Personnel issues are confidential and should be treated as such.

I have no problem, however, in being accountable to the public for our progress on process and outcome goals. The public needs to see the goals that have been set and the progress that we are making.

Q: Were you surprised by the negative reaction you received from some groups and organizations in Louisville? Have you experienced that before?

A: I respect people's opinions and respect their right to express them. What this demonstrated to me was that this is a community that passionately cares about the education of JCPS students.

This community is invested in the success of JCPS. This is one of the main reasons I wanted to be your superintendent. I am looking forward to getting to Louisville and getting to work.

Q: How will you reach out to those who appear to have doubts about whether you are the right person to lead JCPS?

A: I look forward to meeting with them and to listening to them. When we met the first time, I did the talking. I will listen to be sure that I completely understand their perspective.

The diversity of ideas and perspectives is a strength. Different people, different ways of thinking and different approaches to solving problems make a district stronger. That is an asset that I intend to build upon to benefit our system.

I am confident in my ability to lead JCPS, and I look forward to working with everyone that I meet to improve the school system.

Q: What would the community here be surprised to know about you? What are your talents and hobbies? If you had a weekend where you could do anything you wanted to do, what would you do?

A: I ran a 3K in May in Washington, D.C., this past May with my son, my daughter and my daughter's boyfriend. My goal now is to run a 5K.

I love to attend community and school-sponsored events on weekends. I can't imagine a Sunday morning without attending a service. I can't imagine a Sunday night without talking to my

parents. I can't imagine a weekend without reading — and, yes, it is usually about education! Learning is fun! I can't imagine a weekend without exercise, and without work. I love my work!

My husband and I are looking forward to spending weekends exploring Louisville and becoming a part of the Louisville community. I look forward to having our family members visit us in Louisville. Family time is important. Everyone I have spoken with in the last few days wants to make a trip to Louisville. We welcome that.