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School Watch

Decatur board makeup, policies shifting

New perspectives: Steve Roberts and Jason Uchitel to take office Tuesday during an era of change.

By Doug Cunningham
STAFF WRITER

To understand the significance of the new Decatur School Board that takes office next Tuesday, with challengers Steve Roberts and Jason Uchitel replacing Chairwoman Ruth Hendrix and eight-year veteran Don Denard, you have to appreciate how much things have changed in the past year.

Decatur hired its first African-American school superintendent while the school board went from a 3-2 black majority to a 4-1 white majority. The school board also noticeably changed the way it debates school policy.

Before last year, a complicated process called "Innovative Proposal" was used to evaluate new programs through appointed committees. Policies favored by the superintendent were rarely questioned by any of the five board members.

But last April, despite having gone through the Innovative Proposal process, a plan to give elementary school teachers meeting time through early student dismissal on Wednesdays was abruptly dropped when parents complained at a board meeting.

Another example of the change was seen in regard to Decatur's policy of holding back — retaining — students deemed academically below the next grade level. In 1995, a task force studying this issue concluded with an uncritical one-page report by Denard. Last year, a parent group complained about Decatur's high 3.6 percent student retention rate, and said that Denard's earlier report had no data for evaluating the problem.

Now, both Uchitel and Roberts are asking for specific data on students who are retained. And Uchitel, who has complained that the Innovative Proposal process was often more rubber-stamp than hard-earned inquiry, said that this former way of evaluating programs is "probably in hiatus."

This was a watershed election for Decatur, Uchitel said. He said this board will be asking more questions of the superintendent, reflecting a new appetite for involvement among citizens. "There are more people who are active, and more people expect it," he said.

Roberts, whose previous elected office was Decatur High School's student council president in 1987-88, and Uchitel, a Long Island native who began his



"These things... have been there a long time. I hope they don't expect [change] overnight."
JASON UCHELTEL
Decatur school board member-elect



"Citizens deserve a public school system 'of the people, by the people and for the people.'"
STEVE ROBERTS
Decatur school board member-elect

career in the Atlanta area in 1969 because it met his checklist of desirable features, are both attorneys in private practice in Decatur.

The issue of the new board is hard to gauge. Superintendent Ida H. Love, selected in a divisive 3-2 vote, is now in the delicate

position of working for a board in which two of those supporting votes failed to win re-election. While some voters complained about the way those board members handled the selection, they did not name Love, and Roberts and Uchitel have both expressed unqualified support for her.

While Roberts and Uchitel both emphasize the ineffectiveness they bring as lawyers, they also express an overriding pride in the achievements and diversity of the Decatur school system.

Roberts, whose son Chris is an 11th-grader at Decatur High, has been active in PFAA at Glenwood Elementary and Redford Middle, and helped chairperson the Decatur High band trip to Ireland last year. As a former assistant district attorney for DeKalb County and now as a defense attorney, he has seen juvenile crime up close, and believes Decatur offers the best safeguard for its youth — a close-knit community.

Based on the "other side of the track" on Fifth Avenue by a single mother, and having failed to break into pre-law after a treaty with the ABA, Roberts said he has always identified with the underdog. Representing the city at large, he predicts he can give enough time to the board because he has few leisure activities — no hunting or fishing — outside being with his wife, Lynda, and son.

Uchitel, a Boy Scout master whose sons Jeremy, Jacob and Justin are students at Georgia Tech, University of Georgia and Redford Middle School, respectively, listed three areas he plans to address. One is philosophical: He wants a school system "of the people, by the people and for the people."

To help citizens understand the system better than he was able to understand it, he wants school officials to learn to speak in understandable English, as the law requires of insurance policies, not "education speak."

Security, he wants an assessment of the "hedgepodge" of special programs scattered throughout the system, to determine which ones are effective. The effective ones should be expanded and the others cut back, he said.

Finally, he wants to make sure every student is given challenges that push that student to the maximum. He said it is especially important that majority-black elementary schools, such as the three in his district on the south side, offer the same range of experiences as the other elementary schools.

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