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Profile: Donna Hargens | 'Quiet' leader navigated North Carolina busing controversy

By Chris Kenning

RALEIGH, N.C. — When Donna Hargens was asked to become interim superintendent of Wake County Public Schools here last year, the 143,000-student district was deep in crisis.

Suburban parents, disgruntled about the district's groundbreaking but controversial student-assignment plan, elected a new conservative majority to the school board, which promised to end busing in favor of neighborhood schools.

In response, the superintendent abruptly quit, saying he couldn't do his job in good conscience. Furious activists disrupted school board meetings so badly that several were arrested. And the NAACP filed a discrimination complaint, launching a federal civil rights investigation that is continuing.

Into that tempest stepped Hargens, Wake's chief academic officer, who relied on a low-key style and a steadfast neutrality to steer clear of the political debate and help steady the nation's 18th-largest school district.

"She helped navigate the district through one of its most turbulent times," said retired Army Brig. Gen. Anthony Tata, who was hired in December to permanently lead the district in the high-tech Research Triangle, home to several universities.

But her reticence to voice her opinions on the value of busing and diversity makes some Louisville student-assignment advocates anxious, particularly since the district's previous superintendents have been staunch supporters.

Brent McKim, president of the Jefferson County Teachers Association, which supports integrated schools, said it's "important for any leader to be a strong advocate for diversity" and that his group hopes to "get a better sense of where she stands on that."

And Raoul Cunningham, president of the Louisville branch of the NAACP, questioned whether Hargens would provide sufficient leadership on the issue of diversity, saying she "tip-toed around" the issue when the two talked.

"It's terrible. We couldn't pin her down," he said.

Hargens — a former teacher and principal who rose through the central office and has since returned to her \$148,965-a-year job as chief academic officer — is one of two finalists to lead Jefferson County Public Schools. The other is Christine Johns, superintendent of Utica Community Schools outside Detroit.

Raleigh educators, parents, activists, business leaders and board members say Hargens is a thoughtful, professional, hard-working and quiet curriculum leader whose work has helped fuel student achievement in Wake, where 76 to 86 percent of students score proficient in math and reading, depending on the

grade level, and where achievement gaps, while still large, are on the decline.

And they say she has been a champion of protecting classrooms from state budgets that have eaten into the district's \$1.2 billion budget for its 163 schools.

"She's widely admired — I think she's one of the most outstanding curricular people in large districts in the country," said Fenwick English, a University of North Carolina professor of education leadership.

But apart from her short stint as interim superintendent, she has never led a district. She was passed over by a smaller North Carolina district after being named a finalist last year.

And while student assignment continues to dominate the education debate in Wake County, Hargens wasn't a central figure in it. And she remains elusive on her stand.

Hargens said the superintendent's job is to enact board policy, and she won't say how she feels about the value of busing for diversity — a stance that was welcomed in Raleigh but lies in stark contrast to Louisville, where recent superintendents have been staunch advocates.

"She's like Switzerland — she's neutral," said parent Liza Weidle, a former president of the district's PTA Council. "But she's had an incredible impact."

Becoming a teacher

Hargens, 53, was born in Milwaukee, the daughter of a truck driver and a stay-at-home mother. Neither had gone to college, and she said her mother urged her to excel at typing so she could become a secretary.

But she graduated in 1975 as her high school valedictorian and earned a four-year scholarship to Marquette University.

"I think I knew from the second grade that I wanted to be a teacher," she said during an interview in her office in Raleigh, decorated with a Green Bay Packers sticker and a sign reading: "Trust but verify."

Her first job was teaching Spanish and English in Lomira, Wis., learning the importance of keeping children engaged in lessons. She married a computer programmer and began a family, but after getting her master's degree in 1988 she took the job of assistant principal at Millbrook High School in Raleigh.

Three years later she won her first principal's job at Cary High School, in a fast-growing suburban area. She created interventions for struggling students and career programs to help the graduation rate reach 81 percent.

In 1999 she spent four years leading Green Hope High, where she was an early advocate of posting grades online and helped teachers integrate subjects for better learning. During her tenure, the affluent Green Hope was honored as one of the state's exemplary schools.

"She would reach out for parents, and had a lot of focus on expanding AP classes," said Weidle, whose children attended the school.

In 2003, as she was flying to New Jersey's Seton Hall University each weekend to work on her doctorate, she accepted the job of overseeing 23 schools as an area superintendent. Two years later she became assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and in 2006 she was named chief academic officer, overseeing curriculum, instruction, evaluation, research and student-support services.

Dana King, principal of Millbrook High, said Hargens is a workaholic who often sends e-mails late in the night and visits schools constantly.

She's "data-driven ... to the point where people use it tongue-in-cheek," King said. "She will survey you to death. But it's better than going on instinct."

Over time, she also became known as an administrator who "shows up at every event, big or small," said Kris Ramsundar, incoming president of the district's PTA Council. "But that's because a lot of what the district does has her fingerprints on it."

Improving teaching

Hargens also has spearheaded efforts to better evaluate educational programs, smooth transitions between grade levels and shrink achievement gaps.

She was a force behind the district's innovative online curriculum site, where teachers can access lesson plans, materials and videos. It gets more than 1,000 hits a day.

She has also pushed teachers to do ongoing assessments of student progress to more quickly fill learning deficits. And she enacted "professional learning teams," requiring teachers to collaborate regularly on lessons and student progress.

"The benefits are we're really analyzing (test) results ... but trying to get it all done is challenging," teacher Laura Lovelace told Hargens earlier this week at Millbrook Elementary.

But parents were upset by the "Wake Wednesdays" program that released students from school early to allow for teacher meetings. Critics dubbed it "Wacky Wednesdays," and the early dismissals eventually were dropped.

Hargens also championed the district's "Renaissance Schools" efforts, which this fall will remake its four lowest-performing schools (where fewer than 60 percent of students are proficient) by replacing principals, requiring staff to reapply, offering signing bonuses up to \$3,400 to draw top teachers and adding technology and staff. It's being funded by \$950,000 a year in federal Race to the Top funds.

While teachers had "mixed reactions," many believe "it's going to help level the playing field," said Principal Catherine Berry, sitting in the office of rural Creech Road Elementary, one of the four targeted schools.

Hargens also recently helped the district scale back "zero-tolerance" discipline measures, which some complained were unduly harsh. As a result, long-term suspensions fell from more than 1,000 two years ago to 210 through May this school year.

Those efforts have endeared Hargens to many teachers and administrators. At a district barbeque last Sunday attended by 50 principals, all the talk was about whether Hargens would leave Wake County — and whether many initiatives would stall as a result, King said.

Tama Bouncer, president of the Wake's North Carolina Association of Educators, said that although Wake County doesn't have collective bargaining, she thinks Hargens would work well with Louisville's powerful teachers union.

"The communication was always there with her," she said.

Hargens and assignment debate

While Hargens was focusing on curriculum and achievement, Wake County was growing increasingly mired in a debate over student assignment.

In 2000, after courts began ruling against race-based assignment criteria, it became one of the first

districts in the nation to adopt socioeconomic integration to avoid high-poverty schools. Under the plan, the district used busing to ensure that no more than 40 percent of the students at each school were eligible for subsidized lunches.

But as the district grew from 101,000 in 2001 to 143,000, more children had to be bused to ease crowding and achieve socioeconomic balance. That upset many parents, and urban-suburban tensions grew.

Things came to a head in 2009, when Republicans won a majority on the school board and decided to jettison the district's student-assignment policy in favor of neighborhood schools. It set off a firestorm of protest by the NAACP and others.

The North Carolina NAACP did not respond to repeated requests for interviews for this story.

A complaint from the NAACP prompted a U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights investigation. And U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan called the school board's move "backward."

When Superintendent Del Burns left over the student-assignment dispute, the board looked to Hargens because "both sides of the issue respected her. ... She was able to work well with the board," Chairman Ron Margiotta said.

Bill McNeal, an African-American leader, former Wake superintendent and head of the North Carolina Association of School Administrators, said civil rights groups respected her and had no objections when she was hired.

Wake Board member Kevin Hill, a supporter of the dismantled diversity policy, said that while he recognized Hargens was in a tough position, "some people might have felt she could have spoken more strongly on the issues as interim."

Hargens said she didn't apply to be the permanent superintendent because she presumed the board would look to an outsider because of the controversy.

Since she returned to her post as chief academic officer earlier this year, she hasn't been a key player in developing the district's two competing student-assignment proposals — a "blue" plan that's closer to neighborhood schools and a "green" plan closer to the old plan that would cap the percentage of low-achieving students in each school.

Asked whether she thinks a diversity-based assignment policy such as Jefferson County's is a good idea, Hargens would say only that such decisions are "public value choices" best left to "the board's governance role."

Yet Calla Wright, head of the Coalition of Concerned Citizens for African American Children, said she has "found her to be true to her beliefs — that all children deserve an equal education."

Interim tenure brings challenges, opportunity

Hargens' 10-month tenure as interim superintendent kept her busy, as she continued her academic job, handled the opening of new schools and the continuing federal inquiry.

She said she "cooperated fully" with federal civil-rights investigators and accreditation auditors, whose findings placed the district on "warned" status as a result of its assignment decisions but allowed Wake's 24 high schools to retain their accreditation.

Earlier this year, there were news reports that Hargens, while she was interim superintendent, had approved a paperless transfer request for the daughter of a school board member. Although a subsequent review found nothing unethical, the district revamped its policies to make such moves more

transparent.

Beverley Clark, a former board member still active in an education advocacy group, said Hargens was “between a rock and a hard place. You can’t judge much from her tenure during a time like that.”

Another longtime education advocate said Hargens may not be a strong-willed superintendent who can lead boards in the direction they want.

But Harvey Schmitt, president of the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce, said that her short tenure “didn’t allow her to flourish” as a leader, Hargens handles competing interests well. He called her “outstanding.”

McNeal said her low-key style belies a dogged pursuit of goals, an impression Hargens confirmed.

“I think people underestimate me because I’m quiet,” she said. “People shouldn’t misinterpret quiet.”

Reporter Chris Kenning can be reached at (502) 582-4697.

On the web

Additional Facts

Donna M. Hargens

Age: 53

Hometown: Milwaukee, Wis.

Current home: Wake County, N.C.

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

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

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
