

Interview
with
RICHARD HICKS

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By Goldie F. Wells

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INTERVIEW WITH MR. RICHARD HICKS

Goldie: I am in the office of Mr. Richard Hicks at Hillside High School in Durham, North Carolina. Mr. Hicks, I would like for you to introduce yourself and say that you know that this interview is being recorded.

Mr. Hicks: My name is Richard Hicks, principal of Hillside High School and I am aware of the recording of this interview.

Goldie: Well, Mr. Hicks, I wrote to you and I appreciate you answering my questionnaire. I am doing some research. I am comparing the roles of black high school principals and interviewing principals from 1964, and 1989. In 1964, there were over 200 black high school principals and in 1989, when I wrote to the state department they sent me a listing of 41. I found that of those 41 some of them are principals of alternative schools and so we had less than 40 black high school principals in the year '89. So you are one of the '89 principals. I want to ask you some questions and have you respond to them for the research. First thing I want you to tell me is how you became a high school principal.

Mr. Hicks: I was teaching in Winston-Salem, North Carolina at a junior-senior high school and was beckoned back to Rocky Mount to coach at my former all-black high school. Within two years we had merged with the white school in integration. For about three years I taught in that integrated situation and became an assistant principal of that merged high school. I stayed an assistant principal for two years and the third year the superintendent gave me an opportunity to move into a junior high school as a principal in that he was bringing the principal of that school to his office as director of a Title I or Title II program at that time. And so I moved into the principalship. I was working on my Master's degree in administration at that time but the superintendent gave me a year to complete my certificate but after he gave me the job I completed it in one semester and a summer of that same year.

Goldie: So you stayed down in the Rocky Mount area for...

Mr. Hicks: I stayed in Rocky Mount until the year 1981, and I felt like I needed a change so I moved to Orange County where I became principal of Stanford Junior High School. It was a school with about 1140 pupils with a population about 77% white and 23% black. I had originally applied for the high school job which was open in that same system but after talking to the superintendent he felt that he should move the young man who was principal at the middle school to the high school but said that he would be happy to offer me the junior high which I took. I stayed in the junior high school position for six years and Hillside became available when one

of our best principals, a black principal that North Carolina has known, Dr. John Lucas, retired. I was given the opportunity to follow him as principal here at Hillside.

Goldie: And you have been here at Hillside for the past five years.

Goldie: Did you have any educators in your family?

Mr. Hicks: No, I am the first person in my family to go beyond high school and only my younger brother is a high school graduate. My other three sisters and/or brothers, none of them got beyond the 10th grade.

Goldie: I want you to tell me something about Hillside High School.

Mr. Hicks: First of all it has a magnificent faculty. That is the most impressive thing. They are people who know what they are doing, who are interested in going back to school and finding out new techniques and what have you. Right now Durham City Schools is getting a lot of publicity as not being up to par as it relates to the mandates of the state but this staff has put together a very good school improvement plan and are working feverishly to make sure that it comes about. In the third year of the plan in which the state has mandated, I can guarantee that this faculty will meet at 75% of the indicators of success. As it relates to the students here we do not have a Caucasian or a person of any other race in this school other than blacks. There are 976 kids here at this time and they are all black students. However, about 30% of our staff is composed of Caucasian teachers or of another minority. However, we have found that that has in no way deterred the teachers or students interest in making this one of the best high schools around.

Goldie: How do you maintain the total black student population?

Mr. Hicks: It is just a matter that--I guess it was like it occurred in many cities that Caucasians chose to move from the inter-city areas and move to the suburbs and as they moved to the suburbs in the county school systems they began to build bigger and in some cases better facilities in their high schools. So what has happened over the last eight or nine years is that there has been a continuous flow so that those Caucasian families who still live within the school district, their children are grown and have children of their own and the city and county of Durham have not seen fit over the years to move the city school district line along with the movement of the suburbs. So there are many people who live in the city of Durham but are in the county school district because the school district line has not changed.

Goldie: And you are located near North Carolina Central University.

Mr. Hicks: An excellent place to be. One block away.

Goldie: Yes, you can look right over to the campus. Now I am going to ask you some questions about the responsibilities that you have here as principal and how you deal with them. Would you address the supervision of personnel in your teacher selection.

Mr. Hicks: Well, let me take supervision first of all. The state gives us a very good guide as to how to supervise teachers. One of the first things that we do when we come to school is in my handbook there is a list of persons who will evaluate each teacher. I've been fortunate up until this year to have three assistant principals so we would divide the faculty into four equal groups. I would normally take the non-teaching personnel because I would be aware of their movements and what have you and then we would simply follow the plan where we would give them one formal observation during the year and several informal observations, have the post-conferences, the pre-conferences and follow that gamut in terms of supervision. Each teacher is told at that meeting that if there is something of their evaluation with which they want to discuss they have a right to ask the person to whom I have delegated that responsibility to have me in on the conference. The other thing is that any teacher once they see the list they can request to be observed by their immediate supervisor by law, that meaning me if they wish. But that doesn't happen too often once they are assigned. As to the selection of teachers, we have a system here where once the vacancy is defined the director of personnel will have the supervisor at central office to screen the applications and once the applications are screened--we can choose six of the screened applicants and call them in for interviews. We don't have to interview all of the six but we may do that. If we don't know anyone in that group of six, we can give them back and ask for six additional ones. There is a form that we feel out where we have to rate each of the persons that we interview. I have had no problems in the selection of teachers here at Hillside. The executive director of instruction has always wanted the teachers who came to Hillside to be people whom I felt would fit in and suit our needs.

Goldie: So you do take a lot of pains in selecting those--out of the six you are very selective of the ones because of your situation here.

Mr. Hicks: Very much so. And then once I select them if it is a time when teachers are available, I let the chairmen of the departments sit with me and an assistant principal during the interview.

Goldie: Are your recommendations usually adhered to?

Mr. Hicks: I have never had one since coming to Durham City that I have submitted that was not accepted by the board.

Goldie: Curriculum and instruction.

Mr. Hicks: Once again, that proposes no problem because I think the General Assembly made it very clear that there was a standard course of study for the state of North Carolina. If you will look here on my desk right now, what I have now is that teachers must pass onto me. They have ten days into this second semester. They must present a chart to me for the months of February, March, April and May on it and they have to go in and we have a scope and sequence chart, they have to go into that scope and sequence chart and let me know what outcomes that they have not already covered this school year and they must tell me what month they are going to cover them in for the rest of this school year. This will be given to my assistant principals and myself and when we go into the classroom for observations, if you are not within that sequence in the month that you told us then we need to sit down and talk. So from the curriculum standpoint we have the basic course of study, we have a scope and sequence that has been put together by teachers last summer along with our executive director of instruction and the implementation is up to me as a principal. I think we are right on target with that.

Goldie: And you do see yourself as an instructional leader?

Mr. Hicks: The day that principals are not instructional leaders within the school, I plan to retire.

Goldie: Discipline.

Mr. Hicks: Once again, that is something that you have to get and then go on from there. One cannot let discipline consume the entire school day, the entire nine weeks, semester, or school year. And what has happened here at Hillside we did have some discipline problems here when we first arrived but this staff has gotten together and now we don't have situations where kids are afraid to go in the restrooms or kids afraid to walk from one classroom area to another. We have a specific discipline policy. Kids know what is going to happen to them if they are late for school; they know what is going to happen to them if they are on the hall without passes; they know what is going to happen to them if they caught with matches or a cigarette lighters in their pockets; all of that is in writing to them and that is discussed with them by me the first thirty minutes that this student body is together any school year. That is the first thing that they hear because we begin discipline the moment that we walk out of the auditorium to begin our school year.

The other part of that is that we have gone another step here at Hillside and we have a student mediation program here that we started two years ago. In that student mediation program we have trained 28 students and when there is a confrontation that does not require being sent home and if it happened in the community overnight or on the weekend, mediation can occur by being referred by your classmates or teachers, Reverend from your church or what have you, and we put the parties involved in a room with the student mediators and we have an adult who will sit on the outside of that room but does not enter into the mediation. These student mediators who have been trained will present to me at the mediation a report. If it is solved, then they are allowed to go on to their classes without any administrative interference. If it is not solved, then the administrators get into it and 97% of our cases that have gone to mediation since we started two years ago have ended in non-administrative interference. This particular year it has grown so that the Mental Health Center with whom we began it, we now have an on-site person who is available to us now at all times although we do share it now with the other high school who is trying to develop a program like ours at this time. So that is how we discipline.

Goldie: That is interesting. That gives the students more ownership into their own--taking responsibility for their own behavior.

Mr. Hicks: I haven't had to deal with boyfriend, girlfriend, kind of a thing in two years.

Goldie: In high school, that does get to be a real problem.

Goldie: Transportation.

Mr. Hicks: Once again, I don't have a problem with that either because we only have four buses. Hillside is situated in a neighborhood-like situation and it only takes four buses to transport our kids. The way we handle that however is that I have a person, who is a male in this case, assigned to each bus and in the afternoon that person is at that bus to make sure that they get on and we send those buses on.

Goldie: Utilization of funds.

Mr. Hicks: It depends on where the funds are coming from. In Durham we get several kinds of funds. If they are local funds, we usually have to deal with the supervisor of whatever particular area in which you want to speak; science for instance. I get a mathematics allotment and I get a general science allotment. And what I do about the local situation is that I give the allotment to the department chairperson. People in that department must submit the purchase order to the department chairman. If the

department chairman says no, then you work it out in the department. If he or she says yes, it is then sent on to my media center and the purchase orders are typed by the media coordinator. The reason for that is and their job is that if they have same order for English, math, science and social studies and they cut out three of them, if they can figure out a way that all four of these groups can use that material and we have been able to make our monies go further by having that kind of screening then when it gets to me I sign so that it can be ordered.

Goldie: Cafeteria management.

Mr. Hicks: That is something that we all share in. The three assistant principals during the lunch time make sure that we are roving and right now I have it set up, where when there are classes in one whole section of our building there are none in the other. So that gives us a small area that we have to handle. Teachers are on duty in the cafeteria in times of twenty minutes. A teacher has fifty-five minutes for lunch. The teacher either gives us the first twenty minutes of that lunch period or the last twenty minutes of that lunch period on cafeteria duty. And then one of us is still moving through there. Then since each teacher has a fifty-five minute planning period we don't feel like we are asking too much to take twenty of the fifty-five minute lunch period to ask them to help us supervise. Now we not only have the teachers in the cafeteria but they are spread throughout the building for the first and last twenty minutes. Everybody, including the principal, serves duty at the school.

Goldie: But you have a cafeteria manager. Is this centrally controlled--the child nutrition department? You really don't have anything to do with the actual funds or selecting the cafeteria manager, do you?

Mr. Hicks: Yes, I just happen to have one who has been here with me but when it is time to hire a new manager for that cafeteria I am going to be involved. Now I'm not saying that I am going to hire the person, but I am going to have some input in terms of the interview process and being able to say whether or not I think the person will suit our needs. I am not silly enough to say that I will make the final selection because the law states that the principal can only recommend but certainly I would be allowed to participate in that recommendation process.

Goldie: You seem to feel strongly about that. Do you feel that this should be the administrator's role to select people that he or she has to supervise?

Mr. Hicks: I have to definitely agree with that. The other part of it is that when it comes down to the "in" degree,

a person at central office is not responsible in that building. Now, I don't bother the person who coordinates nutrition. I think it is all right for her to supervise other people in terms of ordering food and developing their work schedule and that kind of thing but I think I should have something to say about when the line opens, when to close; I think they are the experts, they ought to know what kind of food they ought to have and what portion but when it comes down to the practical kinds of things then I want some kind of control. Fortunately I have that kind of relationship with Mrs. Lawson who works our program. We feel so good about being involved that last year our sales in the cafeteria showed a 300% increase and we are the top money-making cafeteria in the system and the system made enough money last year that Mrs. Lawson had been able to hire an assistant and is able to pay her from local funds from monies generated from our nutritional programs.

Goldie: Do you have a lot of children on free lunch?

Mr. Hicks: Not really. Do you know that we didn't qualify year before last with the 15% quota for people to get Federal refunds for having taught in that kind of situation.

Goldie: And you know that that is unbelievable and that kind of goes against what everybody believes about a typically black high school.

Mr. Hicks: When you look at this school in the last school year we had about 208 seniors and we have generated \$1.8 million dollars in scholarships for that size. The other day I got my report back from the state of North Carolina and 100% of the students who enrolled in college from Hillside had met the state guidelines for entrance. So these are things that we don't ever see in the newspaper about Hillside High School. Also the state average, if I remember correctly for all students who enter a state school, is something like 84% of them have all of the requirements to enter and when I look at that and we had eighty-some percent of the all of the students who even applied to school went to school at Hillside.

Goldie: What percent of the class applied for college? Do you remember?

Mr. Hicks: I don't remember exactly what that figure was but the long number was 148 out of 208 actually applied.

Goldie: That is remarkable. Well, it's kind of getting off of it a little bit but do you think that your having such a large number of blacks, do you think having the 70% of black teachers has anything to do with the success of the children?

Mr. Hicks: I'm going to give you an answer to that question about the 70% black teachers probably being a strong force toward realizing what we need to. I'm going to have to say that it is good to have that kind of ratio in the situation that we have but it is not necessary for that to exist in order for success to occur. The reason that I have got to say that is that you must remember that I have been principal of two fully integrated schools. When I left Parker Junior High School down in Rocky Mount I had a staff that was about 65% white and 45% black and we were at or above the state level in terms of scores every year that I was there. I left there and went to a junior high school in Hillsboro where it was 77% white and 23% black in terms of teaching and we had the same kind of thing occurring. We were a center for English Teacher of Excellence and that kind of thing. I think the key however, is having people who are sensitive to the needs of students and if you have any kind of combination regardless of the color of the skin who will be sensitive to the needs of that child, you can get the job done. It just means that we are in a situation here where we are 70% black and I think we are in a position to get the job done with that kind of a ratio.

Goldie: In your other two schools, what was the ratio of black students?

Mr. Hicks: Just opposite of what it is here at Hillside. Most of the time there were about 30% or 33% black in one situation and about 40% to 45% black in another situation.

Goldie: I know that this is one thing that is a little bit different too. When you talk about discipline it does not seem to be a real big problem here and when I talk to the principals of 1964, they didn't have a discipline problem. They said it was because of the strong teachers that they had. I am just wondering if this is the reason that it is really not a big problem here.

Mr. Hicks: Strong teachers and teachers who are willing to cooperate. You see discipline just oozes from one door to the next, from one hallway to the next, and our teachers here at Hillside, they don't mind telling you to "stop that" if they don't teach you. What had happened in a lot of schools is the feeling that if I don't teach you I am not going to say anything to you. You aren't mine. Well, when we became a staff here that is one of the things that I asked this faculty to do and that was for us to cooperate and that any success that we had everybody would always know that it would be they who were the ones who made it come happen.

Goldie: Community relations. How does Hillside relate to the community?

Mr. Hicks: When I came here three years ago we were playing all of our basketball games down here in our little gymnasium. We went to North Carolina Central to talk with Chris Fisher, the director of athletics and we have only played one home basketball in our gym in three years. Central opened up their facility to us and they don't charge us anything for coming over there. We have had kids who have gone to Central to sit in their geometry classes. We get a chance to walk over and see all of their art displays, their drama presentations, we can walk over during the day. That is the college community. The rest of the community here-- we have a Hillside Family Day that is coordinated by one of my assistant principals and we do that the Saturday before school opens every year. That has gone tremendously well. We usually get 200-300 parents over here and have a workshop and have a big picnic down on our football field and make a good half day of it. If you want to talk about the business community, two years ago Galaxso gave me \$15,000 to do a project on the SAT. We took 55 kids through an SAT Program from August to the last week in October and they took the test the first week in November. Thirty-three of those people were upper classmen and the others were under classmen. We saw 150-200 points of increased SAT scores on the upper classmen that took that test and the kids who were sophomores, we saw a tremendous job they had done on the PSAT. That is the kind of support that we get from the business community. I must also mention that we have a mentor program that is run by Mr. Lee and just yesterday I got a letter from Galaxso indicating that they were giving Mr. Lee \$500 on behalf of one their volunteers who acts as a role model father. I must also mention that what we ask these role models to do--do not take them to lunch, do not take them to ball games. We want them to come in here and talk with them about their jobs and how they make money, and then take them on their jobs and let them spend an hour or two hours a week or every two weeks or a month to show them an environment in which one can make money and not be afraid of the police coming and arresting them for making the money. That is the objective of this mentor program that we have.

Goldie: How many students do you have enrolled in that program?

Mr. Hicks: We have 40.

Goldie: How much administrative power and control do you think that you have over your school site and your responsibilities?

Mr. Hicks: All that I need to get the job done and to me power and control is not a primary thing with me. For instance, we talked about the department chairpersons being allowed to say how monies will eventually be spent in their department. I don't want that power. I want them to be

happy about how they spent the money. When teachers go to their association meetings, teachers at Hillside when they start arguing that they don't know where the monies went in their school, my teachers have to sit back and not play a role because they know where their money is going. So I have enough power and control here to do what needs to be done for these children.

Goldie: How did the desegregation of schools affect your role as a principal?

Mr. Hicks: It hasn't affected mine at all and I know being a minority I have always felt that I do the best job that I can do in any situation and I don't know of a whole lot of people who can do a better job than I can do in a situation. So it didn't make any difference with me as it doesn't make any difference with me now whether I am working for Durham City or Durham County in a merger. Our emphasis should be on children and I have trained myself to work with other people to make sure that children benefit. That is my answer to desegregation.

Goldie: All right. Did you find any difference in supervising black teachers and white teachers?

Mr. Hicks: I don't let myself do that because you remember I said I try to stick with their evaluation instrument and there are eight functions on that instrument. Now as long as you are carrying out those eight functions, I don't care whether you like me or not and I really don't care a whole lot about vice versa and I am not going to use or like or dislike you when I get ready to do your evaluation. There are some teachers in this building whom I know feel that I am overly stern, that I may treat this person different from that person, but you won't find but a very small percentage who will say that they have been evaluated unfairly.

Goldie: So you are fair.

Mr. Hicks: I think I am!

Goldie: Do you enjoy your job? Why?

Mr. Hicks: First of all, I do enjoy my job. I can't think of anything else that I would want to be. I was a young coach in this state that had the--the world could have opened up for me in terms of jobs. I was fortunate enough to coach a kid named Phil Ford who was the '76 Olympian and who is now the assistant basketball coach at the University of North Carolina. I had DeVillian who is now a big star in the NBA and was on my junior varsity squad, but that is the time that I got out of coaching and came into administration because this is what I want to do. I love being around children. I have only missed three of any kind of activity here at

Hillside in the three years that I have been here. I have been to every football, basketball game, every concert, every drama presentation; I just love my job and I have done this anywhere that I have been. I think there is a place for black males, those few of us who are not in prison now. There is a place for us to be in a positive way in America and that is why I love my job.

Goldie: What do you consider the major problem of your principalship?

Mr. Hicks: Probably me.

Goldie: Why would you say that?

Mr. Hicks: Not anticipating something and allowing things that may cause progress not to occur. To give you an example, you know site-based management is one of the prevalent ideas floating around now. And although you may think that you are allowing your staff to do this or do that one of my objectives this year was to hold back and not speak out so quickly to give other people an opportunity to say and do things. So that is why I say I'm probably my biggest problem but I hope that I am cognizant of that and develop techniques so that I won't be my biggest enemy.

Goldie: What do you consider the most rewarding about your principalship?

Mr. Hicks: It's hard to say because when I get a letter like I did the other day that said we have two candidates who are finalists for the Teacher Scholarship at the end of the year and I well know that once you become a finalist because there are so few now, those two kids are going to get a scholarship. Then I feel so good when an athlete and coach walks in here and says we have a \$70,000 scholarship for your athlete for four years. I feel good then. I feel good on days when we have our academic awards assembly and see those kids come up and get their trophies or awards for making the honor roll. So I just have so many joys in being principal that I can't pick out one. Also, this is not a joy of my teaching position but I am adequately paid. Teachers have a way to go. But as I look back over my 29 year career, my pay has followed my career ladder. I made more when I left the classroom and became an assistant principal and a coach, I made more when I became a junior high school principal, I made more when I moved from a smaller junior high to a larger junior high, and I have made more when I moved from the junior high to the high school. So it is rewarding and I enjoy that part of it because I feel when I go home at night that when I give a day's work, I am paid well.

Goldie: Since there are so few high school principals, if you knew of a black young woman or young man that aspired to

be a high school principal, what advice would you give them?
Mr. Hicks: Be certified and qualify and make sure that you present yourself that way in all professional situations. What I do here at Hillside is that I have a young man on the staff who has his certification. Any time that I have an assistant principal who is going to be out to conferences for three days or more I hire a substitute and put him in this young man's classroom. I bring him down here with me to perform those tasks so that when he goes for an interview he can say, I have had hands-on kind of things. I just don't try to run this place by myself or with the other assistant principal when that occurred so that is some advice I am giving to them and then the teachers, be it he or she, gets to know what teachers say about him/her when he moves out of that role of the classroom and have to get on these kids who walk the hall or come in the cafeteria. But the best advice is to be certified and qualified and know that you can't rap in the , you can't use English that is colloquial and then expect people to be looking at you as a possible candidate for a principalship. I still think black males have to have a certain uniqueness about them in 1990, in order for a superintendent to place them in an integrated situation.

Goldie: Do you think that there must be a sponsor "someone of the other culture that affirms your ability"? You know that you can do it and you know that you do it very well but to save a position in an integrated situation, do you think you need a sponsor?

Mr. Hicks: Let me say this. There are so few blacks, male or female in the positions where the selections are made that on the surface one would have to say yes to your question. But I certainly would hope that if I were to go for a job now that it wouldn't take that but just the collective observations of the group. It would be hard not to feel that way since so many other persons making those decisions are of the other culture.

Goldie: Well, I have come to the end of my interview guide. If you have some words of wisdom, you can give them.

Mr. Hicks: No, I don't have any words of wisdom. I'll just work today and I'll take the weekend off and come back Monday and give it another shot.

Goldie: Well, I can just tell from looking around that you are a sportsman. I can tell that a lot of people think highly of you with all of these plaques on the wall and you have had a lot of accomplishments. I can tell that you like to read from the collection of books and I can tell that you are sincere about what you do. Just the fact that you are still going to the classroom to teach if you have and you get in the trenches to see that the job is done. I think that

the children here at Hillside are fortunate to have a principal like you. I have learned since I started these interviews that the 25 year span between the old administrators and you that are here working in this time but you still have the same, I call it, stuff in you. I've come to believe that an administrator is an administrator and has certain characteristics and being black myself I know that there is a place for us in education and I think that strong administrators like you are what we need in our schools so that we can save our children. I appreciate you taking the time.

Mr. Hicks: If I can be spoken of in the same breath as Dr. Lucas who was here, when I am gone away, I'll be happy. I saw him as a boy come in here to play basketball and I saw him as a young man as I came here coaching. I came against his coaches and I came here and followed him as principal. We had some good black male role models for those of us who wanted to be principals in any era. We have had some real good role models.

Goldie: I think that is what we are missing. That is why I think when we deal with teachers and how many we have. I think one of the things missing is the role models and we have been fortunate because I graduated just a year after you did and we had role models and so I think that is what some of our children really do need. Thank you so much for taking the time.