Sitting back in his easy chair, Robert Aertker spoke mildly of his 12 years as East Baton Rouge Parish school superintendent, years when crosses blazed on his lawn and his phone rang promptly at 2 and 4 a.m.

Dressed in a crisp white shirt and soft grey slacks, Aertker still cuts a handsome figure. This day, fresh from a golf game, he is relaxed in his Broadmoor Subdivision home, where memories of early school desegregation and irate citizens' groups have lost their edge.

Aertker views his administration, from 1964 until his retirement in 1976, as highly successful. So, apparently, did coworkers of his time, who presented him with plaques hung on an office wall in his home, addressed to "A Man For All Seasons" and "Boss For All Times."

Those years, in fact, were some of the school system's toughest. As assistant superintendent for eight years, and even as a school principal before that, Aertker saw that desegregation was coming.

During his first year in office, he assigned the first black student to a white school, an act which spurred marches, pickets and burning crosses.

At Baton Rouge High School, he remembered, he and one of his black supervisors quelled an altercation over whether the flag would fly at half-mast. Faced with police and sheriff's deputies, the students returned to their classes, and outsiders left the school grounds.

Later, Aertker would face the Concerned Citizens and Taxpayers for Decent School Books, who were "against just about anything," he said. When they packed School Board meetings to complain about library books and ideas of sex education, he viewed their antics with amusement.

"Really, I enjoyed them. Whenever I saw them in the audience, I said I was going to have a good time today," he said, laughing. "I told them, 'Ya'U make my day...."

But at least one Concerned Citizens' member retaliated. When the phone company traced the 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. calls that long plagued his family, Aertker learned that they were indeed made by one of three people whose names he had suggested to authorities. The culprit was a member of the Concerned Citizens group.

 Asked if his tenure was a "hot seat," he replied, "It was beginning to get warm. We didn't have forced busing then. Where it was when I left is why I can still look back and smile about it."

Aertker accommodated desegregation by apportioning districts that mixed black and white neighborhoods, which the federal court agreed yielded a unified school system. "When it worked," Aertker said, "Where it didn't, it couldn't, without excessive busing."
Aertker

CONTINUED FROM 1B

Busing across long distances, even five or six miles, is one of his regrets about today's school system. "I have checked with people all over the country and (I) believe that Baton Rouge has the worst busing set-up. How it developed, I don't know."

"We had 335 buses, compared to over 800 now. Just think of the expense," he said, shaking his head. "The board knew that, and people know that's what forced busing does for you."

An advocate of neighborhood schools and desegregation, Aertker believes that busing is only effective for up to two or three miles, a distance that facilitates parental support and the after-school involvement of students.

If he had seen busing on the horizon, he would have bargained with the federal court, telling the judge things like, "Let's neighborhood these areas. Tell us what we can do and what we can't, how far we have to go."

Busing "made the (parents) mad as hell and sabotaged the public schools," Aertker declared.

The school system's current move to site-based management as envisioned by current Superintendent Bernard Weiss is supposed to ease such problems through greater parental involvement and growing community support.

Still, the school system is beset with other problems, serious ones, that Aertker didn't have, he said.

Weiss is handicapped by a split school board, for one thing. In addition, controversies over teacher certification and teacher evaluation are derailing education.

Aertker said he had the full support of all 12 of his board members, as well as principals, teachers and school workers. He met with school personnel once or twice a month and asked to hear their complaints.

"I didn't promise to correct them," he noted, "but I did promise an answer. We talked about everything."

Back then, teachers were in favor of certification, and they were evaluated each year by principals and central office supervisors, he said.

Now, "teachers have made a big mistake by deciding to eliminate evaluation procedures. No one can really expect not to be evaluated in a job. I think they've been misled by their associations."

"I can say this," he added. "If they keep making mistakes like that, they're going to kill the goose that lays the golden egg — the people of Louisiana. That's who pays the taxes" that fund teacher salaries.

During Aertker's administration, the Louisiana Teachers Association — then the only teacher organization — "involved itself in issues like textbooks and libraries, rather than politics."

"They're in a running battle today," he said. "Their priorities better get more in line with educational pursuits."

A New Orleans native and son of a U.S. customs agent, Aertker loved teaching and coaching during the late '30s and throughout the '40s.

Called "Mr. A" by some of his students, he enjoyed "helping them figure out what was right and wrong. I just like young people, and I liked coaching. I like to win," he said, mentioning three state championships his teams won for Baker High School one year.

During the '50s, as an assistant principal and then principal, he remained close to his students. He remembered an incident in which three boys, who had been expelled from Zachary High School, pleaded admission at Baker High.

Aertker queried the principal of Zachary High, who blessed him for taking the students off his hands. When Aertker subsequently learned the boys' offense — feeding a cow a laxative and leaving it overnight on the school stage — he made their admission conditional upon athletic participation. Two of them played on teams for the first time, and Aertker had no problems with any of them.

Now an active 75 years old, Aertker plays golf four times a week with friends and school system retirees ("for two bits a hole"), reads, fishes, spends a month on a Destin beach and enjoys his six grandchildren.

Aertker said societal permissiveness has resulted in the lack of discipline teachers deal with in classrooms. "I doubt I'd last as a teacher," he said.

"When I was principal, I paddled maybe 400 youngsters over four or five years. If one of my students had been caught with weapons or had the temerity to strike a teacher, he'd have been expelled for life."

"But that goes on now. Life has changed," he said.

Last Sunday, Aertker gave a sermon on faith at his church, and that's the ultimate answer and hope he has for education.

"I think we have excellent personnel in the school system — I know we had them then, and I'm sure we have them now — who can provide the proper leadership," he said. "You find that at both the local level and the administrative level. So you gotta keep the faith."