

# Longtime educator learning a new role

Former city schools administrator takes charge of experimental academy

By JAMIE STIEHM  
SUN STAFF

The school day begins with chapel on a bright morning in North Baltimore. Mary R. Nicholsonne, a month into her role as principal, greets each of the arriving children with a hug.

"Good morning, HOPE Academy," says the pastor, P. M. Smith, stressing each syllable. "How are we today?"

The chorus from the small voices in the pews is "Excellent!"

Then Nicholsonne gets up to speak. In 32 years in the city's public schools, she climbed to the heights of the school system and retired in January as the third-ranking associate superintendent.

Now she is back at work, but a long way from running a large bureaucracy. She stands face to face with 53 children, ages 4 to 6, staring at her solemnly with no layers of management between them.

The Baltimore-born Nicholsonne, 59, said she chose to lead this educational experiment, inspired by Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, because she believes that old-fashioned religion can make all the difference to today's children. The Tuskegee Institute, built by former slaves, emphasized strengthening the black community.

"This is a beautiful day," she said to her charges. "Who has made this day?" Their response comes in a song: "This is the day the Lord has made."

Then they hear the word for the day: respect, or R-E-S-P-E-C-T. The pastor tells the pupils, "The rest of the day, I want you to do something to show your teacher — Mrs. Dixon, Mrs. Ellwood, Mrs. Handy — that you respect her."

The atmosphere is upbeat here at HOPE (Helping Our People Excel) Academy, a private church-affiliated school that started a year ago in the Sunday school classrooms of United Church of Christ at 5701 York Road. The girls wear saddle shoes with their plaid dresses, and boys



PERRY THORSVIK: SUN STAFF

**Called to teach:** Mary R. Nicholsonne, principal of HOPE Academy, reads with kindergartner Brandon Flowers.

wear ties with their yellow shirts and green slacks. No tennis shoes are allowed.

"I couldn't begin the day openly with songs of praise," Nicholsonne said of her years as principal of Harford Heights, an elementary school with 2,000 students. "As a public school servant, I could not do that."

"I enjoyed every moment of my 32 years," she added. "And I believe in public education."

But not even a recent offer to return as the school system's chief academic officer could tear her away from her new life.

Something akin to a personal renaissance is happening here. Her work is not just a job, she said: "I see it more as a mission."

The Baptist in her is integrated with the teacher.

It's up to Nicholsonne to make this school succeed, to make it grow from its current size of three

classes — pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first grade — into a full-fledged academy. Tuition is \$3,000, a financial sacrifice for some families, but her salary is less than half the \$95,000 she commanded at North Avenue.

"We can't pay you what you're worth," Smith told her when they talked about her terms in August.

Given a choice between leaving a system with 100,000 students and joining a school with 53 youngsters, Nicholsonne knew her direction. "God revealed this," she said.

As superintendent, "I didn't have that personal touch. Here, I really impact the lives of children — one at a time," she said.

Going from class to class, she said, "I've been here four weeks, and I know everybody."

As head teacher, Nicholsonne occasionally jumps in and teaches parts of the curriculum. HOPE Academy uses the Calvert curriculum, which she praises for its "structured, step-by-step lessons, with a body of content all children must know."

"At some point we got away from that" in many public schools, she said.

Combining that with hugs, Bible verses and uniforms, she said, is a superb chemistry for building character in children.

She recalls from growing up in Baltimore that her elementary school had some of those elements.

"When I went to school, we had prayers and Bible verses," she said. That was before the 1963 Supreme Court decision banning prayer in public schools.

To hear Smith tell the tale, Nicholsonne was "an answer to a prayer." When he was searching for a principal during the summer, he said, "She gave us several names. They turned us down."

Another call came from Nicholsonne. "I have another name," she told him, "if you will consider it." It was her own.

"I almost fell out of the chair," he said.

The next day, the grandmother who thought she had retired reported for work. "I keep saying, 'I'm going to go home early today,'" Nicholsonne said. "Then I don't."