

June 14, 2011

## Donna Hargens named JCPS superintendent

*By Antoinette Konz*

She was the temporary leader of a North Carolina school district in the midst of a rebellion over student assignment, now Donna Hargens will take charge of the Jefferson County Public Schools as the district struggles with its own controversial desegregation plan.

Hargens, the chief academic officer for Wake County, N.C., Public Schools, was named Tuesday afternoon as the superintendent of Jefferson County Public Schools.

The Jefferson County Board of Education made the unexpected announcement after meeting in private for more than four hours. Board members had originally said they wouldn't make a choice before next week.

"We believe Dr. Hargens is the ideal fit for this job," said Steve Imhoff, chairman of the school board. "Her experience in raising student achievement, her overall leadership approach and her commitment to diversity and student assignment make her the best choice to lead our district."

Hargens, 53, has been responsible for improving teaching and learning for Wake County's 143,000 students. She also served as interim superintendent for 10 months during a time of political turmoil over that district's assignment plan.

"I am thrilled about being named the next superintendent of Jefferson County Public Schools," Hargens said in a phone interview with The Courier-Journal Tuesday evening. "I'm really looking forward to coming to town, meeting with staff members and getting ready for the start of the 2011-12 school year."

Hargens will start Aug. 1. Imhoff said the school board must still negotiate a contract with her. She makes \$148,965 in her current position in Wake County, while outgoing JCPS superintendent Sheldon Berman makes \$260,000.

In a statement she sent to The Courier-Journal earlier in the day, Hargens acknowledged the challenges that await her in Louisville.

"There are challenges, but there are tremendous opportunities," she said. "I am excited that I am going to be part of the future of JCPS."

The school board unanimously selected Hargens after meeting Tuesday to discuss its two finalists. The other candidate was Christine Johns, superintendent of Utica Community Schools in Michigan.

Board member Larry Hujo, who was out of town for the vote, said he'd spoken with board members by phone and joined them in supporting Hargens.

"She's got a commitment to diversity, and she's going to bring test scores up," he said in a telephone interview. "She's been at a large district, and she understands some of the issues we face."

School board members said they liked both Hargens and Johns, but decided Hargens was a “perfect fit” for Jefferson County.

“She’s a hard worker who’s moved up within her district and she’s brought up student achievement. She knows how it should be done for all students,” —said Debbie Wesslund, who represents District 3 in northeastern Jefferson County.

The school board chose Hargens over the objections of the NAACP and others who had asked the school board to reopen its search because of doubts about her and Johns’ commitment to desegregation and their ability to lead the Jefferson County Public Schools.

Raoul Cunningham, the president of the Louisville branch of the NAACP, criticized the board for lacking transparency by selecting Hargens during a closed meeting that the board had said was only being held to consider the candidates and set a timeline for a decision.

But Cunningham said he would not begin Hargens’ tenure “with a hostile attitude.”

“I’m disappointed and didn’t expect them to make a decision today, but they did and it’s over,” he said. “... We need to all move forward and now that we have a superintendent, we will do everything we can to work with her.”

In a statement released shortly after the school board’s decision, Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer said he is looking forward to working with Hargens.

“Our city’s goal should be to create the best urban school system in the country, and I look forward to working with Superintendent Hargens on achieving that,” Fischer said.

Joe Reagan, the president of Greater Louisville Inc., said the board made an “excellent choice” in a candidate who has a “thoughtful but tenacious” approach.

He said Hargens would work well with the board but hoped board members would give Hargens “the free rein that a CEO has to choose and organize her team and execute her plan.

Reagan said that didn’t happen with Superintendent Sheldon Berman, whose contract was not renewed and who leaves June 30, or with Berman’s predecessor, Stephen Daeschner.

Brent McKim, the president of the Jefferson County Teachers Association, said Tuesday his organization “looks forward to working collaboratively with Dr. Hargens.”

“As part of the vetting process, we had a meeting with her that went very well,” he said. “Our impression is that she is personable and easy to work with.”

The fact that Hargens has had little experience negotiating with teacher unions in North Carolina “would have been a concern, but she previously taught in Wisconsin, which is a highly unionized state, so we feel comfortable with that.”

Hargens said she plans on coming to Louisville “several times” before Aug. 1 to meet with staff members and the community.

She said she looks forward to talking with Berman and meeting with Freda Merriweather, a former JCPS district administrator who will serve as interim superintendent of JCPS for the month of July.

“I can’t wait to get into the schools and to meet our students and teachers,” Hargens said. “I know how much work goes into getting ready for a brand new school year. I’m just looking forward to spending time getting to know Louisville and learning about JCPS.”

According to The News & Observer newspaper in Raleigh, Hargens leaves at a time of major transition

in Wake — school officials there are developing a new student-assignment plan while confronting challenging cuts because of the state's budget woes.

Discontent among Wake County's suburban parents over busing resulted in a Republican majority in favor of neighborhood schools being elected to the school board. The superintendent at the time, Del Burns, left because of the dispute over student assignment.

Hargens was appointed to as interim chief in his place before the board hired Tony Tata.

Tata announced an organizational shakeup in recent days by creating two new top-level leadership positions, effectively reducing Hargens authority as chief academic officer.

One of the positions Tata created is deputy superintendent for school performance, who Hargens would have had to report to if she had stayed in Raleigh. Currently she reports directly to Tata.

“Our loss is their gain; we wish nothing but the best for her,” Michael Evans, a spokesman for the Wake County district, told the Raleigh newspaper.

With her appointment on Tuesday, Hargens becomes the second female superintendent in JCPS history. The first was Rosa Phillips Stonestreet, who was superintendent from 1898-1910.

Reporter Antoinette Konz can be reached at (502) 582-4232. Reporter Chris Kenning contributed to this report.

## Additional Facts

Donna M. Hargens

**Age:** 53

**Hometown:** Milwaukee

**Current home:** Wake County, N.C.

**Family:** Husband, Jeremy, 54; son, Josh, 27; daughter, Jenna, 25

**Education:** 2005, Seton Hall University, doctorate in education leadership, management and policy; 1988, UNC-Chapel Hill, master's in educational administration/supervision; 1979, Marquette University, bachelor's degree

**Career:** Chief academic officer of Wake County schools, 2006 to present; interim superintendent, 2010-2011; assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, 2005-06; area superintendent for western Wake, 2003-05

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