

Pupil assignment was bruising issue

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another was brewing at West Charlotte High, where principal Kenneth Simmons' efforts to improve the performance of black students left white teachers and parents chafing. Many threatened to transfer if Simmons stayed.

In June, Supt. Eric Smith removed Simmons after 16 months at West Charlotte, and replaced him with middle school principal Terry Cline from Smith's former district in Newport News, Va.

Smith also decided to completely re-staff the school and required all teachers and staff, even janitors, to re-apply. Many did not return.

But some, including some of those who threatened to transfer if Simmons stayed, were rehired.

The move angered black parents and Simmons supporters. Although Smith tried to ease tensions by trotting out supporters like former school board member George Battle and Wachovia executive Isaiah Tidwell, the move left a bad taste in the mouths of many on the westside.

Restaffing has caused a number of problems at West Charlotte, including addition of 30 teachers with no prior experience. And there has been difficulty in filling slots for advanced placement classes and specialized courses such as journalism.

The popular gospel choir, begun during Simmons' tenure, was left without an adult advisor and continues as an ensemble without supervision.

Simmons says he was abandoned by Smith in a battle against rich white parents from Eastover and Myers Park who objected to his efforts to bring more black students into higher level courses.

Other critics charged the removal of Simmons and other black administrators and segregation of black and white children into separate classrooms are common in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

The West Charlotte controversy gave a boost to the school board candidacy of longtime teacher Vilma Leake, who soundly defeated incumbent Sam Reid for District 2's board seat in November.

Leake got 66 percent of the vote and won all but one precinct in the district. She even carried Reid's home precinct, No. 16.

Reid admitted that West Charlotte was a constant undercurrent during the campaign. Neither candidate talked openly about West Charlotte, but Leake painted herself as someone who would speak out, while Reid was praised as a dedicated worker who built consensus behind the scenes.

The outspoken Leake's election made clear there would be some changes on the board, but few expected the surprise election of Arthur Griffin as board chairman. Griffin ousted Susan Burgess, who then resigned, after several board members approached him to offer support.

John Lassiter, an at-large member of the board from southeast Charlotte, was elected vice chair. The board's attention turns now to replacing Burgess, a round of elementary and middle school reassignments and spending \$415 million in bonds

approved in November. Other key issues include deciding where to build new schools, including a technical high school.

Also, the federal courts are again reviewing the legality of busing to achieve racial balance.

Integration supporters asked to re-open the original Swann v. Board of Education lawsuit, after a white southeast Charlotte parent filed a lawsuit to stop the use of race to determine where children attend school.

Bob Capacchione's lawsuit is being handled by the law firm which defended the school system against the original Swann lawsuit and a high-powered Houston law firm which has represented social conservatives in legal battles, including the suits contesting majority-minority congressional districts in Virginia and South Carolina.

Bill Simms, one of Charlotte's most powerful African Americans, was set to return to Los Angeles to accept a promotion when news broke that he had lied on his resume.

Simms, president of TransAmerica Life's Risk Management Products and Services Group, had been named to head the newly-created Insurance Products Division and would oversee sale and marketing of TransAmerica Life insurance products in the United States and Asia.

He would have managed 1,200 employees - up from 350 in Charlotte - and supervised new product and market development.

Instead, he left Charlotte in disgrace and moved to Atlanta. Simms revealed that he lied about his educational background and winning an Olympic gold medal.

Ironically, he had achieved

more than most African American businessmen ever hoped and, as the highest ranking black business executive in Charlotte, was a role model for many.

His influence had been felt in many areas, including the call for a race summit, which he did not attend.

Simms, The Post's 1995 Newsmaker of the Year, was in line to become head of the Charlotte Chamber in 1998 and is a partner in the Carolinas Panthers NFL franchise.

Though Simms became the subject of some debate after the community learned he had lied, many supported the man who, upon coming to Charlotte five years ago, became a model of how business executives could give back to their communities. Simms was everywhere. Helping secure an NFL team for the city, leading arts and sports fund raising drives, chairing the local Urban League and working on behalf of young black males and pregnant girls.

His name was synonymous with action. Amid the din of anger and pain a few paused to reflect on how Simms - with less than a year of college - rose from being a clerk at TransAmerica to being named to lead one of its largest divisions.

Some wondered if Simms would have gotten an opportunity at all without lying - adding a degree in computer science from the University of Southern California to his resume as well as a master's degree in business and an Olympic gold medal.

"That's the irony of America," said business consultant Bill

McCullough. "We are a country more concerned about titles, and diplomas and degrees and we fail to look at individuals in terms of how they can contribute to society."

McDonald's Cafeteria

McDonald's Cafeteria and hotel may reopen in time for next summer's family reunion.

A Harvey Gantt-led group called Westside 2000, Ltd. purchased the complex on Beatties Ford Road at I-85. The complex was once valued at more than \$2.5 million.

The group plans to renovate the cafeteria and the hotel, then reopen them in the spring, perhaps before Memorial Day. The adjacent Fun City theme park will be dismantled and that land redeveloped.

R.J. Leeper, Inc. will be the general contractor.

Westside 2000 shareholders include, in addition to Gantt, Rep. Mel Watt, Lincoln-Mercury dealer Sam Johnson, Dr. Telezee Foster, and Floyd D. Young, owner of FDY food service company.

FDY would manage the restaurant, which was one of the city's most popular eating places prior to John McDonald's death in 1995.

McDonald's widow, Eunice McDonald, ran the complex after his death, but the westside landmark closed in August. Financial

problems led to a mortgage foreclosure and the deterioration of the cafeteria and hotel.

The Northwest Corridor business community breathed a sigh of relief upon learning the Gantt-led group had acquired the McDonald's holdings. Many had worried about the impact of losing such a strong anchor.

The owners said the cafeteria's interior will be modernized, with a new seating layout, new furnishings and increased capacity, from 150 to 250 seats.

A smaller banquet/meeting room will be redone to accommodate 150 seats. The kitchen and serving area will also be renovated to accommodate an expanded menu.

A canopied walkway, new lighting and new signs will be added to the exterior of the building.

The hotel will be refurbished inside and out, with upgrades to the lobby, public areas and guest rooms.



Simmons



Smith



Cline



Simms



Gantt

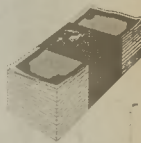


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