



Courage under fire

Story by Jim Cook • Art by Jay Hare

Betty Peters isn't afraid of a fight.

In the six years she's served on the Alabama State School Board, Peters has been an outspoken proponent of increased accountability and effectiveness in the public school system. Her efforts helped lead to sweeping reforms in the two-year college system and the indictment of former Chancellor Roy Johnson on criminal charges regarding his use of his office for personal gain.

Peters shared some of her struggles in a candid interview with *Wiregrass Magazine*.

Why did you decide to run for state school board?

I received a wonderful education in the

Dothan City Schools, as did my father, husband, and many other family members. I wanted to try to restore the level of excellence which we formerly had and to do so across the state. I particularly wanted to improve math and reading instruction. I also wanted more accountability by the colleges of education, the K-12 schools, and by school boards. I was not, at the time, aware of the corruption that was in the two-year college system. During the period I was campaigning, in 2002, Roy Johnson was appointed interim chancellor and soon after the election, but before I was sworn in, he was appointed permanent chancellor by the State School Board, with only Stephanie Bell voting "no." I was in the audience that day and was not pleased

because I would have preferred a national search.

What do you think has been your biggest success as a state school board member?

Getting former Chancellor Roy Johnson fired.

What's been your biggest frustration?

Getting Mr. Johnson fired. The first time Stephanie Bell and I made the motion to fire him, we were called "witch hunters" by one of the other board members. I think subsequent events show we were correct. It was a long and tedious process which gained momentum after we were able to get a copy of all the contracts with vendors entered into during his tenure by the various entities in the two-year college system. A lot of the information was very useful in exposing the corruption.

How do politics and interest group agendas influence education?

Many factors are at work. For instance, the special interest groups fund candidates through PACs (political action committees) which often launder the money through other PACs to disguise the candidates' backers. There are so many PACs that a voter is unlikely to know with which group the PAC is associated; they often possess very vague or misleading names like BI PAC, Arbor PAC, Children's PAC, TVA PAC, or TRD (which is The Real Democrats). One person who runs a large number of PACs gave them names consisting simply of numbers. As most of us now know, if a voter wants to know a candidate's *real* agenda, he must know where the candidate received his funding.

Most people in Alabama do know the major special interest group is the AEA, the Alabama Education Association. The AEA has been known to recruit Democrat candidates to run in the GOP primary (see Brian LeCompte's Web site called Flashpointblog to see how that worked with Troy "Skip" Smithwick's 2008 campaign. The applicable article is entitled something like 'How the Democrats tried to hijack the GOP primary.') They backed my GOP opponent in the 2006 Republican primary as well as the 2008 Republican primary opponents of Stephanie

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Recent studies have shown, for instance, that many elementary teachers across the U.S. are **insufficiently prepared** in the math content area.

Bell and Randy McKinney. Probably in retribution for their support of the 'double dipping ban,' Mrs. Bell and Mr. McKinney faced very well financed opposition in amounts previously unheard of in a state school board race. The PACs representing some vendors doing business with schools also have been involved in state school board races, such as the one for Channel One.

What should the state's education priorities be for the near future?

In K-12, cutting cost and increasing quality and accountability. I think we should try to downsize the Alabama Reading Initiative and the Alabama Reading, Math, Science and Technology Initiative by putting more of the teacher preparation for reading and math in the Schools of Education in the universities. I'd like to see our elementary teachers graduate from Alabama universities academically prepared to teach both subjects. We also need to raise the bar on the 'cut scores' for the Praxis I and Praxis II exams. I am also concerned about the growing role of technology in our schools and the push by the Partnership for 21st Century Schools, which is using state 'initiatives', which overemphasize the cost effectiveness and appropriateness of many of the products its partners sell, such as software and professional development services. I think our recently-passed Math Course of Study will increase our students' academic achievement, but the changes will require some initial professional development of teachers as well as changes in the course of study for math in our colleges.

In the Alabama Community College System, our next priority is finding a new chancellor. ■