

# StarNews



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TODAY 84°/60°  
THU 83°/64°  
FRI 86°/71°

Complete forecast, B6

## GRIEVANCE FALLOUT

# School became author's cause

By Adam Wagner  
StarNews Staff

WILMINGTON – Buried in a definition of teaching on Clyde Edgerton's UNC Wilmington webpage is this message to students: "Accept no advice that doesn't make sense."

The phrase hints at Edgerton's uncompromising curiosity. This trait led the Thomas Kenan Distinguished professor to ask Forest Hills Elementary principal

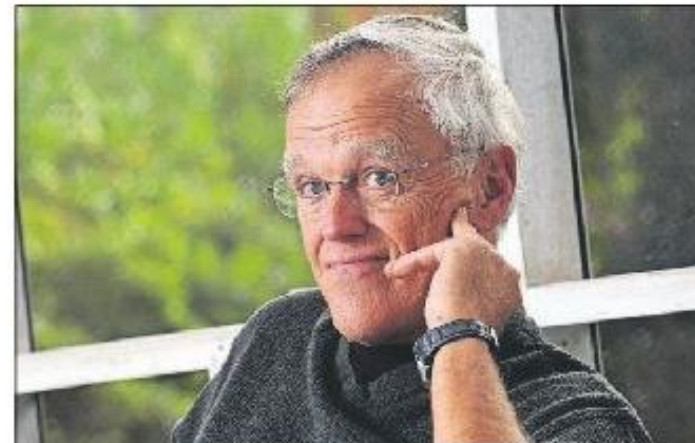
Deborah Greenwood in May 2015 why the Spanish immersion program that included two of his children was filled with white kids. The school is 56 percent minority.

When he heard answers that didn't make sense to him, Edgerton – the author of novels such as "Raney," "Killer Diller" and "The Night Train" – refused to accept them.

After a prolonged grievance process and dogged pursuit of the truth,

Edgerton was turned away from the school on April 21 when he arrived to tutor a student then was banned from all New Hanover County schools on May 10.

According to emails, Greenwood would not tell Edgerton why she removed him from the tutoring schedule, only that it was confidential. The author who's been compared to Mark Twain and Eudora Welty had served



Clyde Edgerton, a local author, has been banned by New Hanover County Schools Superintendent Tim Markley. PHOTO BY MIKE SPENCER

SEE AUTHOR, A5

## LOCAL

### Police to remain in housing areas, school campuses

City police officers will continue to work on Wilmington Housing Authority properties and in some schools within city limits.

A2

as a volunteer tutor at the school for nearly eight years.

Schools Superintendent Tim Markley said he banned Edgerton because Edgerton had not responded to a request to meet regarding a parent complaint. According to the unidentified parent, Edgerton called her on April 22 and said he believed her child had been discriminated against by Forest Hills. Edgerton told her he may have obtained her information illegally.

On May 5, following two days of email exchanges between Markley and Edgerton's attorney, Jim Lea, the two agreed to talk soon. The next communication was Markley's letter banning Edgerton.

Markley knows who Edgerton is. He knows about the Guggenheim Fellowship, the Thomas Wolfe Prize and the handful of New York Times awards.

He doesn't care.

"It's about making sure the student information's not compromised," Markley said, "and it doesn't matter whether he's a local celebrity or the guy on the street."

Late last week, the superintendent reached out to Edgerton about a temporary reprieve for this Thursday.

"You have publicly expressed your desire to attend your son's fifth grade graduation," Markley wrote. "As a parent, I understand and welcome you to attend the ceremony."

Lea fired back.

"You have wrongly banned

him from the school campus," Lea responded, "yet you feel as if you need to give him permission to attend his own son's graduation."

## The program in question

Housed at Forest Hills for its first six years, the Spanish immersion program has 197 students in kindergarten through fifth grade — 73 percent of those students are white, compared with 44 percent of the school's total student body.

Students in the program learn some subjects in English and others in Spanish, a method meant to make them bilingual and that supporters say comes with a slew of cognitive benefits.

Parents, including Edgerton, questioned the school's outreach in minority communities. The concerns came to a head with the admissions process for the 2015-16 kindergarten, a class that was filled using first-come, first-served enrollment, with most acceptance letters sent before the kindergarten enrollment period began.

On the first day of school, that class had 37 white, six Hispanic and two black students. The previous year's class had 36 white, seven Hispanic and no black students.

Unsatisfied with the response from the school district and Markley, Edgerton filed a formal grievance alleging discrimination at the school.

Edgerton's advocacy for black and Hispanic students dovetails with the stories in his novels. Many of those novels were influenced by the segregated South of his childhood. His high school football team was nicknamed

the Rebels. The marching band carried the Confederate battle flag.

"I am kind of haunted by the tension that was produced with a racist culture and realizing that something is awry," Edgerton said. "And I realized something was awry with that (Forest Hills) program and it had such an echo."

Markley has consistently maintained in both a response to the grievance and again in interviews that the process was not discriminatory, though beginning with the 2016-17 school year, the program is moving to the Gregory School of Science, Mathematics and Technology and a lottery will be used to determine admissions if more applications are submitted than the program can handle.

## 'How did you get it?'

As Edgerton collected information about minority parents he and others believe have been discriminated against, he kept track on a printed out email that originally had information about one of his classes.

Over time, Edgerton has scrawled at least 14 names and sets of phone numbers over top of that message, keeping one person's information from running into another's with haphazardly drawn bubbles.

The concerned parent is, he believes, likely on that paper.

"If he let me know who it was," Edgerton said of Markley, "I could know where I got the phone number."

Edgerton said he only mentioned illegality in the phone call because Wayne Bullard, the district's general counsel, told him providing records

such as the race of students, the date students applied and their home district could result in a violation of federal law.

Markley is concerned the phone call may have been the second time Edgerton had access to records.

While serving as an advocate for a Forest Hills employee involved in a separate grievance, Edgerton was briefly in possession of a box of confidential student documents. He insists he never looked at the documents and that they were in his possession only so they could be returned to the school, which Edgerton lives only blocks from, as the employee had been banned.

Markley said he remains open to meeting with Edgerton and Lea to discuss the phone call.

"I want to know what the student information you have is and how did you get it," Markley said, later adding, "If all he's got is phone numbers off a list, just tell me that."

Lea made it clear on Friday he believes Markley already knows what Edgerton does and — just as importantly — doesn't have.

"Once again, you have incorrectly made reference to Clyde having some kind of access to confidential school records," Lea wrote to the superintendent. "You have known for quite a while that is not true, yet you continue to make reference to it."

## UNCW email request

Edgerton is a prolific sender of emails, dashing off messages short and long at all hours of the day and, occasionally, night. When he's passionate about something, Edgerton will send three or

four related emails in rapid succession.

Trying to determine what information Edgerton has, Markley filed a public records request with UNCW, asking for all emails sent regarding Forest Hills and the Spanish immersion program from Edgerton's university email address.

UNCW has denied much of the request. Andrea Weaver, a university spokeswoman, wrote in a statement on Friday: "... The information referenced in the request was not sent or received in connection with the transaction of public business of the university. Under state statute, the information is not public record."

The university included one email, in which Edgerton requested records about the races of students and when they applied by referencing a possible study. Bullard denied the request, saying the information wasn't public record.

UNCW's response is not an accurate reading of state public records statutes, according to Jonathan Jones, director of the N.C. Open Government Coalition.

"There is no specific exemption for personal email, and there's certainly no specific exemption for email from a government employee in one agency, such as a distinguished professor, discussing the function of another agency, such as a school board," Jones wrote in an email.

Markley said he respects the university's decision and will not push for the information.

## 'His heart is in the right place'

Banning someone from

school grounds is a power placed in the hands of superintendents and New Hanover County has banned about 20 people, Markley said.

In Edgerton's case, Markley discussed the decision with the New Hanover County Board of Education before enacting the ban. It did not meet significant opposition there.

Tammy Covil, who is nearing the end of her first term on the board and will not be running for re-election, would not discuss the case because she believes it involves personnel matters.

"Mr. Edgerton is able to present a very one-sided story," Covil wrote in a text message. "It's unfortunate."

Bruce Shell, a former New Hanover County manager who has served on the school board since 2014, said he believes Edgerton ultimately wants the best for the school's students.

"Clyde Edgerton is a well-intended, involved parent and community member," Shell said. "He and I have talked a number of times. I think his heart is in the right place."

On Thursday, Edgerton briefly joked that perhaps the ban and the associated attention — articles in the StarNews, the Charlotte Observer and Raleigh News and Observer, a blog entry on the Huffington Post — would lead to a boost in his book sales.

A half-beat later, his grin disappeared and he said, "I don't want it to be about me. I want it to be about the teachers who are afraid to speak out and the children and parents who suffered from unequal opportunity."