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NASHVILLE, EXPERIMENT IN URBAN SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION.

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THE BIGGEST CHANGE WHICH RESULTED FROM THE CONSOLIDATION OF NASHVILLE AND DAVIDSON COUNTY, TENNESSEE, INTO ONE GOVERNMENTAL UNIT WAS THE CREATION OF A UNIFIED SCHOOL SYSTEM. NOW, ALL BUT ONE MEMBER OF THE NEW METRO BOARD OF EDUCATION ARE NEW APPOINTEES, AS IS THE DIRECTOR OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM. UNDER THIS NEW LEADERSHIP BROAD CHANGES IN THE PREVIOUSLY "MEDIOCRE OR WORSE" EDUCATIONAL QUALITY OF THE SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN INSTITUTED. AMONG THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE NEW ADMINISTRATION ARE INCREASED TAX REVENUES AND SCHOOL ALLOCATIONS, GAINS IN DESEGREGATING THE SCHOOLS AND FACULTIES, CHANGES IN PURCHASING AND MANAGEMENT PROCEDURES, AND THE REDISTRIBUTION OF FUNDS IN FAVOR OF DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS. WITH STRONG BACKING FROM THE MAYOR, THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT IS NOW PLANNING TO REJUVENATE THE CURRICULUM. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "PHI DELTA KAPPAN," VOLUME 48, NUMBER 7, MARCH 1967. (NH)

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COVER PHOTO This scene was photographed last summer in a Head Start class at Toledo, Ohio. Our thanks to Richard Allen Huston, director of Head Start for the Toledo Board of Education, for the excellent photograph.—**The Editors**

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NASHVILLE: Experiment in Urban School Consolidation

By JOHN EGERTON and JIM LEESON

ON APRIL 1, 1963, the citizens of Nashville and Davidson County, Tennessee, abolished their separate city and county governments and replaced them with a top-to-bottom consolidation called Metropolitan Government.

As the nation's first complete amalgamation of all branches of city and county government, Metro has become something of a model for beleaguered urban centers elsewhere in the country. Now in its fourth year, the new system already has produced noteworthy improvements in a number of areas, including law enforcement, race relations, public housing, and public health. But the biggest change of all has taken place in the schools, where two archaic and sometimes antithetical systems have ceased to exist and a unified public school system has been created.

Before Metro, the Nashville and Davidson County schools had many earmarks of run-of-the-mill school systems: inbred leadership, inconsistent quality (most of it poor), some graft and favoritism, and a lot of costly duplication. Consolidation ushered in a new school board, a single director (superintendent), and a clean slate for 82,500 pupils in the 135 schools of the city and county.

The director of the new Metro school system, John H. Harris, has said the unification effort is "like putting West Point and Annapolis together." In guiding the union movement, Harris has used the tact and the tactics of a military man, and he has often been the center of controversy. Last spring the schools became a major issue in the Metro elections, but the critics of the new system were defeated.

The conversion to a unified system began with an interim school board comprised of three citizens named in the new Metro charter and three members each from the city and county school boards. For 18 months the transitional board, headed by President Emeritus Henry H. Hill of George Peabody College, laid the groundwork for consolidated operation of the schools and screened candidates for the director's post.

In accordance with the Metro charter, the interim board also hired an outside consulting firm, Educational Research Services of White Plains, New York, to conduct a comprehensive study of the schools. The nine-month, $35,000 survey concluded that the quality of the schools was "mediocre or worse." It said classes were too large (one-fourth of all elementary grades had 35 or more pupils), salaries were too low ($4,272 for beginning teachers), the dropout rate was too high, vocational-technical programs were too limited, and buildings, books, and materials were inadequate and outdated.

When Metro Mayor Beverly Briley appointed a new school board to assume direction of the schools in July, 1964, President Hill stayed on as a consultant for the final selection of a top executive. The Metro Board of Education, a blue-ribbon slate of nine prominent citizens appointed to staggered six-year terms, included only one person who had served on the interim board (the same man was also the only carry-over from either the city or county boards). The charter gave them sole authority for operation of the schools, including selection of the director. All this was designed to "take the schools out of politics." If that utopian goal remains to be achieved, the new system seems at least to have helped take politics out of the schools.

The board interviewed 13 prospects before selecting Harris, who was then superintendent of the Des Moines, Iowa, schools. For the past three years, the 53-year-old Midwesterner has been riding shotgun on a comprehensive experiment in urban school consolidation. With the backing of his board, he has preached and practiced reform with the subtlety of a sledgehammer, and his shape-up-or-ship-out tactics have produced some grateful disciples and not a few bitter enemies. The two groups agree on only one thing: Metro schools are undergoing changes as deep as they are broad.

Harris accepted a $30,000 annual salary ($5,000 more than Mayor Briley's) and a five-year contract to come to Nashville, where he now directs a network of 141 schools serving more than 91,000 pupils. When he came, he found the schools badly short-changed, rife with personnel problems, topheavy with coaches-turned-principals, and lacking a single doctorate among their administrators. Furthermore, the purchasing system permitted some employees to line their pockets, the quality gap between rich and poor neighborhood schools was steadily widening, and 4,400 students were awaiting decisions from the new director on their applications for transfers to avoid desegregation.

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In three years, Harris and his board have tacked up a string of impressive accomplishments:

- With the full support of Briley, the Metro council and the two highly competitive Nashville newspapers, they got voter approval of a 1 percent increase (to 4 percent) in the sales tax, with the additional funds earmarked for the schools. The new revenue amounted to $8 million the first year. Harris made 169 speeches (and lost 20 pounds) during the sales tax campaign.

- The operating budget for the schools was increased from $22.5 million in 1962-63 to $33 million in 1964-65. Including funds for capital improvements, the 1966-67 budget is about $45 million.

- Desegregation has taken a big stride forward, with more than 60 percent of the schools now biracial and 38 percent of the system's 3,850 teachers assigned to desegregated faculties. The 4,400 applications for transfer Harris faced his first year were reduced to just five in the fall of 1965.

- New directors of purchasing, food service, and transportation have been brought in, and they have, in turn, revamped the entire purchasing system, replaced 90 separate and independent cafeteria managers, and taken over the bus system from the former post-hole digger who was in charge. The new purchasing director "didn't know a soul, so he couldn't grant any favors," says Harris. On one occasion he had a large order of substandard paint returned to its supplier—a man of powerful influence among Nashville politicians. "We didn't know who we were sending it back to," Harris says, "but it wouldn't have made any difference to me." Competitive bidding is now standard practice.

- Distribution of operating funds, traditionally meted out in favor of the more affluent neighborhoods, is being shifted to benefit the most deficient schools. Harris believes a school system "is only as strong as its weakest link," and he has accepted more than $5 million in federal funds and foundation aid to help strengthen the weaker schools.

In addition to all this, Harris has been outspoken in his criticism of organized football and marching bands in junior high schools, the lack of adequate instruction in the fine arts ("not a potter's wheel or a kiln in a single school"), the absence of kindergartens, and the long neglect of libraries. He's on record in favor of homework for first graders, ability groupings, more federal aid (with some reservations), expanded vocational-technical instruction, and wholesale updating of the high school curriculum.

During 1965-66 the Metro system added 35 librarians, bought $1 million worth of new textbooks, and spent $1 million more on library books, maps, globes, and encyclopedia sets. "We were teaching with 15-year-old physics textbooks when I came here," Harris says. "That's not a textbook, that's a piece of ancient history." No less than 10 reading experiments are under way, team teaching and television are being prudently used as teaching tools, and minimum salaries for teachers have been raised to $5,000. None of the changes, taken alone, is spectacular; all of them together, when considered against conditions which existed before Metro, are impressive evidence of the far-reaching effect of Harris's new broom.

At one time or another since he came to Nashville, John Harris has been called impatient, strong-willed, practical, visionary, sensitive, blunt, tactless, realistic, arrogant, and pragmatic. Somehow, all the adjectives seem to apply. The chance to quarterback a full-fledged merger lured him to the job, and he has gone about his work with the cold efficiency of a hired gun and the fervor of an evangelist. He has encountered opposition—as when he brought in some of his administrative staff from outside—but it hasn't slowed him. "When a new football coach comes to the University of Tennessee," he says, "he's allowed to bring his whole staff with him, because they want a winner. Maybe these people [his critics] don't want a winner in education."

Mayor Briley is a strong defender of Harris, and from all indications he has left school operations and policy making strictly to the director and the Board of Education. Briley was reelected to a five-year term last May, defeating former Nashville Mayor Ben West, who made criticism of the new school system a major plank in his platform.

Harris has long been an advocate of school consolidation ("I've been preaching this for 25 years," he says). His own experience in graduate school included a year's work each in elementary education, secondary education, and business. He has a doctorate from Columbia University and worked in industry and as business manager of a large school system before becoming a superintendent. Operating a big school system is, in his view, similar to running a big business. He believes in choosing key personnel with great care and then leaving them alone to do their jobs. "If you interviewed my staff," he says, "I think there's one thing all of them would tell you: 'When he hires you, he gives you a job, and he'll only talk to you when you're having trouble.'"

The ferment in Nashville's schools began under Harris in the areas of organizational structure and management; now it is moving into the curriculum. However much the friends and foes of Metro and Harris quarrel over the man and his methods, there appears no likelihood that the new directions will be reversed. Nashville-Davidson County, with a population of about 450,000, is pioneering in the field of unified urban government, and the election last spring amounted to an endorsement of the new system—including the reconstructed schools.

"I think what is happening here will happen in dozens of other places," says Harris. "The Metro school system is going to be one of the best in the country five years from now, because people in this community are beginning to see some good schools, and they like what they see."