

Dr. Bruce Howell

Upon retiring from 42 years as an innovative educator, he took up the role of historian for Northeast OK.

Chapter 01 - 1:16

Introduction

Announcer: Dr. Bruce Howell's career as an educator spanned forty-two years as a teacher, coach, Superintendent of Tulsa Public Schools twice, and Dean of the College of Education at the University of Tulsa. His career began in a one room country school in Southwest Iowa when he was 18 years old.

While at TPS the first time from 1973-1976, he had a hand in desegregation and the development of magnet programs. During the second term, 1990-1993, he led the passage of bond issues, decentralized administration for more site-based management and established the Mayo Demonstration School and Eisenhower International School.

In 1969 Bruce heard *Tulsa Tribune* publisher/editor and historian Jenkin Lloyd Jones make a history presentation which Bruce never forgot. So, when he retired as an educator, he took up the role of historian for Northeast Oklahoma. His books include: *1806: Settling the Cherokee Nation*, *Pathfinders: 19th Century Pioneers of Cherokee Territory* and *Cherokee Echoes: Tales of Northeastern Oklahoma*.

So now you can listen to Bruce Howell talk about his first teaching job when he was 18 years old and the start of his forty-two-year education career on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 9:30

Teacher at 18

John Erling: My name is John Erling, and today's date is May 11th, 2010. Bruce, if you'll state your full name, your date of birth, and your present age.

Bruce Howell: Donald Bruce Howell; 12/21/31; age 78.

JE: We are recording this at Grand Lake. Bruce and I share our love for Grand Lake on a dark, overcast day, but on the outside we can hear nature speaking to us. Where were you born?

BH: I was born in Cumberland, actually, in our home.

JE: Cumberland, Iowa?

BH: Iowa.

JE: In your home?

BH: Yes.

JE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

BH: One brother; one older brother. He's seven years older than I am. He's a doctor in Brookfield, Missouri. He's one of those that have been there and delivered probably three generations of babies now, and he's still practicing a couple days a week.

JE: Your mother's name, maiden name, and where she grew up?

BH: Her maiden name was Myrtle Ellen Andrew and she grew up in Cumberland, although her father did go to Fort Collins, Colorado for a while, and he was a policeman. And he returned and took up farming in Iowa and ended up retiring to Cumberland and his son took over the farm then.

JE: Your father's name, and where he was from? Where he was born.

BH: Ross Pringey Howell; and Ross was born in Cumberland as well. He was one of four children. He and my mother met, it was kind of interesting, he had dropped out of high school at the beginning of his senior year and had enlisted in the army. The war was about over, and he came back in December, and the following spring he saw my mother across the street. She was, I think, six years younger and he told his buddies, he said, "See that girl, I'm going to marry her." And sure enough, about three years, four, five years later they were married.

JE: What did they do for a living?

BH: He delivered mail, rural mail, and she worked in the Post Office as well.

JE: Somehow I thought there was farming in the background, but not so.

BH: Not with them, there were with all the rest of my relatives. A lot of farmers in the family and a lot of time that I spent on farms working.

JE: The house that you were born in, how long did you live there?

BH: Eighteen years, until I got out of high school, and then I'd gone off to college at Westmont in California. My parents thought that was a good Christian school for me to go to and thought that I needed that. They were both "born-again" Christians and they were worried that I wasn't following the same path very well. My brother was doing much better. So, I went to Westmont College for a semester and then came back and went to what now is the University of Northern Iowa for a semester.

JE: Elementary then was right there?

BH: In Cumberland.

JE: In Cumberland, and your high school?

BH: High School was in Cumberland. I graduated there in 1949.

JE: Then?

BH: I went to Santa Barbara. Went to Westmont College in California, and then for a semester at the University of Northern Iowa, and then I came home at Easter of that first year and a guy pulled up in the driveway and turned out it was Jimmy McClaren, who was director of Greendale-Edna Township Country School. He came in the house and wanted to know if I'd like to teach school. I really hadn't given it a lot of thought but he offered me the incredible amount of money of eighteen hundred dollars a year. Two hundred dollars a month for nine months. It didn't seem like I could turn that down, so I started teaching that fall.

JE: How old were you when he offered you that job?

BH: I was eighteen.

JE: So your education background...

BH: Was limited to one year. In Iowa they did what they called a Limited Elementary Teaching Certificate. In three years you had to progress towards a degree. I did that. I started taking night classes and matter of fact, I really never went again to a college campus and lived on the campus. I commuted, sometimes a hundred, sometimes a hundred and a fifty miles, on the weekend, and go to various colleges: Drake University, Buena Vista College in Northern Iowa, and so forth. In 1960, I received my bachelor's degree, and in '61 my master's, and in '66 my doctorate.

JE: You started teaching at nineteen. Was it about 1950?

BH: Yes, the fall of 1950.

JE: A one-room schoolhouse I presume?

BH: One-room schoolhouse, nineteen kids, five kindergarten, rest of them were scattered up through the grades. One of the girls was a seventh grader, she was four years younger than I was. We had an agreement. I didn't do vomit. (laughter) We had an agreement since she was part of a large family, if such happened, why, we had recess and Ruth cleaned up. It was an origin teaching for me.

JE: But, here you were eighteen?

BH: Yes.

JE: And teaching this variety of classes. Where did you get your support and material?

BH: Actually there was just whatever there was in the building at the time. I remember there was an old windup phonograph we used quite a bit for our music program. First thing I asked the directors for was, you know, the seats were bolted to the floor, and I asked them if we could get tables and chairs. Which was quite an innovation. They actually popped for the nineteen kids to have their own table and chairs. We were to a commercial company and bought them. That way we could move the chairs and desks

around and group the kids according to their achievement level rather than according to their grade level. That was a first. I had another alternative objective in mind and that was since I was also head custodian it made it a lot easier to clean the place by moving everything to one side.

JE: So maybe, without knowing it, you were working in what you later instituted in open design.

BH: That's exactly right. As a matter of fact, that's been brought up on different occasions. I remember when we got into a real modification of the middle school in Eagle Grove, Iowa. Some parents were not pleased with the flexibility that I'd introduced, and so I rallied their mothers and grandmothers who had gone to country school to come visit the program, and they went back and told their kids, "well, this is just like the school I went to, only bigger." You know, I stumbled into it, but it was a good political move on my part.

JE: When the gentleman came and asked, "would you consider teaching?" Was teaching even part of your thinking?

BH: Well, I was going to, it was then called Iowa State Teachers. Yes, I had that in mind, eventually, but I wasn't prepared to just stop at that point.

JE: Okay. So, as you thinking back on the quality of education you gave to those kids, how have you reflected on that?

BH: I can only say that after I got my doctorate one summer, I went back to University of Northern Iowa and taught a couple of classes. I was walking down the hall and this lady ran up behind me and, "Mister Howell, Mister Howell!" I turned around and she said, "Do you remember me?" I said, "I really don't." She says, "Roma McCaren, I was your fifth-grade student." Roma had just gotten her doctorate. Those were the kinds of things that thrill teachers. When you see somebody actually follow, maybe I had something to do with inspiring her to do that; probably not, but I like to think so.

JE: Was there ever a time that you thought, "man, this is not what I signed up for. I just don't know whether I want to do this anymore?"

BH: Oh, absolutely. Really I envisioned myself becoming a lawyer. I was going to teach and save money and go to law school, and of course that never materialized. Barely able to meet the bills month to month, so that never happened, and I'm glad it didn't. My colleagues and acquaintances over the years, I wouldn't trade for any other profession.

JE: You were continuing your education all along, which I'm sure proved to be helpful as you had practical application in the classroom.

BH: Every day, every day. As a matter of fact, I got in trouble in some instances. The professor from Drake University on extension would say dogmatically "do this," or "that," and I'd go back and try it and it didn't work and I'd go back and ask again, "Now, how am I supposed to do this?" Pretty soon I learned to just be quiet and take my course and if I applied it and it didn't work, then it didn't work. But, I didn't make an issue of it with a professor.

JE: Wasn't it impressive to him that you were teaching at a young age while you were furthering your education and he knew this was going be practical application for ya?

BH: A number of people were doing this at time because there were a hundred and five country schools in Cass County, Iowa at the time. And there were, as I recall, three men. I know the fall of the year that I started at age eighteen, I was nominated to be the county representative to the state convention, because nobody else, of course, wanted to go. So, I went down to the state convention that year, and of course, didn't know what I was doing at all, but it was a female dominated by far operated organization. County Superintendent was female.

Chapter 03 - 3:40

Schools in Moscow

John Erling: Your years in Iowa as an educator, you were a coach?

Bruce Howell: Among other things. I moved from the country school after two years to a small town and I was an acting principal, and I also coached all off junior high sports at that school.

JE: What town was that?

BH: That was Griswold, Iowa. I was there just a year, and then went to Northern Iowa to a town called Pocahontas. I was there for four years and essentially did the same thing and continued to work on my education.

JE: You became President of the Iowa Secondary School Principals Association.

BH: Yes, in 1966.

JE: And, you were invited to tour Eastern Bloc countries.

BH: Yes.

JE: What did you draw from those travels? Did that experience help shape your future philosophy?

BH: To a degree. I was taken with the fact that when I was visiting, let's say, schools in Moscow, their curriculum and their organization pattern was exactly the same as ours. And I'm thinking to myself, well if this is a communist country and we're a democracy, should we be operating in the same organizational procedure? And it was interesting to me to see that. I think there's a misunderstanding of the communist bloc at the time. Only about ten percent of the people were actually accepted into the communist party. So, the kids would start out, they would wear neckerchiefs, and there would be a communist representative in each school, and after school they would go to what was called the commisal, which I would say is like our YMCAs, and then some of them would begin

their indoctrination, but only a small percent were actually chosen into the communist party. Well, in all of this; visiting Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania; it seemed to me that their organizational format was very much like ours. They were practicing what we were doing here, which was lock stepping kids age and grade wise, which seemed to me the antithesis of what we should be doing in a democracy. We should be maximizing the efficiency of the individuals, not locking them in. We needed to make it possible for kids to advance, not in lockstep but more rapidly.

JE: So, it was an epiphany of sorts?

BH: An epiphany of sorts, yes. Absolutely. And they also had some other interesting things. When we were in Moscow I went to the Bolshoi and saw the prima ballerina from Denmark dance *Swan Lake*. Well, I, country boy, I'd never even been to a ballet. But then I remembered going to Bulgaria and they had simulated the Bolshoi in a school and kids from all over the country came to this school as qualified artists. So, they had already started what we later, in our own way, called alternative schools. I thought it was an interesting factor. And then in Denmark, because kids came from the rural areas where kids would come in for several weeks, they simulated a city so kids would learn how to function in Copenhagen and the larger cities of Denmark. In that sense, they had already gone into alternatives that we did later.

JE: So we pride ourselves in the United States for, maybe, leading the world in everything. But, then when you went to these other countries and said, "wow, they're ahead of us in some of these areas," that had to be kind of a surprise to you.

BH: It was. Although, I thought, well that's what we're here for; is to learn and look at the ways those people operated. There were things that they did that were repressive to kids too, but there were also those progressive aspects.

Chapter 04 - 5:55

Middle School Program

John Erling: Middle School, you were taken with middle school...

Bruce Howell: Yes.

JE: And developed a concept. Talk to me about that.

BH: Well, we really got out on the cutting edge in a lot of aspects. My middle school included sixth through ninth grade. There was six hundred kids at the time. It was north central Iowa. We developed such programs as continuous progress for kids. Teachers in the major teams; math, science, social studies; taught half days and they planned half days.

We knocked out some walls for offices and so forth and they rewrote the curriculum to fit the kids. We had about forty of those kids who we called “optional attenders.” Those kids could go into a class, or classes, and if they maintained a B-plus average, they didn’t have to attend classes. They worked with one teacher, Mildred McElwain. Mildred had been an English teacher that was just outstanding. But she was one of those ladies that scared the bejeebers out of everybody, including me. She coordinated those kids. They would go in, they would take the tests in the regular classroom and if they passed continually, they’d work with “Mac,” as we called her. She would give them assignments, like, “develop a play on the Revolutionary War,” and then they would have to do all the research. In other words, expanding their minds. Most of them, of course, were older, but occasionally a sixth or seventh grader would sneak in to the top forty-two. I remember we had a standardized test, which we compared ourselves to the lab school at the University of Northern Iowa to see what the progress was, because obviously people were concerned. Their kids were running around, you know, there were no passes to get out of class; if you had to go to the bathroom, you got up and went, or if you needed to go to the office. But, it was all business and the kids monitored each other. So, we were able to relax, become more democratic. During the course of the three years that I was there the program was in operation, we had visitors from twenty-two states. I remember the Assistant Superintendent from Philadelphia came and looked at our program and one of the comments he made when he was getting ready to leave was, “Oh yes, Eagle Grove, he spent a week there one night.” It was one of those situations where you had to go thirty miles to the nearest airport to get on any kind of plane. We had a good time and there was lots of visitors. We did a lot of, we thought, creative kinds of things. I backed off as being Principal per se and became Instructional Principal, and I selected a fellow that happened to be head wrestling coach in the district of all things, but really sharp guy, by the name of Dave Hardy, and he handled the management part. I worked only on instruction and curriculum. So, we had a duel principalship. And we had an advisory board of teachers that met once a week. We visited schools and we took the parents and kids with us to visit innovative schools, like, we went to St. Louis, among other places and looked at innovations in those schools and come back to see if it would apply. The whole point is, that during that time, we gained some notoriety and probably my biggest pull as far as inviting me to speak was the fact I’d just stepped out of the classroom or the building that day or the day before and I wasn’t speaking from the position of being a college professor who read a book on innovation, but actually doing things, and so I became a very popular speaker.

JE: There, you were pushing the envelope in many ways.

BH: Too many ways.

JE: And you did that for most of your career. I would think you would agree with...we'll get into more of that later, but there were always naysayers to your idea I suppose?

BH: Always, sure.

JE: Right.

BH: And, legitimately.

JE: Okay, legitimately?

BH: Sure.

JE: How would you handle that, I don't know if it's negativity or whatever, here's somebody that wants to come along, meaning you, that wants to change something, and people don't like that?

BH: Well, I think that most people are fearful of change because it feel like it's strictly experimentation. And to some degree it is, although I'll go back to my country school experience and the first thing I discovered, as an eighteen-year-old teacher, was that if I taught nine grades, eight subjects a days, that was seventy-two subjects a day, which broke down to about four and a half minutes. In other words, if I were going to do it structurally like that. So, obviously in the country school, what you did was group whoever was at a particular reading or arithmetic level together and work with them. To me, that made common sense. You're one teacher and you do what you have to do structurally. Well, the same principle worked with the middle school. If we got kids of a common need or achievement range together and worked with them at that level, we didn't have bored kids at one end of the spectrum, overwhelmed kids at the other end, in the single classroom. That's the whole basis. But, the American public has structured in their minds the same school that was developed in 1840 that we have essentially still today, in terms of grade levels, grading by age, rather than achievement, a hundred and eighty days. We're still letting out in summer to pick cotton, and that type of thing, and it's, of course, way out of tune. You know, I could go into a long lecture about ways that we should be changing and taking advantages of technology today.

Chapter 05 - 3:45

Tulsa

John Erling: In 1969 you came to Oklahoma as Assistant Superintendent of schools in Tulsa.

Bruce Howell: Right.

JE: How did that come about?

BH: During the time I was working on the middle school concept, I did a lot of national traveling. As a matter of fact, I counted up one time, I've been to forty-four states,

speaking essentially on the middle school or school climate, one of the two topics. During that time, Gordon Cawelti was Executive Director of the North Central Association. When I was President of the Iowa Association, we had our summer conference at Lake Okoboji. We invited, among others, Gordon to come. Well, they also asked me to speak on the middle school. Gordon heard me. Afterwards he introduced himself and later on he invited me to speak at their national convention in Chicago, which I did. Then in the fall of sixty-eight, he was selected as Superintendent in Tulsa. They got this telephone call in October. He said, "I've just been appointed Superintendent. Would you like to come down and be my assistant?" He says, "the board said I could bring one person in from the outside." And I said, "Where is it?" "Tulsa, Oklahoma," you know. I guess I'd been through there as a kid on Highway 66, but I didn't remember. So he described it, and it was a quantum leap, of course from a small town in Iowa to come down and work in a large city with eighty thousand kids at that time. It was another giant step for me.

JE: When you come to Tulsa in '69, what were some of the most pressing educational issues that you found, and how did you feel Oklahoma compared to Iowa in education?

BH: I really never drew that comparison. They're both rural states. And, of course, I had moved from a rural community to an urban community, which was significantly different. Somebody asked me, "in a nutshell, what is the difference?" And I said, "Three zeros." There's eighty thousand kids here and the district I came from was considerably smaller, but the issues are essentially the same. Parents have the same concerns. Kids have the same problems; there's just more of them. I think it is true that in a small community it "takes a village to raise a child." There was nowhere you could go in Eagle Grove, Iowa that my children weren't identified as my children, and if they did something wrong, I knew it before they got home. Moving to Tulsa, Oklahoma, they were out of site in three blocks. You know, you just had to trust that they would do the right things. Those were the differences that I saw. Outside of that, the major issue we were confronted with in particular was desegregation, and that was a significant difference.

JE: You became Superintendent in 1973. How did that come about?

BH: Well, Cawelti decided that he wanted to leave. He had an opportunity to become Executive Director of the Curriculum Association in Washington. It fit him quite well. He'd been Executive Director of the North Central Association. I think it gave him the opportunity to influence on a national basis, curriculum, which is one of the things he still is involved with, even though he's retired. My concern was we were just getting ready to initiate the innovations of Washington High School, Carver Middle School, and two or three elementary schools as far as voluntary desegregation was concerned. So, I threw my hat in the ring primarily to continue to implement and initiate those programs.

JE: And you remained a Superintendent, your first time around, till '76?

BH: Yes.

Chapter 06 - 8:00**Voluntary Desegregation**

John Erling: About desegregation. In the late sixties the Federal Government mandated a change in demographics in schools all across the country. You'll have to correct me on some of this as I talk about this, but was it true that a Federal Judge finally gave Tulsa Public Schools a deadline for integrating Booker T. Washington High School, Carver Junior High, six elementary schools?

Bruce Howell: To me knowledge, that's right. I don't remember the exact dates, but that was the goal.

JE: Getting to that goal wasn't easy, as we think about Booker T. The demographics had to be fifty percent black, fifty percent white. Black students in the sixties had begun to attend predominately white high schools. A boundary change was made in the school district to begin merging white schools with black students at Booker T. How did you accomplish this? You had a Principal, by the name of H.J. Green, at Booker T. Talk about that whole background and scenario as how you were trying to desegregate and make Booker T. a different school.

BH: Well, we were concerned at looking nationally at forced busing that was occurring even down the road in Oklahoma City. So, we were attempting to come up with some kind of voluntary program that would work. We made several attempts to, say, desegregate Booker T., and by the way, the Federal Government never did define desegregation. They'd say, "Well, was it fifty-fifty?" Well, they wouldn't say. "Is it twenty-five, seventy-five?" They wouldn't say. We never knew what was on their minds, and the other factor was that just about every two or three months, it seemed like, they changed attorneys, and so it was a matter of our attorneys reeducating the new ones on our progress or lack thereof. So, over a period of time it was very frustrating, first of all, not to know what the goal was, second, of course, how to accomplish what may be satisfactory. We had not heard of a voluntary program nationally at the time. So, eventually after struggling with probably two years of meetings and alternative ideas and so forth, the voluntary thing came up. We had tremendous support from Bob LaFortune, mayor at the time, Nancy McDonald, you know, just a number of people like that; Penny Williams, among others. Our first effort was at Burroughs little school. That materialized before Washington or Carver, both. And it demonstrated to essentially the white population on the south side that people were willing to integrate black with white at Burroughs, and it was working really well. This led ultimately to the decision by the board to close Washington on paper and to reinvent it as a fifty-fifty. We couldn't figure out any other way that the percentage of desegregation could be any more pure than fifty-fifty. So, we began recruiting blacks

and whites for the school. This was a very slow, tedious process. You almost had to go one-on-one with parents in small coffee groups and things like that to explain what the details would be. We also had to recruit teachers to go to the school. There were certain teachers that are just magnetic in their abilities and so forth, and so we targeted those folks and several of them agreed to go. Some didn't, several did, both black and white teachers. We maximized the curriculum simply by using the, what I call the "high-dollar teachers" with reputations to go to those schools.

JE: What was to be the total population of the school?

BH: Originally it was to be five hundred of each. A thousand kids. I don't remember what the incident or incidents were, but it seemed like six weeks or so before school was to open, the board bumped the number to six hundred and six hundred. Well, that was difficult enough to find five hundred whites and five hundred blacks that would attempt to make this program work, but we were given the task of finding the rest and we did.

JE: Did you question upping the number?

BH: Oh, of course.

JE: What was your reasoning behind that? What did you think that was...

BH: Well, I think it was just pressure from the community; particularly the black community, because after all, Booker T. was and is the star or crown jewel of schools in the black community. I could understand from their stand point why they wanted kids in there.

JE: Did they think you'd fail at getting the fifty-fifty?

BH: I don't think so.

JE: Okay.

BH: I don't know what was behind their motives, but we finally did get that number.

JE: Did the black community embrace the concept immediately, or was that a sell as well?

BH: No, that was a sell as well. Because, Booker T. Washington had the history of black education behind it and very fine teachers that worked very well with the black students. To disseminate some of those teachers out, some of those very fine teachers to other schools was a negative as far as the north side was concerned, obviously, in turn to bring white teachers in who they had no knowledge of, in terms of their quality or interests in their community. It eventually worked out of course, but initially it was a hard sell.

JE: Did you have to also visit homes of blacks? Because you referred, and we'll get into more of that, you went to white families to recruit, did you have to, other than board meetings, attend small neighborhood meetings?

BH: No, I did not. Sufficient number of blacks were ready to enroll at Booker T. Washington. That was the problem. As a matter of fact, I don't know what the enrollment was before we revamped the school, but there were sufficient numbers. Also, as we went through this process, we developed what we called "noncontiguous zoning." There also was an

area within walking distance, I don't remember what the distance was, around Booker T. that students who lived in that area could go to school anyway. So, it wasn't desegregated right up to the doors of the school. There was an area around there that children could go to that school if they lived in that neighborhood. But our effort was to focus on the white population. They were ones that were essentially going to have to be transported a long distance.

JE: I would imagine the black community were also afraid of the tradition of the past and the traditions that they had of football teams and spirit clubs and all those kinds of things?

BH: Oh, absolutely. That was the big sticking point. You know, it was the social center. It was history for the black community. Like I say, their pride was focused on the fact that they did well in athletics, and they had individuals who left the school who became prominent in their particular professions as well. So, it was like any other school. You have that loyalty and it's perfectly understandable if the problems emerged in their minds that we were trying to destroy the school or something like that. Of course, we were not. We were trying to desegregate as peacefully as we could.

JE: Did you have the schoolboard solidly behind you on this, so they were also spokespeople and helped you tell the message?

BH: Yes, we did. Eugene Harris was a representative from that area and was very articulate and understood what the issues were and the necessity. I think like any government mandate, like health care today, it's a matter of time before the information trickles down, the details trickle down, it doesn't just occur over night. In our case, it took three years.

Chapter 07 - 4:08

Recruiting Whites

John Erling: Alright, then about recruiting the whites to the school. How did you accomplish that recruiting and finally reach your six hundred?

Bruce Howell: A lot of it, as I said, were from the people that I mentioned beforehand. They promoted this. They sent their children. They promoted others in their neighborhoods to make this attempt. And I might say Washington has far exceeded any expectation I had, for even today it's an institution in itself as everyone knows.

JE: One time I was talking to you about this, you went with an exceptional black student and you took him with you. Tell us about that.

BH: Well, I can't remember James' last name, but the community had been separated for so long, and whites had moved south, and blacks had moved north, so there really wasn't any

social interface, at least, between the two. As I recall, he was such a handsome, articulate you man, that in my mind he sold the program, I just sat there and listened. The white parents would question him about this and that, and he was so articulate all I had to do was be present and drink coffee most of the time.

JE: So, you went to a number of homes or neighborhoods?

BH: More than I can remember. I think I lost count at forty, or something like that that we went. The parents would invite in three or four neighbors. It was a very small group so people could get their questions answered.

JE: When you were recruiting the white students, is it true the students wanted to attend, and they signed up, but when it actually came to enrolling time, many parents actually said, "no?"

BH: I don't recall that. I don't know what happened there.

JE: And only sixty-seven students that actually enrolled, and that must have been when you had to turn up the recruiting. You asked students to have input in the curriculum. What foreign languages would you like to take? And what was your response?

BH: Oh, they would come up with the usual: French, Spanish, German, so forth. We were able to hire Ronnie Roberts.

JE: Oral Robert's son?

BH: Oral Robert's son, and my information at least, Ronnie could pick up a foreign language, as a matter of fact, traveled with his father to foreign countries and often time interpret it. Once Ronnie was on board, someone would say, "Well, you teach this? How about Sanskrit?" "Oh, yes, we can do that." (laughter) I think Ronnie was fluent in, like, twelve languages, or something like...(laughter) Far beyond the common knowledge of even what language existed. That was a boon for us, and he was a fine teacher and a fine addition to our faculty.

JE: And he helped recruit, probably, other language teachers.

BH: Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure, and students.

JE: H.J. Green. He was the first white principal of Booker T.

BH: Yes.

JE: How did that come about?

BH: We felt that if we were going to desegregate Washington High School, we needed to start with the Principal, and so we switched, H.J. was at Hale and the time, and he was our first, you might say, white educator recruit, I believe. And he was kind of the benchmark. And it was a fortuitous choice on our part, because not only is H.J. a fine educator, he is a fine human being. His qualities came through to everyone. He was instrumental in helping to recruit white teachers to go to Washington High School, and also to maintain the black teachers who were already there and reassure them once the school was open, having

been Principal at a couple other high schools, was very uncomfortable the first six months because everyone was so nice to everyone else. There were no fights, and no arguments. He was kind of relieved when finally a fist fight broke out between two kids because he felt like things were coming down to be more like it really should be.

Chapter 08 - 5:18

The Very First Day

John Erling: The very first day for an integrated Booker T. Washington, do you even remember the day and the nervousness you must have felt?

Bruce Howell: Yes, of course, as a matter of fact, I got a call the night before from a friend of mine on the north side. He said, "We are concerned that there may be some problems when the white kids pull up tomorrow." But, he says, "don't worry, we've got it taken care of." Well, of course, that increased my worries because I hadn't thought about that particular thing. Well, he was absolutely right. When the next morning came and the busses arrived, apparently there was a line-up of fellas there that would whip the Green Bay Packers. There were no problems whatsoever. Once the kids were in the building, things went very well. As I said before, there were no arguments or fights of any kind for a long, long time.

JE: And that attitude continued then for many years, I mean, you never did have any major racial tension?

BH: Well, not while I was there. I don't know what occurred subsequently, but I don't think that they have had any problems in that regard.

JE: Carver Middle School, too, was integrated.

BH: Same time!

JE: Same time.

BH: Yes.

JE: Is it true that the black community was upset about that?

BH: Yes, to some degree. As I recall, there was an alternative school set up.

JE: I believe, Carver Freedom School?

BH: Freedom School. That operated briefly. In the meantime, we were going to renovate Carver, make it larger and so forth. We set up, kind of, the model that I had in Eagle Grove, and an Instructional and an Administrative Principal. I don't recall the enrollment, but we had anticipated was having the building ready for a new enlarged enrollment. Unfortunately there was a steel strike in Pittsburg which delayed, for six months the

completion of the building and not only were the administrators faced with the problem of trying to work with the desegregation issues, but also just housing. They had kids everywhere; in the lobby, in the auditoriums, and so forth for about six months, but they persevered and prevailed, and that school is doing well.

JE: The day that Booker T. opened under this concept, you must have had a lot of media coverage, national coverage, that came out?

BH: I don't recall what the coverage was, actually. The program was unique, I know that, at the time.

JE: I do know that in 2008, Booker T. Washington was placed sixty-sixth in News Week Magazine's top 100 public schools. It became, and still is, a school today that is sought after. It's a magnet school.

BH: Well, any student, of course, if eligible to attend. They have to pass certain criteria, and now those change. That's been a moving target, certainly since I left the district. The numbers, I think, are the same, the end result, but the various standards that they go by far pass my understanding. I don't know what they do now. At the time we were struggling to get enough white students to go, and so it wasn't so much of an issue. Later, I surmise, that it has been a much more difficult process for blacks and whites to get into Booker T., because of the very thing you just mentioned: the quality of education. Our first focus was on quality, because we knew in at the end of the day parents will seek out quality education for their kids. It's interesting, when we were kind of interviewing a few kids at Carver Middle School, after they'd been there for a about two months and the white kids from the south side, we were interviewing some of them, we asked them what they liked most about Carver, and they said, "The bus ride. We've never been to that part of town before." So, you don't know what kids are after, you know what parents are after. They're after quality. Over the period of time those things have all gone away though, my lab school program has been in existence for thirty plus years now in both places and so it's just a way of life.

JE: When you were first recruiting, grade-point was not an issue, it was just that you were white, is that true?

BH: Essentially, at that point in time. Although, I think fortuitously, most the kids were pretty average or above average in their abilities anyway. Because they were going up and they were going to face "high-dollar" teachers who had their own standards, and they realized that. And as the years have passed, why, of course, that word has gotten out across the community.

JE: Did you draw from that experience then with Booker T., and you watched that grow? Because you were coming up with new concepts, anything came out of that that promoted your thinking in other areas?

BH: Not particularly. It was important not to try to do too many different kinds of innovative things because as I said, “parents by and large are traditionalists.” So, at that point in time we were looking at quality education that they would understand. So, the idea of non-gradedness and all of that kind of thing was not even in the picture.

Chapter 09 - 3:25

Curriculum Design

John Erling: During your years as superintendent you saw an increase of violence in schools. What were the factors, you think, that were behind some of this change? Maybe guns were introduced. What practices did you develop to deal with some of this violence?

Bruce Howell: It was almost, quite frankly, at least the first time around, before my time. The guns were not an issue at that point in time. The major issues I think were the attitudes of kids that had to be bussed out of their neighborhoods. I have always argued that the politicians, the federal government, made a major mistake on putting desegregation on the backs of kids. Instead, that land development and housing development should have been the focus. That a fraction of every square mile should have been for integration purposes. The idea of sending a youngster, five, six years old, to another school far away, there by not enabling them to leave school and go to Cub Scouts or little league baseball in a timely fashion has always bothered me and I think the government opted out of the issue. Because they didn't want to face adults, it was easier to move kids.

JE: But, that, you must admit, would probably be a tough sell to have forced neighborhood integration.

BH: Well, it was a tough sell to desegregate the schools too. In the final analysis, nothing has changed. The kids still have to leave their neighborhoods and go to somewhere else. So, in terms of the concept of a neighborhood school, I still would opt for looking at housing as a solution to that problem.

JE: You had a specialty that was called Curriculum Design. Describe what that means. Tell how you developed a curriculum that speaks for students of different backgrounds.

BH: Again, it has to do with non-gradedness. Developing the program and meeting the needs of individuals, I think that kids come to school with so many different talents. It's important that we recognize that some of them are more mature than others, as well as having different interests. And we need to capitalize on those interests in order to teach those things that they're not interested in. This is why today I'm so opposed to No Child Left Behind, because there is so little in involving the arts and humanities that are mandated

in the testing program. It catalogs kids and it denies some of them the opportunity to do what they do best. So, in terms of the whole idea of curriculum design and non-gradedness and all of these other factors, you have to look at what kids are come skipping to school in kindergarten thinking their going to do. They're going to learn to read. That's what they want to do because their older siblings know how to read, and their parents know how to read. So, you try to tie their interests to that. But some of them are not interested in the structure immediately, and some of them are more mature or less mature than others. You have to deal with those kids as individuals, not as age, grade levels.

Chapter 10 - 7:48

Open Design

John Erling: Does it bother you today that prominently we're dealing with it as age grade levels?

Bruce Howell: Oh yes, the whole world of technology we're essentially bypassing in schools as still warehouses for kids. We're not looking in schools in education as it is. When kids can go home on their own computer and google almost any kind of information in the world, we should be capitalizing on that technology much more so than we do. Instead we're still structured in the Horace Mann's 1840 school, organizationally, grade wise. We know, for example, that there are at least three age grade levels in every grade, at least, maybe more. As a result of that, we're not getting the maximum out of kids. We're getting kids who can easily top the curriculum in a particular grade level and those that struggle for one reason or another and we put them together and try to compare them simple because they're six, seven, eight years old, or in the second, third, fourth grades. That's just not the way human nature is. We don't grade people after they graduate from school. From there on, they're on their abilities. Why aren't we doing that in grade school?

JE: Okay, so then, is the reason: it's easy? It's easier to continue what we're doing? However, you built open design sites across the city, which lends to what you just talked about, I believe. That concept, open design site. Talk about that.

BH: Actually, I think we built five schools eventually that were of an open design. I don't think any of them are open today in that concept. I remember Park Elementary School, we had a loft area for observation, which I think now is a library or a teacher's work room or something like that. Part of this goes back not only to reluctance of parents, but also to the way kids are taught in college. Many colleges still teach in a traditional manner. Kids go out ill prepared, and I can speak to that, having been in our education. Ill prepared to handle today's kids. Still trying to manipulate them in the same way we did thirty, forty

years ago when there were considerable differences in social issues. These innovations come and go. The four-day week, for example, I championed because I can see so many advantages to having kids stay longer for four days. But, only through contingency, maybe, is that going to happen, that is in current budget crunching and so forth. We're seeing a few schools do that essentially because it's a money saver. But, there are many advantages to taking a serious look at what would be the four-day academic week. Of course, the big block there is, "who's going to babysit the kids the fifth day?" Some school districts have resolved that, but most school districts haven't. That's just an illustration.

JE: To demonstrate your open design, you open Mayo Demonstration School. The response from the community to that curriculum concept, talk to us about it.

BH: That emerged as a result of House Bill 1017 in the need to have a school where teachers could go and learn a different model, if you will, or module. So, that school was set up with the idea that people could come and participate for several days in what we called at that time "new design." The whole concept, again, was promoted because of House Bill 1017 and the requirements or mandates that were forthcoming from that. Many of those mandates, you know, are underfunded at this point in time and so it's been very difficult to maintain it.

JE: For the record, House Bill 1017 was a package of education reforms and tax increases to raise revenue for those reforms passed by the legislature in 1990. As I remember, was quite a contentious bill, and finally was passed.

BH: Yeah, barely.

JE: Mayo Demonstration School. No walls, open air. You'd see groups of kids sitting on the floor. Describe what that looked like.

BH: Well, it was in essence what we had in mind for continuous progress. That the kids could use the school instead of the school, if you will, using the kids in terms of structure. It was less structured and more independence for learning was placed on a child. The teachers and the administration were fully aware of this. In fact, here again, you come up with a concept and it's wonderful to accept the kudos for it, but the real momentum comes from the people that are in the building. They have to grasp the concept and run with it. Here again, they ran further than my expectations (laughter) in all cases. The people that were there and the people that are still in the district were among the finest that we could find. This was true in other open schools. Columbus was another early modification. It was kind of interesting, when I first came to town Columbus was being built and was being built as a traditional school. We decided, well this will be our first open school. So we actually had to, let the contractors, because the bids, finish putting in the walls, and then we took them out with our own maintenance crews before school started, and that became our first open school. And eventually we had Park and Emerson and couple others that were part of that program.

JE: If I can insert here, I might mention that my wife, Margaret, was the Principal as Mayo Demonstration School opened.

BH: Absolutely. Margaret and I became kindred spirits in that regard because she was able to do some things that you couldn't do in a traditional school, and pretty much the path was open to do within the structure of non-gradedness whatever she wanted to do, or her staff wanted to do in the way of being creative. Many, many teachers and many, many educators have these wishes but they don't have the opportunities.

JE: So, here we are in 2010. Are you concerned about maybe a Mayo Demonstration School that is not getting the attention that it should be getting today and that's not being promoted like it should be?

BH: Yes, I am. I think a lot of what happens again is based on tradition. In our case, our case being our profession, it's a money issue. We're always seems like a day long and a dollar short as far as having enough to work with financially. And time-wise, the school year is too restrictive. The concept that I've already mentioned of a hundred and eighty days and five and a half hours is far, far outdated. I've looked very closely at homeschooling. The curriculum that is available to a homeschooler is essentially very technology oriented. It enables them to do things that kids in a traditional school can't do. The homeschools have overcome what my big concern originally was, which was the social issue: not getting out, being too isolated. By having their own athletic organizations and their own music organizations and so forth, as well as their homeschooling and being able to maximize the use of technology. That's where I think the failing of warehousing is.

Chapter 11 - 6:38

Dean of Education

John Erling: Then there was Eisenhower International School. At the time, in Oklahoma, an emergent school was a new idea. Was the concept your idea?

Bruce Howell: No. The original school, actually we had a school for Vietnamese kids, the "boat kids" for a while, so they could be integrated into the regular school. I had kind of argued against that at the time and it turns that a few years later those kids were doing quite well. They had picked up the language through other ways than the typical immersion process, but the first program was developed, I believe, under Dr. Zinke in Eliot. The traditional school and the immersion school was bumping up against each other and there was some conflict there, so the building at Eisenhower was empty. We moved that Spanish immersion to Eisenhower and subsequently started French in that school. And here again, we had a wonderful principal and great staff to carry that off.

JE: Is it true that some thought it would be too much for an elementary student to accept to be immersed?

BH: No, I never heard that.

JE: Okay.

BH: I can only relay my own experience. At age seventy I decided I wanted to learn the piano. That's eight years ago. I think I've gotten through the first book and a half. The receptiveness of the mind of a five-year-old is like a sponge compared to older people. It's amazing to me what they can absorb and what they learn. In tandem, say, with English, foreign language is just another minor glitch in their overall learning process.

JE: When you left Tulsa Public Schools as superintendent in '76, you became Dean of Education at TU. What was the philosophy behind teaching then future educators?

BH: Well, unfortunately it was too traditional. Teachers were cranked out just like they had been for the previous thirty years. We tried to have more on-sight involvement of teachers so that they could see what's happening, as we like to say, "off campus in the real world." Still, I think there is an awful impact on beginning teachers when they go out in the field and find out what the, quote, "real world," unquote, is like as far as the kids are concerned. Things have changed so dramatically, sociologically, in those years since traditional teaching came about, or when I started, and the teacher was the authority. You simply have to deal with those issues, you can't change the kids. You have to become more flexible than we were in the past.

JE: You did some research at TU on teacher and administrator evaluation techniques. What were your findings? How did you implement them? You call that Teacher Appraisal System.

BH: Well, the Teacher Appraisal System I developed as kind of a twofold. One was developing an actual list of twenty or so items you would evaluate, in terms of classroom management and so forth. Then the second phase was a booklet on what you would do to improve classroom management. We used staff members, that is the students that were working for me, to go out into schools there, identify good teachers in terms of what they were doing again, using the term, classroom management, to successfully manage their classroom, and then write about that. And my hope, which has never materialized, was that schools then would attempt to use the manual. Now they use the evaluation system. Many, many schools in Arkansas and Oklahoma use it, but not many use the remedial booklet that goes with it, in terms of what you do to help these people. The other was, my thought was, at that time if a small school had one or two kindergarten teachers that were having problems, that maybe several schools could get together and they could have a workshop to deal with this. That also has never materialized, but the evaluation system seems to be quite popular. The point is that they don't do anything with it after they get it.

JE: I guess that's human nature too.

- BH:** I guess. This system calls for a principal to go into the room six times during the course of the year, once about every six weeks. Each time then they report back to a central agency and that agency collates all of the information and then they get the information back to the school from all these other schools and how they rate with the classroom management, per se, of other schools. You know, what the percentage of problems they're having in those schools.
- JE:** That sounds like, "we already have a heavy workload, how can we handle this extra?"
- BH:** Well, it's required. That was another part of ten-seventeen was the evaluation system. And that's why there was a continuing education fund developed out of ten-seventeen, to support improvement of instruction. That fund has diminished, and diminished dollar-wise, down now so it's practically nil, but that was the concept, was to try to help improve teaching in the classroom.
- JE:** At TU you oversaw the University School. Talk about your original vision for that school.
- BH:** We started that school in, I think in the auditorium of Lorton Hall. It was just one individual who, again, saw the concept, took it and ran with it, and got support of the administration after I left, and they built their own lab school now. It's done extremely well and is apparently is very highly thought of, but it started out, I think, with one of two grades and gradually increased to a larger number. I haven't visited the new building. I'm not very conversant on it, per se.
- JE:** But it was implemented, wasn't it, while you were there? Wasn't that your dream, your vision?
- BH:** Yes. Well, it was one of them. Yeah. Here again, it's the individual that grabs the dream and runs with it that really makes the dream come true.
- JE:** Well, today it's a highly thought of school in 2010.
- BH:** Oh, it's incredible.
- JE:** Some of what we've talked about, the open designs, so forth, was your dream there at the University School?
- BH:** That was beyond me by that time. We got the program started, like I say, in Lorton Hall. Then they moved it over to a little pre-fab building that since has gone and now it's "out of site out of mind" with me.
- JE:** Gotcha.

Chapter 12 – 5:23
Back to Tulsa Public

John Erling: Then you became Tulsa Public Schools' Superintendent for the second time in 1990. What factors drew you back to TPS as Superintendent?

Bruce Howell: I'd have to say Rae Carnage, who was on the board at the time. His persuasiveness. His concern that hadn't passed a bond issue in eighteen years, or something to that nature. He wanted me to come back and see if we could pass the bond issue. We had a hundred and twenty-five million dollars in the bank at the time if we could get to it. But, people were not of the attitude at that time to pass bond issue because the district enrollment had shrunk to about half of what it was. A number of schools had been closed, and there was antagonism there. So, anyway, he and other board members thought that since I knew the district, I might be able to come back and be able to do something to help pass bond issues. So, I came back and the first obvious thing was that we were having ten bus breakdowns a day, average. And my argument to the public, first off, was that, "we can't get the kids to school, we can't teach them." Well, that resonated apparently because we passed a little seven-million-dollar bond issue. Kind of broke the issue, so to speak. Then we come back with the second one, which was about thirty million, or something to that nature for air-conditioning. All the suburban kids were airconditioned, our kids sat in the heat. So, we got three million dollars-worth of windows and air conditioners. I retired at that point, and the next bond issue, I think, was over a hundred million and then recently they passed one for three-hundred million. That money was so desperately needed by the district because years ago the state legislature had approved the idea that you could use building funds for salaries for custodians and other personnel and so instead of just using that to repair building, most of that money was going into salaries. So, the only money to repair buildings laid in the bond issues. That's why we needed to get into bond issues. So, I came back with a "two Bs and two Cs": Busses, buildings, curriculum, and Colorado. Colorado was where I was going to retire when we got this thing done. So, that was three and a half more years of involvement with the district.

JE: How would you describe your second term with TBS? You weren't implementing new programs at that point, is that true, and you were more concerned with passing bond issues?

BH: That was the primary objective. The other, this came naturally, ten-seventeen was in the background and was passed early on when I was around the second time. That gave the opening for Mayo. The rub at Eliot gave the opening for Eisenhower International School. That was the curriculum part of my "two Bs and two Cs."

JE: What is a high performing, high challenge school? What are some of the issues at that type of school that you wouldn't find at a more traditional school?

BH: Well, I did considerable research across the state with a cohort from the University of Central Oklahoma. What we were looking for were schools that were essentially poverty stricken, if you will, real problems in that arena, but, were achieving well on the state tests. What we did, actually, what she did, was go out and visit those schools and interview those people and gather data and send it to me. Which I crunched the data then and to determine then what they were doing that, despite their poverty issues, were making them high performing. And a lot of it, of course, had to do with orchestrating new teachers; be sure they were working in teams; team teaching. Doing, if you will, some of the kind of innovative things that's we've been promoting for years. Getting teachers out of isolation and cooperating with each other and getting them to see that even though the tests were given at particular grade levels, and tests weren't given at their level, they were as responsible as those teachers at the fifth grade, per se. We found those schools, interviewed the teachers and the principals and visited and developed our research results from that.

JE: Isn't it difficult to get a teacher to go to a high challenge school? That there are only certain kind that say, "Yes, that's where I want to be," and others say, "No, no, no, no, I don't want to be in one of those situations."

BH: Well, I think that's true with any profession. There are people who like to feel challenged at different kinds of levels. Yes, certainly, I think of Special Education teachers particularly. How difficult a row they have to hoe as far as teaching kids with disabilities. There are other teachers that prefer to go to high challenge areas, recognize the needs that those kids have, and are willing to work with those kids. Takes a certain personability to do that.

JE: And there seems to be few of them.

BH: Yes, yes, I think that's true. I think probably the majority of teachers want to work with kids that are higher on the education scale.

JE: But they need a special ability? Not everybody can do it.

BH: No, absolutely. I think it's an empathy for one thing. The ability to accept small achievements; patience. They have attributes that many of us don't have.

JE: Yep.

Chapter 13 - 6:07**Outcome Based Education**

John Erling: Outcome based education. That was, I believe, a heavily debated topic during your years with TPS? Explain the idea behind that concept.

Bruce Howell: Well, outcome-based is essentially what emerges from what you attempt. If that's a way to put it. First of all, one of the things we don't do in our business, is we don't pre-test. We give our annual test in April, but we don't find out what kids knew in September. So, from the very simplistic point of view from outcome-based education, you would test in the fall and again in the spring and see what the growth was. But, instead of that we give one giant test in April without really knowing what the basis was for improvement. In a nutshell, that's outcome-based education.

JE: So, why was that debated?

BH: Well, it's something different. We've never done that before. We've always given standardized tests in the spring. You know, in our middle school in Eagle Grove, we'd get tested in the fall and in the spring to see what the measurement was. To me, it's common sense, but that doesn't always prevail in education.

JE: (laughter) Sorry. Does it make you feel, as we've talked here, you've felt like a lone wolf many times, or you've, certainly met others across the country who've agreed with you? You've come up with these concepts, implemented them, and some of them seemed to have faded away...

BH: Well, I think that's typical of any change. Education is an incredibly large, fixated institution. Initially in 1840, when we could warehouse kids, all education occurred in the school building. There were libraries, a few, but for the most part that's where people went. And over the years, up until 1900, children went to elementary school and essentially that was their education, or even Harvard was essentially a high school when it was opened. In 1900 then, when the child labor laws came about and junior high school was initiated to entice kids to go to high school, they had to broaden things out, and now those have been about the only innovations that have stuck. We've changed the junior high to middle schools. To some degree the middle school is different than the junior high, but not a lot. Not as much as I would have liked to have seen. I've seen some improvements, some changes over a period of time. I've certainly been exposed to some incredible people that have always been on the cutting edge. I had the good fortune of being on the Charles F. Kettering, CFK Limited Board. Chuck Kettering was the grandson of Charles Kettering, who invented the self-starter. So Chuck had ample funds. His concern was school climate. We'd meet for a week at Vail every summer for twenty years, I guess. He would bring in people from all walks of life; business, as well as education; to

talk about what could be done to improve the climate in schools. He was very concerned because he was from the Chicago area had worked with gangs in Chicago. Being able to partake in the conversations and workshops and so forth with these guys at the lodge at Vail for twenty years was a incredible experience for me. And then, I did a lot of consulting for them on school climate. My territory was Chicago, Denver, Minneapolis, to New Orleans. I think I have traveled on every trunk airline that there was in that territory talking about how we could improve the school climate. For example, we developed the first measurement of school climate which is now the Phi Delta Kappa annual evaluation that they do on schools. They picked that up and were able to publish it and carry it through to see what climate factors are important. Maybe, that has had an impact on making people more sensitive to the needs of kids.

JE: But you and others, your colleagues, as you've just described, can think about concepts and change, but ultimately doesn't it come back to the schoolboard? That no matter how these brilliant people are thinking, and no disrespect to schoolboard members, but there's got to be a giant leap between a schoolboard member and what the Ketterings and the Howells are thinking. To bring those two sides together is a major, major challenge.

BH: It is. I have been very fortunate and our boards that I've worked for, their willingness to, if you will, try these ideas. The first board was a five-member board, who we initiated, we, Cawelti, initiated some concepts at the time. Same with the seven-member board. We tried different things. They could see the merit in doing some of these things to see if that would work better than what we had been doing. Board members, unfortunately, are so restricted these days by legislation, in our case from Oklahoma City. That for many of their responsibilities have been taken away by mandates from the state legislature. The typical one that came out, at least the first time around for me, was the legislature would pass something that involved any school district with twenty-five thousand or more students. So Oklahoma City and Tulsa were the ones that got to do this, that, or the other thing, or were required. Now they've softened a little bit and it includes more and more and more districts, but so many of things that they do develop, then, are unfunded and the requirements are thrown back on the district, which in turn gnaws away at the schoolboard's authority.

Chapter 14 - 4:00**Many Experts**

John Erling: Were you often frustrated with the idea that, seems like everybody is an expert when it comes to education? I singled out the schoolboard, but we have state legislatures, too, who believe that they're experts in education, and they're not, they're not professionals, but they are in a seat of power. But there's something going on there, that they're in charge, but they don't really know the business.

Bruce Howell: Well, everyone has gone to school, so they have their own perception of what "good" education is. Often times they don't take into consideration what others need in the way of good education. Most of these people have been successful in school. They've been the athletes, we'll say, "the upper echelon of students in school." And so, they school has met their needs. What they don't understand is the needs of others are not being met, and in many instances, as I said earlier on, always equated it in many of my presentations to the fact, "why is it that kids in kindergarten go to school skipping and singing and by the second grade, they want to stay home?" The difference being that some of the kids adapt and some don't. Well, my guess is that those proponents at the legislatures continued to skip and sing on their way to school because they were satisfied with what was happening. And so, maybe it's more to the other element that our attempts at innovation are directed.

JE: Today it's 2010. Do you have an overview of education today in our district compared to the seventies when you were TPS Superintendent, the eighties and nineties? You've certainly stayed interested in wanting to know what's going on.

BH: I had the opportunity, if you will, to look at it thirteen years apart. Going back in '89. The basic difference again, was a size in enrollment that we had. I think the diminishing involvement of parents has been, it continues to be, a growing problem. I don't know whether this is frustration from the legislature about schools, or what, but the increasing mandates that come from the legislature as though one size fits all. We have schools with such a range of enrollments and needs, and of course their lack of adequate funding; those kinds of things continue to frustrate me. I see those as continuing problems. On the bright side, we see kids achieving, Washington High School is an example, you know. There are other schools that are doing the same thing with lesser number of students that don't get the publicity. But, overall I'd say that those are the problems; the legislation issues, maybe the parental support in some instances; the technology; the frustration we have with utilizing the technology at the present time. If I were starting all over again that's what I would focus on, is technology.

JE: The family involvement. If a family does not support a child when they come home, asking them about their homework, “what can I do to help you?” Supporting them. If a family does none of those, the changes for that child, unless they’re really exceptional, are not very great?

BH: That’s true, that’s true. It takes a village, if you will. In the overall involvement of parents, in lack of support, is one thing that I’ve noticed over the years that’s greatly increased.

JE: We love to hear politicians speak, “Education is the answer. Education is the answer.” Yet, when it comes to them voting for funding, they don’t seem to come through on that. There’s also a disconnect there.

BH: Absolutely.

Chapter 15 - 4:37

Technology

John Erling: What achievements give you the most satisfaction as you look back on your career?

Bruce Howell: I don’t look back, frankly. As I mentioned a little bit ago, Chuck Kettering’s grand-dad made a statement one time: “I am very interested in the future because that’s where I’m going to spend the rest of my life.” So, whatever I’ve done in the past is done. I’m interested right now in the history of North East Oklahoma. I have so many other venues at the present time that I don’t look back and reminisce much, I look more to the future and things that are happening now that are of great interest to me.

JE: Pick up on technology. If you came back today, you’d focus on technology? It seems that we don’t fund technology in our schools. There should be a computer for every student.

BH: Yes, not only that, but the curriculum should be addressed to the technology rather than the way it is. We’re trying to integrate technology into the curriculum, we should be reversing that. The technology keeps leaping ahead. The whole world is at my fingertips and it is at any child’s fingertips. We shouldn’t be denying that in terms of space. They should be working individually on, first of all, their interests as well as their needs. We capture a child by interesting them first and then we teach them. We can’t do it the other way around because it just doesn’t work that way. They’re not going to be forced to do things that they don’t really enjoy. So, I think using technology, the range and kinds of things that are available in technology, appeals to almost every kind of youngsters’ intellect. And that’s what we should be focusing on.

JE: Students listening to this conversation years from now, they're interested in education, they want to be a teachers, they want to be an administrator. Your advice to them and the challenges you believe they will face?

BH: Well, again, we need to restructure the school so that their talents can be more affectively utilized. I think that teachers don't need to be warehouse keepers, they need to be facilitators. So, obviously they need to understand the capacity of technology and in turn they need to understand the interest of the individual student, then compare the two and let them move in that direction. I see the school of the future with maybe a teacher technician overlooking twenty student with computers, but every one of them working on something different, that in one hand is of interest to them, and in the other hand is a learning tool for things that they're not interested in. That will help them to learn because they understand the need to know something they don't understand.

JE: Today, your age is seventy-eight?

BH: Yes.

JE: Describe what it is you're active in today.

BH: I'm very interested right now in the history of North Eastern Oklahoma. It's so deep. Goes back so long. I've developed some DVDs and I'm promoting different things that have happened in the past here. My interests at the present time is the military trail which begins at Fort Snelling, Minnesota in Saint Paul, runs to Fort Jesup in Louisiana. Of course I want to magnify what happens as it goes through the quad counties: Craig, Delaware, Ottawa, Mayes. For example, this summer I'm going to trace from Fort Snelling down through Fort Leavenworth, Fort Scott, into Oklahoma. And then next year, take it from here down to Fort Jesup. That's one area of interest. The others, what I call "Sons and Daughters." I'm developing a DVD on individuals who have achieved in North East Oklahoma whatever in the arts, athletics, music, so forth. There's just a lot of depth here that I think needs to be exposed so that particularly children can develop a better image of themselves in terms of what their ancestors have done.

JE: Well, it's a gapping hole because we don't have somebody who can come in and put it all together. Everybody's heard little bit of stories here and there but the fact that you're doing that, you are contributing again in a major way. And I want to thank you for spending nearly two hours here with us here today on this. It'll be a learning, teaching, interest tool for many, many years to come. Thank you.

BH: Thank you.

Chapter 15 - 0:33**Conclusion**

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on VoicesofOklahoma.com.