Women in Leadership Positions in North Carolina

History 62

Oral History Project

Tape Log

Field Worker: Kara Sheppard

Tape Title (Interviewee, Event): Judy Hoffman

Number of Sides: Two on tape 1
One on tape 2

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Genre/Topic: An oral history of Judy Hoffman of Raleigh, North Carolina, Chairman of the Wake County School Board. These tapes cover her work with PTA, School Board Advisory Groups, her experiences as a School Board Member, her current work as Chairman of the School Board, her family life, and the events that led her getting involved in the school system.

Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is summarized.

Tape Index

Counter No.       Topic

(Side A)

00     (Opening Announcement. First word cut short.)

06     "What woman has been most influential in your life? How has her leadership style affected you?"

16     "Probably, Charlotte Martin." She served on the school board 10 years ago and always acted as a lady. She made sure she was accountable, up front, honest, and accessible to people. Tried to mold her leadership of the board from her.

38     What is your leadership style like?

   A people person into working hands on and grass roots.
   Accessible to public. Really enjoys being involved. Involved in working on legislation and bond referendums.

59     First thing that got her involved in Wake County schools.

   Her three daughters. She wanted to know what went on in their life all day long. She wanted to know what they were doing. Then she started doing volunteer work.
89 How did you get on the school board?

Never thought she would be on the School Board. There were real problems eight
years ago with school funding. She took the Commissioners to the schools. She did not
want to be away from home and her children. She asked her family what they thought
before she got involved so she would know she had their support. Formed an umbrella
group of all twelve advisory councils. Continued to get more and more involved. Doors
continued to open and she wanted to serve.

129 What were some of the things you lobbied for and the bond referendums you
worked on?

Adding schools and renovating old schools and additions to schools. There are 400
schools in the county. A large piece of the current referendums is for technology and
modernization for heating systems. Trying to get air conditioners and heating systems.

155 What is the worst problem the school board had ever faced since you came on board?

Probably the problems they are experiencing now. The early retirement of the

175 School violence?

Violence task force formed 2 years ago and putting police officers in schools.
Violence has been decreased by 75%. Having a uniformed officer on sight has been very
successful. Metal detectors used randomly. Drug searches with dogs. Alternative
education expansions for children who are continually in trouble. Story about a boy who
was recently brought before the board for threatening the life of an employee at his school.
The state mandates that these children must be educated.

210 Another initiative is the character education program. She brought it to the board
about a year ago. She felt she was seeing children in the schools lacking the ability to
understand right and wrong, that their actions affect other people, and that their is a
problem with a lack of order.

"People are so afraid of the separation of church and state we have basically turned tail and
run and we have basically failed greatly in this direction. We have gone way to far in terms
of everything is relative...it is wrong to say, 'If it feels right it is OK.’ There is now a real
effort across the country to regain some of the basics.” There are eight character traits
being taught this year and it is having a big affect. Where it was piloted there was a 66%
decrease in violent crimes and 82% decrease in skipping school. Feels children need to be
taught basic self-discipline. Taking it to the community.

297 How are teachers teaching character education?

It is a detriment to purchase a character education curriculum. They have adopted
eight characteristics. Said to schools, “It is up to you to develop a way to teach children.”
Integrated throughout the whole day. Lots of examples of respect. All kinds of projects.
Respect is the current character trait being taught. There are all kinds of ways to get
children involved. At middle to high school level it is more through their home room.
Community Service Projects in high schools. Taught through literature and social studies,
language arts, and historical figures. Trying to center language arts, history and social
studies on people who were historically good and represent the character traits being
studied.
330 How has it been received in the community?

“It was received very, very well. I took a lot of time and trouble making sure the task force I appointed was really diverse. It had people from all walks of life, all communities, all religions, all races, teachers, students, parents, and principals.” Surveys went home with every student. They put a ballot to vote on the eight characteristics in the newspaper. In total they received 25,000 back from the paper and from parents. Character traits were very successful. Range of approval was from 79% - 86% and whether they wanted it or not. Students also need to see it reflected in the community.

353 How are you trying to get the whole community involved?

Meeting with business leaders. The boy scouts are incorporating it into their own type of character education program. She also meets with the media. The television stations and newspapers are running reports now on the schools and will expand their coverage next year. Some businesses have also agreed to post the 8 character traits.

365 Businessmen she has spoken to say that children are graduating from school today do not have the integrity they used to have. They do not trust them to balance the books. They don’t trust them to get to work on time. Main reasons people are losing their jobs today is because they cannot get to work on time, cannot be trusted, and cannot get along with other people. She feels that the school system has a responsibility to start teaching this to students by clamping down on people to uphold these characteristics. They are trying to get around to as many businesses as possible and also looking for donations and grants. Scholarships from Rotary and Optimists Clubs for students who greatly demonstrate all of these characteristics. These students may not have the highest grades or be the football stars, or a music genius; but they deserve to be recognized. In looking at the heroes children have today; she feels most lack these character traits.

392 Alternative schools?

For children who are not getting what they need in regular schools. 300 students, smaller school, and smaller classes. Sometimes unusual learning exceptions. For needs not meant in a regular classroom.

412 How are they handling guns in schools?

Besides policemen, the policy has been reviewed for the main thing. Children know if your found with a gun your out and even the facsimile piece. Police officers have probably done the most and metal detectors. By law, they cannot open and search lockers or cars. There are a lot of flaws and loop holes. Having an officer there means he knows the children in the school and the children know him. If there is a problem they can go to him. There is also a hot line for children to turn in case of sightings of drugs or weapons.

446-447 School board code of conduct policy?

Each school can add things to the police

454 (End of Side A of tape I)

00 (Beginning of Side B of tape I, first words cut off, just reminding Mrs. Hoffman of the last question)
Each school can decide what they want to do about some issues such as what is appropriate dress, otherwise the school board code of conduct covers almost everything. An example of one of the policies in the board's code of conduct is about fighting. If you are in a fight one on one the principal of the school has some leeway, but if another person steps into the fight to help then it is an automatic suspension. The school board is trying to do a lot better job of letting students know about their policies at the beginning of the year too.

Lawsuits?

Parents call her all the time and she tries to be very accessible for people to get in contact with her. One father called and said his had gotten caught with a pocket knife and suspended and she was the only one who could do anything to get him back in school. He said his son was a good boy and deserved to be allowed to come back. There really was no point because even though she is normally the one who parents can call about expulsion, she can not do anything about being expelled for weapons because of a policy of the school board. Eight students were kicked out of National Honor Society for cheating and their angry parents called in an uproar. “Rules are great if they don’t hit you.”

“Loaded with lawsuits” She had just received word of another one that morning. Feels people are lawsuit crazy. People sometimes feel like they can just “buck the system” and sometimes the rules are created to be challenged. If there is a problem, there is an extensive appeals system. If a principal makes a decision, it can be appealed to a site based committee. If they uphold it, it can be appealed to central office and the superintendent. If he upholds it, it can go to the school board.

What rules most often make it to the school board?

It is an automatic failure in a class to miss 10 days. So the attendance policy is usually the biggest problem. The school board looks to see if a student is always tardy; especially to their first period class. The policy to keep a certain G.P.A. to play sports is another policy that is appealed often. The next most commonly appealed decisions have to do with weapons, fights, or discipline.

Are these the same things you get in lawsuits over?

Special education for special students. Another example is when the board has moved a student, and sometimes they are over just really strange things such as some decision a teacher or a principal made. The have had lawsuits over a student not getting the teacher they or their parent wanted.

Have you personally been sued? What is that like?

School board members have lawyers and they represent them. She’s never known of a lawsuit where an individual school board member was sued and they lost.

How often do you face it?

She has received a summons for four so far this year. They also have to face possible lawsuits from personnel with 8000 employees. Those are mostly about placement or a review.

As chairman, how would you define your job?
"My job is one really of leadership of the board. Laying out a vision. Being able to put in order what we need to do next and how to get it done and communicating with board members and the administration. I'm sort of the liaison between the superintendent and the staff that is hired to carry out policies that the board makes." Meet with superintendent and staff. If there are problems you must be the go between. Must maintain good communications.

222 How did it change form when you were just a member of the board?

"Now, I don't just vote."

She must make committee assignments, do many speaking engagements, and speak to other government bodies on the school board's behalf. "You go to a lot of schools and a lot of fun things to. You represent the school board to the community."

224 What do you think about the political side of your job?

"You learn to work with people, to give up on things that are not as important and not on the things that are." She feels the country has a perception of politics as being dirty, but that she does not work through back room deals.

229 How has your position affected your family?

Her husband is very supportive and really wanted her to work on the school board and then serve as its chairman. Her whole family is very supportive and she says she could not, and would not do it without them. She does not think a person should do this type of job unless their spouse is supportive because it is very time consuming. The phone sometimes starts ringing at 6:45 a.m. and is still ringing until 11:00 p.m. They have three phone lines. It is not an 8-5 job.

281 "People never leave you alone. They think you are always accessible. If it is important to your family to always know they can count on you, you must keep your priorities in order. Once your family feel your priorities are out of order, they are not going to support you anymore and they're going to be very hurt."

294 She did not get involved with the school board until her kids were in kindergarten through high school. Her son is probably the one who feels it the most. He was five years old when she took office. She takes him to therapy and must make sure all his needs are meet. "It is a juggling act."

299 "Sometimes you're and you say I didn't do such a good job today, tomorrow I'll have to do better." She discussed taking the job with her whole family. "We took it on as a family project." They knew it was mainly a service project, and if it was ever at a point where it was in the way or hurting them, she would stop.

311 What is the average amount of time you spend on school board activities each week?

It is an odd type of job. Monday board meetings can last from 1:30 to 10:30. She felt it would be very difficult to assign an amount of time. Usually around 40 hours a week, but at odd times.

337 Do you work at home very much?

Not as much as she'd like to, probably two days a week.
What other jobs have you had?

She taught in Montgomery County, Maryland and then substituted in Wake County when her family first moved there.

What have you done with your music degree?

She played in the Raleigh Civic Symphony until eight years ago, when they adopted Joseph. She also played in the church orchestra and for preludes and weddings. She still plays, but not as much as she would like to.

What other outside activities do you have?

Paul, her husband, teaches a Sunday School class and she supports him in that. Wednesday night a small group Bible study group meets in their house too. She has had to give up almost everything else though because of the time required for her position.

Where do you see the school going in the future; within the next five years?

She felt character education would take off and there would be a need for longer school days. Students need to be able to compete all over the world. “Our students nationally do not compete well internationally as far as SAT scores. We cannot get the information out in 180 days. Japanese students, by the time they have gone through their whole system have four more years of school.” Technology will be key in allowing all schools to operate. State law says that all students must be taught in the least prescriptive environment. In the future for schools, there will be a need for a different type of management. Site based management that will let them have more leeway in individual schools. She also felt the School Board needed the ability to tax to raise funds. Now they must go to the County Commissioners for money. There will be a different configuration of who has power in the future.

With cut backs in money are you feeling a crunch?

“Yes. Particularly in Wake county. It is hard to be adding 4000 students each year without having funding increased. They are having to cut services, positions in central office, and even some teaching positions.”

(End of side B of tape I)

(00) (Beginning of side a of tape II. First words are cut off, but it was a reminder of the last question Mrs. Hoffman had been answering.)

“Even though there is no doubt that we can look into ways to cut money, there has to be a limit for how to do that. We have cut as far as we can cut.” Feels they must look at prioritizing and re-evaluating old programs. Per student Wake County is getting far less other big school systems. In Charlotte/Mecklenberg, they are getting $200 more per student. Smaller school systems are suing the state saying they need more money because they have more problems. A new suit against the state is coming from Wake County. Just because smaller school students say they have more problems, it needs to be remembered that a school system the size of Wake’s has more at risk students being served. They need to be protected too.

How much does Wake County get per student?
$2000

72 Has it gone down over the past few years?

"No, but it has not gone up." If we add 4,000 students per year, they are expensive....around 78,000 students entered this year.

91 Question about reasons for having year round school. Does it save money or space or both?

She says it does save space to have students attending year round schools. 1/3 more students can go through a school if it is on a year round system (from 600 to 830). They go to school nine weeks and are off for three. The money issue is a little different. The system has 6 or 7 year round schools now. They are not less expensive. Buildings must be kept open, running, and services twelve months a year. It does save the initial money of building a new school. At the high school level, it can be more expensive.

137 Overcrowding problem?

There are 460 mobile units being used in Wake County right now. Some schools have over 300 students to many. Next year(1995/96), there will be six new schools opening. Eventually the county will be able to get rid of the mobile units, but they will still need to have full schools.

169 Magnet school program?

Very successful. One of the most successful in the country. She would like to see the magnet school program enhanced.

187 What are some of the programs offered at these schools?

Gifted and talented, communications, two international schools where 47 languages are offered, and some magnets are for the classics. They are looking at adding a Montessori School. The year round schools are part of the magnet system too.

213 What is a Montessori School?

It is a school that offers enhancements to gifted and talented students. The classes are much smaller.

224 What is the most successful thing you have started or been involved with since you went onto the school board?

Character Education Program

236 Where do you see yourself in the future?

She is in her second term of a two term limit as school board chairman. After she finishes her time as chairman, she still has three years left to serve. Beyond that, she is not sure especially because Joseph is still so young.
She said she had a "real love of the legislature". The state congress is where many of the rules and regulations come from that cause much of the difficulties to local level school boards. She would like to make an impact at the state level.

Could your wanting to influence policies at the state level possible mean running for an office at that level.

"Yes, maybe, we'll have to see what doors the Lord opens up".