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Erma Hepburn says:

Different styles caused conflict

by Lanita Duke

Grassroot News, N.W.—Erma Hepburn, Acting Executive Director of the City of Portland Human Resources Bureau believes her style of operations resulted in a negative evaluation from Commissioner Margaret D. Strachan. "There were rumors that I was to be fired. Yet, it was never told to me officially. During the latter part of July I was called into her office and handed an evaluation." Ms. Hepburn declined to reveal the contents of this evaluation. "All I can say is that a lot were issues and items that took place prior to my appointment as Executive Director. And some of the issues addressed were even before Strachan was elected to the Council. A lot of it was misinformation and out of the time-frame of my responsibilities."

Ms. Hepburn concluded the evaluation with the hope that she and Commissioner Strachan could get together and iron out their difficulties in a professional manner.

Ms. Hepburn came to the City of Portland in 1973, a survivor of the PMSC era. In 1980 she was appointed, on a temporary basis, to direct the Human Resources Bureau. "We used to be the prime sponsor for all CETA projects. In addition, the City has been designated as the area agency on aging. We also have a youth diversion project."

Each Bureau is part of a department and the department is headed by a Council member. It is tradition that each time the city receives a new Commissioner the Human Resources Bureau always goes to them.

The attitude of the '80s is to divest the cities of so-called social programs. Is Commissioner Strachan trying to systematically dissolve the Human Resources Bureau? "I think Commissioner Strachan is very committed to social services programs. She is a very neighborhood kind of person. I think the concern is just the difference in style."



ERMA HEPBURN

This difference in style is the root of the perception held by some members of the Commissioner's staff that Ms. Hepburn has the wrong attitude. "I have been involved in social service programs since 1968 and have dealt with many of the same people in City government. I have never had any difficulties dealing with people in City government."

Ms. Hepburn's position could be taken away from her anyway be-

cause the job of Executive Director of the Human Resources Bureau will be up for grabs, through the Civil Service, on August 22nd. "All temporary appointments have to go through, at one time or another, the Civil Service process. The position was announced on August 7th. I will have to decide if I want to apply for it by the 22nd." Ms. Hepburn has yet to decide if she will apply for her job. If she applies she must score in the top three to retain the position.

Strachan responds to questioning

by Claudia Fisher

It has been reported that several weeks ago Commissioner Margaret Strachan's office decided to fire Human Resources Bureau Director Erma Hepburn, who is the City's only female and only black bureau head. In a Monday interview with the *Portland Observer*, Commissioner Strachan stated she had not and would not discuss with any newspaper the performance memo her office had recently presented to Hepburn, saying that she owed respect to City employees and would not discuss in general City employee performance.

Strachan defended her actions earlier last year to open to the Civil Service test process positions in each of her bureaus which have been filled by temporary employees, who, by rules of the City Charter, can only be hired for thirty days before undergoing a Civil Service test process. Hepburn was appointed to her position by then-Commissioner Frank Ivancie in spring 1980 when he was running for Mayor against Connie McCreedy. Newly elected Mayor Ivancie assigned the Human Resources Bureau (HRB) to Commissioner Strachan, who was elected to fill his vacated seat.

According to Strachan, when accusations arose that she was using the Civil Service process to remove Hepburn, she and Hepburn "worked it out" and Hepburn understood Strachan was not aiming at anyone; rather she sought only to make the Civil Service process fair and workable. Irritated at the press' focusing solely on her efforts and bureaus, Strachan mentioned Commissioner Lindberg's activities to bring about Civil Service changes.

Strachan also attempted to lay to rest rumors of major differences of opinion about the direction in which HRB is and should be moving. With a federal CETA program budget cut from \$18 million to just under \$3



COMMISSIONER MARGARET STRACHAN

million in three years, serious efforts have been made to close service delivery gaps created. With Hepburn and HRB her staff wants to "look at ways to build a constituency for social service, to create an awareness of how dollars are spent, the numbers of people who are served and volunteers who are utilized." She and Hepburn have been working on changing the HRB profile in the city. Strachan described past discussions with Hep-

burn as "fruitful."

When asked if she believed Hepburn lacked the capability of meeting current bureau needs, Strachan replied, "I have never said she lacked capability." Then asked if she wanted Hepburn as director of HRB, the Commissioner answered, "I encourage her to apply for the job," adding that she had postponed permanently filling the position because it was decided there (Please turn to page 2 column 2)

Parents declare war on Chicago school board

by Lynn Orr,
Pacific News Service

CHICAGO—After years of unkept promises that the public school system would improve, a small group of inner-city Chicagoans are fighting back—in sharp contrast to the stereotype of poor parents who don't care.

Angered over some of the lowest scores in the nation, the self-named "Parent Equalizers," a predominantly black group claiming 250 members, is determined to force a showdown with the Chicago Board of Education. The protest centers on a controversial reading program the board hopes to sell to other urban school districts.

The parents label it a "second-rate, dangerous education program" and refer to it as "garbage in, garbage out." One politician believes it is intentionally racist, and a leading reading specialist calls it part of a "know-nothing" movement.

After a year-long battle, including a class action lawsuit to prevent future sales of the copyrighted reading program, the parents are so disillusioned by past failures to upgrade education, and so distrustful of school officials, that they want the

reading program axed by September. Otherwise, they say, they'll organize a strike against Chicago schools.

"They don't concern me," said Superintendent Ruth Love, who incurred the parents' wrath last fall by mandating the until-then optional reading curriculum. "I'm concerned with the average parent."

"I guess they'd just like us to go back to watching soap operas and worrying about our laundry," said Equalizer Deborah Johnson, who believes average parents just don't know what is happening to their children in school.

The latest results of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills appear to support the parents' concerns. Since 1978, the average seven-year-old in Chicago public schools has scored above the national norm in reading on the Iowa test. But the reading scores decline as the children move through the school system, with 13-year-olds falling more than a year behind the national norm.

This year in releasing the delayed test results, school officials pointed to the fact that the decline was slowed by one month in each of five grade levels. They further project that the average child will be reading at the national norm in four years—

if scores can be improved by three or four months at ages eight and nine.

Parent Equalizers blame the reading problems on the Chicago Mastery Learning Reading Program and its predecessor, the Continuous Progress Mastery Learning Reading Program, used from 1975-81. The master learning program, now required in all Chicago city schools from kindergarten through eighth grade, concentrates on teaching specific objectives such as word endings, and then testing students on their "mastery" of the particular skills associated with the objective. If students fail more than 20 percent of the skills on each test, they are retaught and retested. The program allows children to be grouped according to "mastery" level, rather than grades; theoretically a seventh-grader can be working on objectives begun in second grade. Teachers maintain precise files on the students' achievements, which

are transferred with school records. Promoters say the program accommodates children with different abilities and ethnic backgrounds, as well as the high rate of teacher and student mobility found in inner-city schools.

Parent Equalizers, backed by a militant substitute teachers' group, Substitutes United for Better Schools (SUBS), say the program shields incompetent teachers by shifting educational responsibility to students. "This is a program that says black children can't be taught like human beings," says outspoken Equalizers president Dorothy Tillman, mother of five. "We have teachers who are not concerned with whether these children can read, they just care about whether they pass the tests," says Paulette Vargas, another member.

These parents say they can't afford to abandon public education for private schools, and they're convinced now their only option may be to attempt to shut down the schools if the reading program isn't eliminated.

In its place they want the board to purchase a proven reading system, one they hope will prevent their elementary children from facing the fate of Chicago's current high school students, whose reading scores fall below 75 percent of other U.S. high school students.

The Equalizers have already won enough community support to convince school officials to revise the new program by removing racially

offensive material and negative depictions of family. One of the deleted narratives, "Whiskey and Sweets," related how a father fakes a heart attack to get his son to buy him whiskey.

Michael Katims, the director of the reading program and a consultant to the school board, believes the parent group is "quite well-intentioned but creating more harm than good. Forty to 100 people are treated as if they were the only parents, when there are 700,000 parents" in the district. "Nothing has ever demonstrated success in the inner city, but we're going to do it," he said bluntly.

With both the Kansas City and New York City school districts expressing interest in the reading program, the potential revenues to Chicago's financially ailing school system are apparent, and the district already has signed an exclusive contract with a Massachusetts firm to print and publish the copyrighted program.

The Equalizers' lawsuit, filed one year ago in state court, questions the board's marketing of an "untested" program, according to the Equalizers attorney, James Chapman, who volunteers his services to the group. "The contract obliged the board to

use the system before it was completed," he said.

But, according to Katims, the program has been tested through its use in several individual Chicago schools on an optional basis, along with a field test at the city's May Elementary School—where the reading score decline this year was actually sharper than the Chicago average.

Meanwhile, alderman Clifford Kelley, a black independent from the 20th ward, has introduced a resolution into the council's educational committee to investigate the reading program, which he believes to be intentionally racist. Blacks also point out that Mayor Jane Byrne has won disputed appointments of two white school board members here to replace two black members, making a composition of five whites, three Hispanics and three blacks in a school system where blacks dominate at 61 percent of enrollment.

"This system has absolutely no interest in allowing public input," Kelley said. "And once a child has been denied an education, there's no catch-up."

The program has also engendered controversy in educational circles. (Please turn to page 2 column 1)