

BY SIGRID BATHEN

▼ The new superintendent of the Sacramento City Unified School District—with budget woes, a divided school board and a high dropout rate—relishes the challenge.

Terry Grier: Swimming Upstream



In his first high school teaching job more than two decades ago, Terry Grier taught five subjects and coached the baseball team to unexpected victories in the tiny North Carolina river community of Hertford, perhaps best known as the home of famed Oakland A's pitcher Jim "Catfish" Hunter.

"I'd known Jimmy for a while but never knew who he was," Grier recalls. "He went to the First Baptist Church in Hertford, and we were sitting there one Sunday when the minister said he wanted to say thank you to Jimmy 'Catfish' Hunter for the new pew cushions, and everybody laughed because in Hertford no one, but no one, referred to Jimmy as Catfish—it was a name [A's owner] Charlie Finley gave him. He was just a country boy. . . ."

As he tells the story in his melodic Carolina accent, Sacramento's new city school superintendent—who grew up on a tobacco farm in Fairmont, N.C. (population 2,500), the

son of a small-town butcher with an eighth-grade education and a seamstress with a high school diploma, the grandson of a sharecropper who farmed the land of others for a share of the profits—looks anything but country. Wearing a dark blue pinstripe suit and crisp white shirt set off by a red silk tie and matching pocket handkerchief, a small gold bracelet on one wrist, the 44-year-old Grier speaks softly, quickly, alternately regaling visitors with Carolina stories and his strongly held beliefs about American public education. The conference table in front of him is bare, like his office walls in the crumbling 1920s N Street elementary school building that has served as the district headquarters since 1950 and is being abandoned this summer for a controversial move to an \$8.5 million high-rise on Capitol Mall, which the board voted to buy some months before Grier was hired.

Though miles and years and perhaps even lifestyles away from his Carolina roots, Grier remembers clearly where he started. His parents still live in Fairmont, where his dad now owns a string of small businesses, which his younger brother Mitch helps manage. His mother, who for years was a seamstress in a pajama factory, retired after selling her very successful women's dress shop in nearby Lumberton 10 years ago.

"I was the first kid in our family to graduate from college [East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C., with a bachelor's degree in biology and health education in 1972]. I was in ROTC and thought I wanted to fly planes for the Air Force, but bad eyes wouldn't allow me to fly. I'd had my knee torn up playing ball, so I thought, gee, it would be great to do physical therapy and work with kids who had sports injuries, so I graduated a semester early, then went back to grad school."

Grier married Cindy Hodges, a 1972 graduate of Queens College in Charlotte, N.C., that summer. During the summer, the young couple visited the resort community of Cape Hatteras, N.C., where Grier struck up a conversation with the high school principal from Hertford. "He enticed

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education

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me to come to work for him by enticing me to coach baseball," Grier recalls.

"During our first year of marriage, we lived in this little apartment right beside the drawbridge where the song 'Carolina Moon' was written. That was our claim to fame." He laughs uproariously at the recollection.

When his baseball team "did very, very well, which we weren't expected to do," Grier was recruited to teach in Whiteville, N.C., nearer to his and his wife's families. "My wife was a new bride, living six hours away from home, and Hertford was the furthest she'd ever been from home, including college."

Since then, the Griers have moved often—four times in North Carolina between 1978 and 1984, when he became superintendent of the McDowell County Schools in Marion, N.C. Along the way, he earned two master's degrees from East Carolina University and, in 1983, a doctorate from Vanderbilt University.

Their daughter, Leigh, was born in 1976 and their son, Jason, three years later. Grier says neither is pleased about the move to California (nor is his wife, who favored his accepting the superintendent's job in Greenville, S.C., close to family). "A lot of my colleagues recommended against this [Sacramento] job," he says, "because of the volatility of the situation, the state's money problems, and the fact that Sac City has not had as good a national reputation as we hope it will have. . . . I always really wanted to work in an urban setting like this, where you have very diverse children and a very diverse public. I always wanted to prove that public education does work. And I think you can do that here."

The Griers left North Carolina behind in 1987 and moved to Amarillo, Tex., where he was superintendent of the Amarillo Independent School District for one year, then back to South Carolina as superintendent of the 13,000-student Darlington County School District for three years. Moving up the career and salary scale to increasingly larger districts, Grier was hired to head the troubled, 33,000-student Akron Public School District in Akron, Ohio, in 1991.

During his three years in Akron, he moved with typical speed, pressing for sometimes unpopular reforms in a district with a powerful teachers' union, where the previous superintendent had been in office for 25 years. Grier says administrative vacancies were not advertised outside the district and the 60 school principals were all promoted through the ranks, predominantly white,



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male and Akron-bred, in a district that is 42 percent African American. "When I went to work in the central office, there were no women and no minorities at the senior cabinet level," Grier recalls. "It was all white good-ole-boys."

Grier will face fewer such disparities in Sacramento, where the teaching and administrative staff is 29 percent minority and the student population is two-thirds minority (fairly evenly divided among Asians, African Americans and Hispanics), and where the previous superintendent was Rudy Crew, an African American who left last year to head the schools in Tacoma, Wash. There will be problems of a different sort in the 50,000-student Sacramento City Unified School District, which had been without a superintendent for more than a year. The board of education faces the acute fiscal woes of many urban school districts, and the 31.6 percent dropout rate is among the highest in the state (the largest district, Los Angeles Unified, had a 29.1 percent dropout rate in 1993, while the highest rate was in Del Norte County Unified at 39.8 percent). The board has been plagued by divisive public disputes among members seemingly unable to agree even on the hiring terms for a new superintendent.

Grier, who earned a base annual salary of \$115,000 in Akron, signed a four-year contract with the Sacramento district that includes an initial base salary of \$127,500 plus a reported \$33,000 benefit package, including small incentive payments for superior performance. Given the district's precarious financial status, the cost of hiring Grier was, at best, controversial.

Wilson Riles, California's state superintendent of schools from 1970 to 1982, who now owns a consulting firm and was hired last year by the Sacramento board to conduct a nationwide search for a new city superintendent, says Grier's salary and benefit package—which Riles' firm had no role in negotiating—is not unusual, given his qualifications and his reputation as an effective, if sometimes impatient, troubleshooter. Grier, at age 38, was one of the youngest superintendents to be named to a list of the 100 top school administrators in the country.

"Terry Grier is an energetic, concerned, active person who believes that Sacramento can be an excellent district, a lighthouse district," Riles says. "It has every opportunity to be—it's in the capital of the largest state in the nation, and if you make a success out of this, people are going to know about it. If you're a young, energetic person, here is a challenge, an opportunity. . . . He is also a person who is not going to run and hide; he will step out front, he won't try to blame people. He will expect perfor-

TAKING ISSUE

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In a series of interviews with *SACRAMENTO* magazine, Sacramento City Schools Superintendent Dr. Terry Grier gave his views on a variety of issues affecting public education in Sacramento and around the country. Here is a sampling:

On Schools vs. Prisons: "I'd love to have what we have in California to incarcerate a prisoner for one year. I'd love to have that money to educate a child, and I'd like to have that for five years, and if we didn't make the progress that anyone thought we should have made, then I'd be willing to be removed as school superintendent."

On Grades: "We know the damage that giving grades in elementary schools does. But we still do it, because we know that parents like to sit around bridge tables and parties and brag about how their kids are on the honor roll. At the elementary level, I never, ever understood who made a 96 and who made a 92 in reading at the third-grade level. But yet we do that every day with a great deal of assurance and authority."

On Reading: "If you're going to teach a child to read, you have to do it by the third grade. For every year they pass the third grade not knowing how to read, it makes it twice as hard to help them catch up.

We only have 13 reading recovery teachers in this district right now, with 50,000 students, and we know that reading recovery is one of the most successful early-intervention reading programs available."

On School Violence: "It's not so much the kids on campus I'm concerned about, but those who come in from off campus. They get in fights over the weekend over girlfriends or softball games or some other silliness and come to the school to try to hurt people. It's a deterrent [to violence] to have a [police] officer there, with that cruiser parked out in front."

On Advanced Placement: "How can we say in this district that we believe all children can learn when we only offer advanced placement courses in two of our six high schools [McClatchy and Kennedy]? Are we saying that we don't believe the children in four of the high schools here are smart enough to take the AP curriculum?"

On the Future of Public Education: "It must change. It must change or it will disappear. The voucher movement is not going to go away. It will get stronger and better organized. I don't think the teachers' unions can continue to provide the kind of money it will take to fight them off."

mance from staff, he's not going to be scared of the union, and he will negotiate with them in a fair way. And I think that's what this district needs."

Grier is widely regarded as one of a new breed of American school superintendents who function more as crisis managers and troubleshooters than traditional school administrators, rarely staying in a job longer than necessary to make often sweeping, sometimes unpopular changes. He relishes the challenge. His longtime colleagues and friends say he would be lost in a district *without* challenges.

"Every superintendent has certain things that characterize their management," says Dr. Dudley Flood, executive director of the North Carolina Association of School Administrators and a former deputy state schools superintendent who has known Grier for more than 20 years. "He's an open-and-shut case of 'what you see is what you get.' He is unpretentious, direct, almost to a fault. Sometimes this comes across as confrontational. . . . He is tireless and expects the same from others. He is extremely intolerant of incompetence or inaction. You'll clearly love him or despise him. . . ."

"What people who know him best like most about him is his freshness. He has a lot of serendipity. He doesn't ponder things a long time. He is much more likely to act. His philosophy, which I like to think I influenced, is that you need to act if you have all the information, with no procrastination.

That will not excite people who procrastinate."

Flood says Grier would not be a good "maintenance superintendent"—one who is content with the status quo. "He has to swim upstream—that's the guy's nature. He wouldn't know what to do in a calm, ordinary month." And, Flood adds, Grier has "mellowed" over the years. "Fifteen years ago, he was much less diplomatic. He has mellowed some, is less abrupt. . . ."

"In the end, he will stand on principle, and in every instance [his decisions] are child-centered. There have been times when I told him to slow down. He would say this child is only going to be 10 years old for a short time, and he was right."

IN 1980, WHEN GRIER was in his second North Carolina high school principal's job, at St. Pauls High School in St. Pauls, N.C., one of his first tasks was to clean the bathrooms. "They were just filthy," he recalls. "They smelled. They were horrible. I talked with our custodians, and I agreed to give them time and a half if they would meet me at the school on a Saturday. I came in wearing blue jeans and hunting boots and a flannel shirt and gloves and said, 'Here, this is how we want to clean the bathrooms.' So we got some brushes and some disinfectant, and we worked together. We saw an immediate improvement."

The story is typical Grier—take charge, get the job done, to hell with ceremony and convention.