

## **HELEN OAKES LEAVES SCHOOL BOARD AFTER 7 1/2 YEARS - Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA) - December 2, 1989 - page B04**

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Helen Oakes spent most of yesterday cleaning out her office at the Board of Education, filling 29 file boxes with materials to be sent to the Temple University urban archives.

For her, it was not a happy task.

Oakes, a member of the board for 7 1/2 years, had hoped to be reappointed by Mayor Goode to a second full six-year term. But instead Goode chose Floyd Alston, a banker from Mount Airy, who will be sworn in Monday to take Oakes' place on the nine-member body.

"I'm sad about leaving," Oakes said as she sat in her now bare office.

She was originally appointed by Mayor William J. Green 3d and is the only Green nominee passed over by Goode. And her departure has been somewhat acrimonious - she accused School Superintendent Constance E. Clayton of having urged her removal in retaliation for Oakes' sometimes outspoken criticism.

But at her last board meeting two weeks ago, the superintendent had kind, if not effusive, words to say about Oakes.

"We've learned from her in a variety of ways," Clayton said. "We've been appreciative of her candor, her hard tough questions. We wish her good health, best wishes, and look forward to seeing her continue her interest in public education."

Oakes has been a presence on the Philadelphia education scene for more than two decades, most prominently with the newsletter that she wrote for 19 years. A four-page, meticulously researched document that came out monthly for most of its life, the newsletter served as a bible of sorts for educational activists - especially in the tumultuous days of the 1970s and early 1980s when strikes were the norm and budget deficits constantly loomed.

But last January she ceased publishing it, saying it was time to move on to other interests. At the time, she was lobbying hard to remain on the board, and the newsletter - though not always critical of the school district - had become an irritant to some who thought she should express her misgivings privately in board sessions.

"I think that Helen has always said what she's felt," said David Tulin, who does consulting work on desegregation and other issues for the school district and has known her for a long time. "She has always been committed to children first and teachers and administrators second. I think she thought that she'd be seen as more of a team player by ending her newsletter."

Oakes is leaving the board - and Alston is coming on - at a crucial time. Differences between Clayton and her chief of staff, Ralph Smith, have thrown the top administration of the district into disorder and consumed the attention of the board for months.

Oakes sees the development as ominous and feels that Clayton has not demonstrated an openness and receptiveness to new ideas and approaches that will be necessary for the district to continue to move ahead.

"I have a concern about the future of the school district," Oakes said. "We need a superintendent who gives clear direction and . . . works with people on the basis of mutual respect and openness."

Oakes believes this could place in jeopardy many of the advances made under Clayton, particularly improved labor relations and the trend toward giving teachers and principals more say over how their schools are run.

For herself, she said she planned to keep up her interest in public education, but wasn't sure yet how she would do it.

"I think judging from the number of people who have talked to me, many teachers, principals and other administrators feel that a voice they once had and who understood many of the problems they faced is gone," she said.

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