

# Board members are just people, Garvelink says

By BARBARA UNDERWOOD

Birmingham's new superintendent of schools has left no doubt in anyone's mind how he intends to accomplish "effective and efficient" communication with the board of education. At his first board meeting on March 7, Roger Garvelink outlined his plan for establishing channels of communication with board members. He explained his comments in greater detail last week.

Garvelink said he hopes to provide answers to such questions as: "How can the board tell the superintendent he's goofed without causing cardiac arrest?" and "how can the superintendent tell the board it has made a bad decision without having a protest?"

"We want to agree on a system so we are all comfortable with one another," Garvelink said. "I want to be responsive to all the board members, but I take the position that I work closely with the president of the board and take direction from the president."

He said he has always held the theory that "a board member is a board member when seated at the board table, but away from the table a board member is just like everyone else—except the president."

"THAT DOES NOT mean a board member can't ask a question but there is a proper way to do so," Garvelink continued.

Board members have a right to know what is going on and should be able to get necessary information in order to make the best policy decisions, he believes.

But "the superintendent should not be bothered with calls from seven board members on a regular basis and administrative staff should not spend inordinate amounts of time researching individual questions," he said.

A simple question can mean days of research and "what concerns one board member may not concern six other board members."

"If the whole board wants the answer to a question, it will be answered. But the administration can't drop everything to answer a question," Garvelink continued.

"I WANT a majority of the board to agree before I answer a question and I will not feel obligated to respond if only one board member asks a question."

Although in the past individual Birmingham board members have requested information from the superintendent, Garvelink stressed that his policy "is in no way a reflection of the board."

tion on the Birmingham board or any single board member.

"I have decided through experience that wherever I went this would be one of the first things I would do," he added. It is a good way to begin our relationship."

When he first came to Birmingham, Garvelink said he would spend the next few months doing a lot of listening and that he would not share his initial impressions of the district until July.

Also, he said he would not "state a platform" and "to begin by saying I am going to change this and that doesn't make sense because we already have the best."

But last week he discussed briefly his philosophy of education and also outlined his plans for a meeting schedule for the board.

"I have been accused of being a great humanist," he said of his philosophy. "I try to base my decision making on what is best for individual children."

"My response is very positive to personalized education, even more than individualized education. I believe we can personalize the instructional program and require minimal skills for all students but how to get them there is the challenge."

"All students learn differently and matching the learning style of a student with the teaching style of a teacher is the challenge," he continued.

This concept has "all kinds of ramifications for special education and gifted children," Garvelink said.

Regular board meetings will continue on the first and third Tuesdays of each month. On the second Tuesday, the board will visit a school or other facility such as the Birmingham Center for Continuing Education, the bus garage or Oakland Intermediate School.

The fourth Tuesday each month will be devoted to workshops on pre-determined subjects "that need investigation or on which the board needs information," Garvelink said.

"Hopefully, if we do a good job in the workshops, the first and third Tuesday meetings will be more efficient," he added.

Workshops will cover such topics as communication between the superintendent and the board, board evaluation of the superintendent, superintendent's evaluation of the board, the board's commitment to community education, teacher evaluation, declining enrollment, the gifted program, physical education, curriculum and others.

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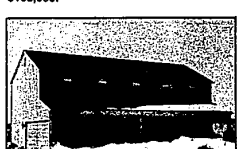
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