

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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LR school chief shaped by good, bad of past (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Dexter Suggs Sr., the incoming superintendent of the Little Rock School District, carries with him wherever he goes mementos of his past - both the good and the bad.

The good: A large silver ring with a deep blue stone, a reminder of his fulfilled promise of a high school championship team earlier in his career.

The bad: The depression under his ribs on the left side from a long ago gunshot. And there's another gunshot scar in his back, he said, and scars from knife slashes under both arms and close to the outside edge of his right eye. Look closely at the top of his 44-year-old forehead - that scar is from having his skull split open.

"The hospital was my second home," said Suggs last week, recalling his childhood in the Walnut Park neighborhood of St. Louis, a violence-ridden area that he described as being then and maybe still among the most dangerous places to live in the country.

Thirty years later and in Little Rock for most of this month to get familiar with people and issues before taking leadership of the 25,000-student district on July 1, Suggs is looking to his future - one he intends to intertwine with the Little Rock district's for a long time.

His newly signed contract is for 20 years, he jokes. It's actually just for three years - the maximum allowed by state law - but it can be extended annually.

His tone is serious when he talks about working with the greater Little Rock community to "transform" the district into a one that is better respected and supported by the city's residents, one that will ultimately stand out as one of the best in the South and in the nation.

He sees the challenges: The state-labeled low-achieving "priority" schools for one. The condition of facilities, for another, including the abundance of portable classrooms and the aging athletic facilities that someday may require a tax increase to provide replacements.

"It's a process," he said. There will be no silver bullets, he added, no cookie-cutter solutions and no immediate sweeping personnel changes.

Regarding what he might do his first days officially on the job, Suggs promised to listen and converse with the community, and to increase the level of accountability "the likes of which has never been seen before."

“For everyone. For the staff. For myself,” he said and then added: “I’m very competitive. I believe in being successful in whatever I do. I know exactly how to motivate people to move to the next level. I’m very forthcoming, very candid in my conversations.”

Asked how he inspires, Suggs said each person and situation is different.

“People must be prepared to do their jobs,” he said and reached back to his roots: “I’m from Missouri. Show me. Don’t talk. Just show me.”

Serving out the last few weeks as chief of staff in the 31,000-student Indianapolis Public Schools, Suggs is an Army veteran from the Persian Gulf War and a national-award winning educator with about 20 years of teaching, coaching and administrative experience in two Indianapolis-area districts. He has a doctorate. He’s married to a woman with a doctorate and they are the parents of three children whom he describes as “scary smart.”

Dressed on the day of an interview in a gray-green suit and paisley tie, and peppering his short, direct answers with yes ma’am and no ma’am, Suggs is a long way away from his youthful travails and the hospital stays. But his life story is gripping - even the abridged version.

He and his sisters were raised by his mother and stepfather, “loving people, and they did their best to raise me,” he said.

He was high-achieving in elementary school, but as he got a little older he abandoned academics in favor of using school to socialize with friends who were fellow gang members.

As a sixth-grader, he was expelled from one school, he said.

For fighting?

“No, I did something to the principal,” Suggs responded, paused, and elaborated: “I had no respect for anyone. I didn’t care who you were - principal, teacher. You could be someone walking up the street, I did not care,” he emphasized. “You and I having this conversation - it would never happen. I’d be more likely to hit you upside your head than to talk to you. That’s just how bad it was. That was the norm in my community.”

He said he was shot the first time in the summer between sixth and seventh grades, stabbed a couple of times during the seventh grade - and he thought he was going to die after he was shot again in the summer after seventh grade.

But between eighth and ninth grades, Suggs said, it dawned on him that he was headed for jail or death. He persuaded his mother to fill out an application for a school-desegregation transfer to a distant high school. He caught the bus at 5:30 a.m. to Pattonville High, near Lambert-St. Louis International Airport, and returned home late in the evenings.

He became involved in football, basketball and track, excelling to the point that he was making the newspapers as a freshman. That caught the attention of gang members from his neighborhood. Surprisingly, they rallied around Suggs, buying him practice and game cleats.

“They said they wanted me to look good ... because to them I was representing the ‘hood,” Suggs said. “They provided lunch money for me. They made sure I wouldn’t come back to the streets. They would even come to my games. At some games, I had the largest cheering section.”

His academic achievement also improved. He said he knew he had “crossed over,” when he reported to his junior year science class, looked around and saw two students, who would later become an astronaut and a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor, and realized his counselor had signed him up for Advanced Placement physics.

Suggs laughed about parts of his high school story, but he pointed out that there was a darker element to it.

“I was once told that, ‘If you come back to this, we’re going to kill you. You can do something with your life. You aren’t allowed to come back.’ That was unique because in our situation it was usually ‘blood in, blood out,’” Suggs said. “To be able to walk out without going through any consequences,” he said, “put the weight of the community on my back. Everyone was looking at me.”

“That has helped me as an adult,” he said of the experience. “Pressure situations don’t bother me.”

College followed high school and, wanting to avoid going home for the summer, he signed up for the Army Reserve. During what would have been his sophomore year, he was called into service for the Persian Gulf War. There was training at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., and 6 ½ months camped in Kuwait, 17 miles from the Iraq border.

“My whole perspective on life changed. I valued things I didn’t value before. That’s when I decided to become an educator - because you have a lot of time to talk to yourself in the desert. I reflected on things I had done - bad things - to people who didn’t deserve it. So I thought being an educator would be the best way to give back to society and I’ve always said that if you are going to do something you want to be the very best at it.”

Suggs has a bachelor’s degree in fine arts from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, two master’s degrees, one in curriculum and instruction and the other in administration supervision, and a doctorate focusing on organizational leadership, which is from Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion. He said he was recruited to the Metropolitan School District of Wayne Township where he worked at Ben Davis High as a speech and English teacher and coach, primarily of girls basketball. He moved into the Indianapolis Public Schools system as an assistant principal, a principal and in other leadership roles.

In remarks to the public when he was a candidate for the Little Rock job, Suggs described himself as data-driven, a “workaholic” and a “servant” leader.

Andrea Roof, a member of the Indianapolis School Board, last week recalled an early encounter with Suggs before she was on the board, an encounter that seems to support those descriptors.

“When he was head of transportation, I was having several issues with the bus showing up,” Roof said in an e-mail. “I had small children and was growing very frustrated. When I talked to Dr. Suggs about the issue, he handled it immediately. He even came out to the bus stop to wait with us to make sure there were no problems.”

Suggs has received awards for his work, including state educator of the year honors in Indiana and a Milken Family Foundation National Educator Award in 2007 for his work at an Indianapolis middle school.

“You appreciate it but it doesn’t define you as a person,” he said of the honors. “You do it because it is your mission, it’s your calling. I got into it because I wanted to make a major difference for children. I know I work for the School Board but in reality I work for the children.”

Little Rock School Board member Jody Carreiro said last week that while in Little Rock, Suggs has made scant mention of his growing up years or even some of his later career accolades.

Carreiro surmised that Suggs has other priorities.

“He’s more focused on the next fascinating chapter of his life here in the Little Rock School District,” he said.

Watson Chapel High School brings home Class 5A Quiz Bowl title for third straight year (Pine Bluff Commercial)

CONWAY — The Watson Chapel High School Quiz Bowl team won its third consecutive Class 5A state championship in a Saturday afternoon match with Little Rock Christian.

Watson Chapel’s team of four plus 10 alternates competed on live television in front of a large crowd of supporters in the studios of the Arkansas Educational Television Network on the campus of the University of Central Arkansas.

“Seeing this team of kids compete and win gives me an incredible sense of accomplishment,” Watson Chapel coach Ronette Metcalf said. “They are so committed to this team and to each other’s success. I am just so proud of them.”

The Watson Chapel team included captain Rhett Hunt, Andrew Fleming, Joshua Knight and Eric Williams, with alternates Maggie Young and Sarah Smith substituting for Hunt and Fleming in the third round.

The game

The competition began with a toss-up round devoted to a series of 20 questions that were answered according to who hit their buzzer first. The questions were wide-ranging, covering topics ranging from poetry to mathematics to Greek mythology being utilized.

At the end of the first round, Watson Chapel led 100-70.

The second round combined the toss-up format with a series of six themed bonus questions for the team with each correct toss-up answer. The themes ranged from fill-in-the blank to events happening in April to Mark Twain. Watson Chapel secured the first two toss-up questions and ended the round with a 170-80 lead over Little Rock Christian.

Round three was a lightning round with the possible categories announced and then time given for the teams to make substitutions and choose their category.

Watson Chapel chose the category of musical instruments and substituted Young and Smith to take the place of Hunt and Fleming. The decision was a strategic one as Young and Smith were the designated music experts for the team.

“Sarah and I are both in the band and have a musical background,” Young said. “In the state tournament we were in two music lightning rounds. We swept one and also did very well in the second.”

At the end of the lightning round Watson Chapel led by 250-160.

The fourth round saw the return of Hunt and Fleming to the lineup and the continuation of a dominant performance with a final score of 340-250.

“The questions suited us today,” Metcalf said. “We have been competing almost weekly since the first of the year and during the week the team practices during lunch and after school. They are very committed to it.”

Metcalf said she was proud of Smith’s efforts as captain during the third round.

“It’s a lot of pressure to go up there on live television and serve as captain and time the answers,” Metcalf said. “And she is doing it as a 10th-grader. She handled everything very well.”

Metcalf said she tries to teach her team how to respond quickly to questions and to make educated guesses when needed.

“I tell them that the math they do in Quiz Bowl is not regular math,” Metcalf said. “It’s Quiz Bowl math which means you’re going to have to make some estimations.

“It’s knowing how to anticipate an answer,” Metcalf said. “Knowing things by dates is important. If they know things chronologically then they can make some determinations that allow them to eliminate possibilities that do not fall into their timeline.”

Metcalf said resources such as the Modern Library's Top 100 Books allow them to memorize authors with their books as well as other key data.

"The school district really supports us and that has meant so much," Metcalf said. "They have invested in us and it is well worth it. We are provided with a bus and driver to get us to our competitions. We aren't in a school district where the parents have to drive the kids."

Metcalf said she hopes she is living up to the legacy of her mentor, Linda Miller, who died in the fall of 2012.

"She was the Benton High School Quiz Bowl coach and she was my mentor," Metcalf said. "She got me into coaching Quiz Bowl. I hope that when I die people say about me the kinds of things they said about Linda."

Assistant coach Jaime Fox was proud of the team's accomplishment.

"We have really good kids who worked really hard," Fox said. "I'm really proud of them. I thought they played really well. Ms. Metcalf is an outstanding coach."

The team

"This is competition for all of us who don't play sports," game MVP Fleming said to laughter from his fellow team members. "Being on the Quiz Bowl team is being in a kind of family."

Hunt was happy to be able to share the victory with the rest of his team.

"We've had our ups and downs," Hunt said. "We are a dysfunctional family that loves and supports each other. The best part of all of this is being with my teammates."

Eric Williams provided answers at several critical points in the competition.

"It's a lot of fun being a part of this," Williams said.

Smith said serving as captain during the third round was a good experience.

"I was kind of nervous at first but once I got up there with the team I felt fine," Smith said. "The whole experience has been really, really fun."

Joshua Knight, who will attend Hendrix College next fall, said he provides the team with knowledge of a more esoteric nature.

"I am strong in literature and mythology," Knight said.

Jalen Mauldin appreciates the friendships that he has made on the team.

Sophomore Khadijah Jones followed in her older brother's footsteps.

"He was on the Quiz Bowl team and got me interested in it," Jones said. "I like the competitiveness of the tournaments and I like the players on the team."

Rachelle Beggs is a team parent.

"I have a son on the team and his older brother was on the team a few years ago," Beggs said. "I love watching them compete. I guess it's been four or five years that I've been doing this."

Jimmy Beggs said his time on the team has taught him things he wouldn't have otherwise learned in school.

Mulberry Pleasant View Enrollments Dips Below State Minimum (Southwest Times Record, Fort Smith)

MULBERRY — Enrollment at Mulberry Pleasant View Bi-County School District dipped this year to 342, eight students below the state minimum for school districts, school superintendent Dana Higdon said.

However, Higdon said, enrollment for the rural Crawford County district tends to be cyclical, and district and state officials are not overly concerned.

Higdon said she contacted Arkansas Department of Education officials who told her the enrollment count has to be below the state minimum for two consecutive years before it becomes a concern.

Higdon said Wednesday that an enrollment dip is not unusual for Mulberry. Enrollment for the 2011-12 school year was higher than the 2010-11 enrollment count, she said. This year, the district is trending down. District officials believe it will rebound next school year, Higdon said.

In a September 2012 report to the public, district officials reported enrollment of 355. The state counts official enrollment by averaging together the counts for the first three quarters of the school year, Higdon said. She said the district had between 380 and 400 students in the 2011-12 school year.

According to a Department of Education annual statistical report, in 2005-06 the Mulberry district had 544 students, then a 14 percent decrease over the previous five years.

The district's financial situation is good, Higdon said. Although a decline in the state's per student foundation funding will occur because of the enrollment drop, the district is not at a point where it has to worry about staff cuts because of enrollment, the superintendent said.

According to the Arkansas Department of Education, per student foundation funding for the current school year is \$6,267. For an eight-student decline, that would be a \$50,136 drop in that specific type of funding.

Of Arkansas' 235 public school districts, Mulberry is one of 35 districts that received an "achieving district" designation under the state's Elementary and Secondary Education Act Flexibility accountability standards for 2012, Higdon said.

Based on its flexibility plan, the state received a waiver from some of the most restrictive federal No Child Left Behind requirements, particularly the one that demanded all districts raise overall student achievement in the same pre-set increments until all students became proficient by 2014. The No Child Left Behind Act was the 2001 re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act passed in the 1960s as part of the War on Poverty.

The states approved for ESEA Flexibility measure many more areas than the reading, mathematics and graduation rates required under No Child Left Behind. According to Education Secretary Arne Duncan, under the flexibility plans, the states also eye science and social studies, writing, how many students are taking advanced placement and concurrent high school and college credit courses, students' ACT scores, dropout and remediation rates.