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Archibald: Hall's legacy is one for the children

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By **John Archibald** -- [The Birmingham News](#)[Follow](#)

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Ethel Hall sees what's going on in Birmingham schools.

It makes her sad.

She sees Bessemer, too. She sees across the metro area, all over the district she has represented on the state school board for almost a quarter century. What she sees makes her -- like most of us, I guess -- groan.

"Oh!" she says, as if in anguish. "There are so many ... issues."

So many issues.

Like a broke Birmingham system with three sets of lawyers and no clear goals. Like instability in Bessemer and partisanship across the metro.

"We have to do better," Hall said.



Longtime state school board member Ethel Hall, with her new book. (Mark Almond)

Hall is now 82, living in Fairfield. Her history is long -- she was the first black woman elected to the state board -- and her legacy written. But as she prepares to leave politics, she's doing it the way she has done most everything.

Thoughtfully.

She reflects that much has changed in education since she was elected, and not all of it is good. Local boards seem more absorbed with contracts than children. Partisanship on her board can trump reason.

"It's not like it was when I came on the board," she said. "We didn't vote like that. We discussed issues and that's what we voted on. The children came first."

That makes her pause.

"That's why I say it's time for me to leave," she said.

Which is some statement.

Don't get me wrong. It would be nuts to say Hall or any board member sparkled all the time. There were spats and squabbles, as there would be on

any board with personalities as strong as Bettye Fine Collins, Bradley Byrne, John Tyson and Spencer Bachus. And don't forget the two-year college scandal happened on her watch, too.

But Hall, more than most, stayed focused on education, said former state Superintendent Ed Richardson.

"She never let issues of politics or race or the personal agendas of others get in the way," he said.

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