

# Opinion

33203 Grand River/Farmington, MI 48024 Bob Sklar editor /477-5450

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## School chief Ability to communicate: key

**I**F ANYONE can change the course of a school district, it's the superintendent, the chief day-to-day administrator. Truly effective superintendents boast an ability to communicate — with trustees, staff, students and taxpayers.

No one is saying much about why Graham Lewis only half-surprisingly resigned as Farmington Public Schools' superintendent June 20, after his annual review.

But we're willing to wager that his tenuous communication skills helped seal his fate half way through a two-year contract.

More than once, the school board bristled at not learning about a curriculum change until it already was done. Lewis routinely underscored his management style as the ultimate delegator by turning over agenda items to one of his assistants — a habit that became almost comical.

In speaking to parents at board meetings, Lewis tended to talk in convoluted terms, causing some to mutter, "What'd he say?"

**IN RESPONSE** to changes Lewis made in the central office, several trustees were concerned about the lack of a definite chain of command.

Beyond that, Lewis often didn't attend community events, even though he held a position of community leadership.

Frustrated by his narrow view of the district, we gave up seeking him out as the spokesman and instead sought out other administrators, teachers or trustees.

So as the school board embarks on a national search for a new leader for a district with a \$85 million budget, 10,700 students and 1,400 regular employees, communication skills must be a high priority.

As trustee Jack Inch put it: "What we're really looking for is someone who can listen well, understand well."

In our view, a doctorate, strong academic credentials and experience as a superintendent

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are prerequisites.

Farmington Public Schools needs a proven leader not afraid to speak up, stimulate discussion and prick the community's conscience.

**THREE YEARS** ago, Lewis, then an assistant superintendent in Farmington, topped 60 candidates to replace the popular Lewis Schulman. The "favorite son" gamble did pay dividends — make no mistake about that.

Willing to skirt tradition and test new ideas, Lewis made a good school district better. Improving staff development, opening a common campus, eliminating high school attendance boundaries, and planning a new elementary and major facility improvements were among his successes.

But he came up short in fostering a sense of togetherness.

A 30-year educator, he'll stay on as a consultant for a year. We trust the school board lets him earn the \$88,000 he'll be paid as part of his contract settlement.

**WHOEVER SUCCEEDS** Graham Lewis must be enterprising and energetic. He or she must become more visible in the community at large — not just within the school district.

The new superintendent must take the initiative to work more closely with the two cities with which it shares a tax base, facilities and constituents.

A superintendent not only sets the tone for a school district, but also is its goodwill ambassador and most-important pillar. An ability to communicate well is vital.

## Silver anniversary

This year, the 25th annual Farmington/Farmington Hills Founders Festival spanned nine days — the longest period ever. But newer events like the Civil War encampment, the Muscular Dystrophy Association boat race and the Blessings of Liberty picnic mixed with old-time favorites like Kids Day,

Miss Farmington and the Founders Day Parade to provide a potpourri of family fun. Above, Carol Wales of Carlton rides in the parade in her and husband Bill's 1948 Chevy. The underlying purpose of the midsummer fest should never be lost: to salute our 155-year-old community's heritage.

## Judge facing big task: restoring public image

**NEW DISTRICT** Judge Fred Harris of Farmington has more than a caseload to consider. He also must improve his shaken public image. No sooner did he take the oath of office to become a 47th District Court judge than he became caught in an ethical bribe trap over his hiring practices.

Bluntly put, Harris stretched the bounds of sensitivity by abruptly booting retired Judge Michael Hand's court recorder and court officer. Court recorder Cindy Hage was fired 2½ months before she could vest in Farmington Hills' pension program. Court officer Howard Aldrich was fired in favor of Harris' son, Patrick, a college student.

State law allows judges to hire their own court recorder and court officer. Harris skirted no law in firing Hand's personal staff. It's the way — the abrupt way — Harris did so that irks me.

**REACTING TO** Hage's firing, Farmington Hills city councilman Paul Sowerby said: "Possibly the issue of sensitivity could've been addressed a little better."

Harris responded, "Everybody who's familiar with my background has to know on issues like that, I'm supersensitive." Firing Hage a few months before she could vest is a strange way to show sensitivity.



Bob Sklar

Harris admitted he didn't know Hage was so close to vesting. Couldn't he have checked?

I agree with councilman Aldo Vagnozzi, who said: "We ought to be able to cut through the bureaucracy if she wants to be vested. We ought to find a way to do it."

I can't fault Harris for hiring his law firm secretary of 25 years as his court recorder. But making a genuine effort to work out a solution so Hage could vest would have boosted his credibility.

Harris said his son is someone he "can get rid of like that" once he's able to hire the kind of court officer he really wants — a uniformed police officer.

We like the idea of bolstering courthouse security and think the additional cost can be justified.

But why wasn't Aldrich given a chance to stay on until a police officer is hired? To say his loyalties "stayed with the judge he worked for" is a cop-out.

**AT LEAST** Harris isn't white-washing the firing flap. "This was, my personal decision. And I'll take the heat for it," he told the city council.

I also don't understand why Harris' removed himself from his law firm; payroll and took full judicial pay for: May when he spent part of the month wrapping up his law practice.

True, he spent part of the month visiting neighboring district courts for "on the job" training to be a judge. But he didn't take the bench until June 1.

At best, he should have stayed on his law firm payroll until he wrapped up his law practice and accepted payment from the state only for the hours in May he spent on judicial business.

Judge Margaret Schaefer, the 47th District Court's chief judge, must shoulder blame for agreeing to let Harris delay donning the black robe until June 1 — a month after he took the oath of office.

Just as Judge Harris passes judgment on matters before the court, voters will pass judgment on the wisdom of his decisions when he faces election in November of 1990.

I'd remind him to never forget who he ultimately answers to: the people of Farmington and Farmington Hills.

His public image rests with them. Bob Sklar is editor of the Farmington Observer.

## Living hell

### Racism: It can't be tolerated

**W**E CAN appreciate why Dianna and Derwin Success want a stockade fence around the back yard of their Farmington home.

The biracial couple and their two children, Matthew, 11, and Sarah, 6, have been targets of hate messages since moving to a home on Shilwassee four years ago.

But it's a sad commentary of our times when a family must resort to erecting a six-foot fence to fight bigotry.

The Successes see the fence as a way to deflect harassment, if only while in the privacy of their back yard.

Misguided souls have spewed harassment while driving by the Success' well-kept home, making life a living hell at times.

In a particularly cruel act, vandals spray-painted obscenities and racial slurs on the home two days before Christmas in 1987.

"Daily, my life is threatened," Derwin Success, a black minister, told the Farmington City Council Monday while seeking approval to erect the fence.

His wife, Dianna, is white. They fear their children will become innocent victims of a racist.

**YOU'RE RIGHT,** Rev. Success. Some folks obviously don't want you living in our community.

But not everyone wants to drive you out — not your neighbors, angry that a "wonderful couple" who happens to be biracial can't live in peace, and not city officials, who vow aggressive prosecution of anyone caught harassing you.

We're troubled by the effect the continued taunts have had on other neighborhood youngsters, who can't help but be hurt by the pain their pals Sarah and Matthew surely must feel.

Aside from prosecuting lawbreakers to the fullest if arrests are made, the community must never forget that racial equality still hasn't been achieved.

Community intolerance of ethnic hatred is a must if the Successes and other people who've fallen victim to prejudice can ever hope to live without constantly looking over their shoulder.

The community must rededicate itself to turning the bricks hurled through the Success garage windows two years ago into building blocks for ethnic harmony.

## Freeway fear

### Time for drivers to fight back

**A**S A FREEWAY driver, how long has it been since you've laid on the horn and shouted at the jerk who's glided into your lane without signaling, nearly sheering off your front bumper?

Probably a long time. Freeway shootings have seen to that, and made us that much more paranoid in the process.

It's not healthy and it's not natural. Any doctor will tell you stress needs an outlet. Any driver will tell you navigating metro area freeways is stressful.

Yet we do nothing, fearful of having a bullet squeezed off in our direction. People don't even look at people in other cars, fearful that their facial expressions may prompt an act of hostility.

SO WE seal ourselves in our cars, stare dead ahead and let rage silently build inside us.

That's ridiculous. A few armed lunatics have made us afraid to honk a horn in the Motor City.

Honking off that blind fool careening across lanes is a time-honored tradition around here. It relieves stress in the directions where they should be directed — and keeps us from taking it out somewhere else, on someone else.

So let's get together on this. Someone saw the guy in the Geo Tracker who took a shot earlier this month at a car on I-696 near Orchard Lake Road. Call the police and help prosecute.

Fight back. Call and write your legislators and tell them you want laws enacted specifically addressing penalties for those convicted of freeway shootings.

This is not some complex, abstract issue steeped in philosophical meaning that will require time and even-handedness to resolve. It is an immediate problem that affects every one of us every day.

After all, how many tombstones do we need bearing the inscription: "Here lies X, dead for committing the unpardonable sin of sticking his tongue out at the driver next to him."

## Farmington readers' forum

Letters must be signed, original copies and include the address and telephone number of the writer. Names will be withheld from publication only for sufficient reason. We reserve the right to edit them. Send letters to Readers' Forum, Farmington Observer, 33203 Grand River Ave., Farmington 48024.

### Hosts needed for students

**To the editor:**  
I am writing for Loisirs Culturels A L'Etranger, otherwise known as L.E.C. A while back, I asked for some families in our area to open their homes and hearts to students coming our way from France for July.

These wonderful students now are with their host families. It was such a thrill meeting the students at Chicago's O'Hare Airport and flying them in to Metro to the waiting smiles of the families they were to stay with.

I have since been in contact with each of the families and have basically nothing but positive feelings from the students and families. They have been doing so many wonderful things and seeing so much of our beautiful Michigan (Canada, Pennsylvania and a few other states).

I can't thank the wonderful host families enough for sharing their homes and family with these students.

I still need about 10 more families to open their homes and hearts to these students for August. The students available are male and between ages 16 and 19, primarily 17.

They will arrive on Aug. 1 and Aug. 4 — if we can find a home for them to stay in. They are all very

### Coaches are exceptional

**To the editor:**  
I've been involved with North Farmington/West Bloomfield baseball and softball for youth (NFWB) for the better part of seven years. I have had the opportunity of meeting many fine and dedicated parents involved with the kids, and until this year, the blessing of coaching my son.

This year, my son left for the greener pastures of travel baseball playing for the 13- and 14-year-old Sandy Koufax team. He has had the finest experience of his young life, and it is all due to the dedication and hard work of two men, Jim Ferguson and John Heiler.

These two individuals have given so much of themselves that each and every one of these 14 boys involved in this program is truly fortunate to have had this opportunity and privilege of learning and playing for these two exceptional coaches, one of whom lives in Berkeley (Mr. Ferguson).

I, as NFWB tournament director, speak for the parents of these 14 boys when I say, from the bottom of my heart, thank you and God bless you. You both have touched the lives of so many with your good deeds.

**Leonard R. Woolf, Farmington Hills**

**To the editor:**  
Mr. Steve Barnaby was way off base in his column about pornography June 29.

Farmington Hills police Chief William Dreyer is the finest man I know to wear the badge. He would not take a cheap shot just to hurt our rights of free speech.

He no doubt received a number of complaints. For all we know, adults are selling porn to minors. For this, they must pay. It isn't free speech when you hurt our children.

It isn't free speech when the almighty dollar is more important than what we teach our children. It isn't because we don't wish to take away adults' pleasure. Just that if something is illegal, then it is illegal. Don't harm our children.

**Vernon C. Kielplinski, Farmington Hills**

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