

Controversy Over School District Problems Splits Butte Falls

(Editor's note: Controversy has developed in the Butte Falls school district. In an effort to determine the basis and scope of the controversy, Mail Tribune Reporter and Regional Page Editor Cleve Twitchell has been interviewing Butte Falls residents and school officials. His report of the situation follows.)

By CLEVE TWITCHELL
 Mail Tribune Staff Writer
 Butte Falls - On the evening of March 6 of this year, the board of Butte Falls School District No. 91 voted 5 to 0 not to offer a 1963-64 contract to C. L. Stratton, who for the previous six years had served as principal of the local elementary school.

The board's action touched off an eruption that has virtually split the community. It is a controversy that actually has been smoldering here for some time, with the March 6 decision merely lighting the final fuse. And at present, the hassle is still very much alive.

One group of residents is seeking to get Stratton reinstated as elementary school principal for the coming year. A second group supports the school board's decision.

Question of Decisions

Basically, the issue at stake in Butte Falls is a question of whether the school board and administrators should decide school matters, or whether the voters should decide them.

One group feels that once the voters have elected a board, it should be left alone to make decisions as it sees fit. The other group feels the voters should have a more direct say in major school matters.

Following the board's decision March 6 not to reelect Stratton, a number of moves

and counter-moves took place. First, a hearing was held before the board, at which time those seeking to reinstate Stratton presented a petition demanding that he be offered a 1963-64 contract. The petition bore a total of some 250 signatures.

Hold Firm to Decision

Board members held firm in their original decision, however, contending that many of the signatures were not those of registered voters within the district. The other group admitted that all of the signatures might not be valid but argued that the petition represented the "overwhelming sentiments" of the community anyway.

Subsequently, district superintendent Charles Copeland and the board asked the Oregon Education Association's Commission on Ethics and Professional Rights and Responsibilities to make an impartial investigation.

A subcommittee of the commission spent April 5 and 6 at Butte Falls interviewing all who wished to be heard. Following its investigation, the subcommittee released a report stating, among other things, "The subcommittee found no reason to question the ethics of the board's determination," and at another point that it believed the board and administration "has acted in what they believed to be the best interests of the school community."

Petitions Circulated

Next, petitions seeking the recall of two board members, Andrew Hamstra and Duane Burton, were circulated. They were presented to the school board, with sufficient signatures to put the recall on the ballot.

Both men were recalled in an election on May 6. Ham-

stra by 90 to 81 and Burton by 88 to 83. In the same election, Duane Smeltzer, a candidate supported by those seeking Stratton's reinstatement, defeated Francis E. Poole, school board chairman, 96 to 75, and the school budget was voted down, 97 to 89. Smeltzer will take office July 1.

Following the election, the remaining three board members, Poole, Charles Ferguson and Jess Rodgers Jr., named successors to fill the vacancies created by the recall of Hamstra and Burton. Their action was taken in accordance with a recently enacted state law.

Appointed to Board

Appointed to the board were Mrs. Hannah Dalton, a member of the board in previous years, and William L. Harris. Both are sympathetic to the March 6 decision not to reelect Stratton, and so as a result of these appointments, the balance of power remained 4 to 1 in favor of the school administration.

The other group, which had hoped with the recall move to gain a 3 to 2 majority on the board, was unhappy, if not furious. It felt that the "will of the people" as expressed at the election has not been followed.

Some members of this group indicated they plan to take the matter to the county school superintendent, or even the state board of education if necessary.

Policy of County Office

Alf B. Mekvold, county school superintendent, on the other hand, said that it is the policy of his office to try to get the parties in a controversy to get together and work out their own solution. His office wants to avoid stepping in and usurping the powers of the local board, he said. Chances for a reconciliation

between the two sides of the Butte Falls controversy appear somewhat remote at present, however. Each side is determined to win.

"The people's will shall prevail," say members of Stratton's supporters. "We will never drop the fight." In addition to Stratton's reinstatement they are asking Copeland to resign and the board to appoint two members sympathetic to the majority vote expressed at the May 6 election.

"The only way for this thing to be resolved is for Stratton to leave the community," say members of the other side.

'Premeditated Railroad Job'

Members of the group seeking Stratton's reinstatement contend that his non-re-election was a "premeditated railroad job" planned from the beginning of the school year.

To support this contention they offer the testimony of two teachers in the district, who state that they were approached by persons shortly after their arrival who attempted to turn their feelings against the elementary school principal.

One of the teachers contends he was taken aside by the superintendent early in the year and told that all was not well at the grade school because the principal was incompatible with the other teachers.

The two teachers also objected to what they called a "loyalty oath" which was circulated at one point following Stratton's non-re-election. The sheet was a form of pledge indicating that those who signed supported the school board and its decision.

The teachers complained that this was a damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don't proposition, because if a teacher didn't sign, it made it appear that he was against the board, but if he did sign, then such action indicated he favored the board's decision on Stratton.

Superintendent Copeland, when asked about the so-called "loyalty oath," confirmed its existence and explained that he drew it up at the request of the school board, which wished to determine how the teachers felt about the Stratton situation. Although no one was obligated to do so, seven of the 10 teachers in the district (excluding Copeland and Stratton who both also teach) signed the statement supporting the board, the superintendent said.

The school board members say the decision not to reelect Stratton as principal was the climax of a series of events over a period of several years. A year ago, Stratton was retained by a 3 to 2 vote of the board.

Get Into Personalities

The specific reasons for the action get into the realm of personalities, and some of them must as such remain confidential, but basically the board contends that the principal was incompatible with most of the other teachers and that he took school matters to the general public instead of to the school board.

"When 12 people can't get along because of one man," remarked board member Hamstra, "you remove the one who is the cause of the trouble, not the other 11."

Hamstra was on the board one year before he was recalled. When elected in 1962 he actually was supported by the same group now attempting to reinstate Stratton. But during his year on the board he changed his mind and in 1963 voted with the other members not to reelect the principal.

Hamstra says he changed his mind on his own and was not pressured into it. He says he did so because he felt Stratton consistently came to him personally and to other residents of the community with complaints about school matters instead of taking them to the board as a whole.

Stratton on the other hand contends that he spoke of school matters only to a few people, mostly persons who asked about them. "I feel that it is the public's privilege to know what is going on," he said. "The public doesn't, in my opinion, know enough about school matters. After all, they're paying the bill."

The school matters to which both sides refer, revolve primarily around a question of whether the seventh and

eighth grades should attend classes at the grade school or at the high school three blocks away.

This year, because of scheduling problems, seventh and eighth graders have attended some classes at each school. The state board of education objected, stating that in effect the district was conducting a six-year high school in two separate buildings without its permission.

And so the superintendent and the school board drew up a program for a six-year high school and six-year elementary school, voted it into effect for the 1963-64 school year and secured the state board's approval. Stratton in the meantime drew up and supported a program to keep the seventh and eighth grades at the elementary school.

The board and superintendent say that Stratton had been warned repeatedly for several years not to take school business to the general public. Stratton, however, contends that prior to his non-re-election no one came to him to tell him he was out of line or offer suggestions as to how he could get back into line.

The board's view is that it did not fire Stratton but merely did not offer him a new contract. The board has offered to recommend Stratton for a job in another district as a teacher but not as a supervisor. "I feel we've done everything possible to see that he got fair treatment," said Superintendent Copeland.

"The board has a right to hire whom they wish."

In the controversy agrees that it isn't doing Butte Falls or its school system any good. Because of its small size and relative isolation, the OEA Commission on Ethics subcommittee noted, the district already has trouble attracting good teachers and providing a well-rounded educational program.

Some observers foresee the possibility that the current hassle may lead to consolidation with another district.

If the district's proposed 1963-64 budget continues to be voted down, for example—and the pro-Stratton group has indicated it will continue to vote the budget down as a protest move—the school board could find itself forced to operate after July 1 only on those funds not raised through local taxes.

According to County Superintendent Mekvold, there is no legal precedent to indicate what would eventually hap-

pen in such case, but it is realm of possibility that consolidation could result.

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