

INTERVIEW

with

GERALD PATTERSON

Principal
71st High School

February 17, 1991

by Goldie F. Wells

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Goldie: I am in the home of Mr. Gerald Patterson in Hope Mills, North Carolina. Mr. Patterson is the principal of 71st High School and he is one of the 1989 principals. Today's date is February 17, 1991. Mr. Patterson, would you introduce yourself and say that you know that this interview is being recorded.

Mr. Patterson: My name is Gerald Patterson and I am aware that this interview is being recorded.

Goldie: Mr. Patterson, I am doing some research and it is part of my doctoral requirements and I am doing a study to compare the role perceptions of Black high school principals. In 1964, there were over 200 Black high school principals. When I wrote to the State Department last year in 1989, and asked for a listing they sent me a list of 41 and of that 41 some of them are principals of alternative schools so there are less than 41 Black high school principals in the state which makes you all real special. So I am interviewing principals from those two years to see some comparisons in your perceptions of principalship. I want you to tell me something about yourself and how you became a high school principal.

Mr. Patterson: Well, my first job after college was at 71st High School and I was hired to teach biology there and this was in 1967. So after only two years total integration came about and I happen to be there. I was one of two Black teachers there and a part of the plan called for a Black administrator to be added to the staff because prior to that there wasn't one. I happen to be there so I guess they knew me and they gave me the opportunity and reluctantly I accepted it. I was reluctant because I had no plans to become an administrator, not that soon anyway. I wasn't sure I wanted to do this right then but I thought about it and opportunity knocks and you don't know when so you have to take advantage of it. At any rate that is how I became involved in administration and stayed there as an assistant for four years. In the meantime I received a Master's degree in administration and went to Goldsboro for two years. Then I came back here to Anchestnut as principal where I stayed for seven years. Anchestnut was the school that I graduated from. It was a junior high school when I returned and then the opportunity came for Cumberland County to hire a Black high school principal. We didn't have one until 1982. We did not have one after integration until 1982, when I became principal of 71st high school. To tell you the truth by that time I had passed the point of really being gun ho about being a high school principal. I had been in the junior high for seven years and that was close enough for me

to realize that it is a tough job. But I realized if they offered me that opportunity if I did not take it I wasn't sure what they would do next. Not meaning what they would do to me but whether they would completely bypass putting a Black in that position so I accepted the job and have been there since.

Goldie: Do you have educators in your family?

Mr. Patterson: Well, not a lot. I have one aunt who was a teacher and there are two others in the family who are teachers but we don't have a long line of educators in our family.

Goldie: I want you to tell me something about 71st high school and tell me about some of the history and the people you have there on your staff and racial compositions.

Mr. Patterson: Well, as you know, 71st was an all White school prior to the days of integration. It is named for the 71st community which got its name from the 71st regiment, the Scottish troops that settled in that area. The 71st Scottish regiment and 71st high school is probably one of the fastest growing schools in the state because we have had no less than--let's see. Southview was built and took away some of our students; Governors Bryd came first to take away some of our students; Westover was built to take away some of our students so that is three high schools that were built to take away some of our students and we are still growing right now. 71st High School just a few years ago when I went there was probably about 35% Black. Today it is probably 53% Black. So our community is becoming--we have an increasing number of minorities moving into our community and the community composition economically is probably from lower middle-class to maybe upper middle-class. We have a lot of middle-class working people and it makes to a really good place to work. I enjoy the community because the people there don't tend to be especially political or they don't tend to be the kind of people who are always trying to pull something over on you or ask for favors. I'm glad to work in a community where any child can really feel comfortable coming into the office and I can feel comfortable working with them. They don't have to be anybody special.

Goldie: How many students do you have?

Mr. Patterson: We have about 1400 right now and that is enough.

Goldie: How many staff members?

Mr. Patterson: We have 86 teachers and other professional people and 7 secretaries; we have staff of 11 custodians and about 12 cafeteria people so when you add all those people

together that is a large working force.

Goldie: That is very large.

Mr. Patterson: We have 3 full-time assistant principals, 3 counselors, 2 media specialists and I have a host of people who come and go and I can't keep up with the numbers on those.

Goldie: Now I want you to tell me something about the responsibilities you have and how you deal with them and I will give you different areas I would like for you to address.

Goldie: Tell me about supervision of personnel and selection of teachers.

Mr. Patterson: Well, selection of teachers is probably if not the most important thing that I do is one of the most important things that I do. I happen to think that that is what can make or break you as a principal is the kind of staff that you select. I have 3 full-time assistants and we all share some responsibilities of the staff. I believe in assigning people a task and then giving them the opportunity to do it. I believe that my role should be to support them in their efforts and provide whatever leadership or whatever else they need in the way of support for them to get their job done but not to stand and look over their shoulders every minute or everyday even to see how they are doing it. I assign my assistants certain responsibilities. For example, one assistant is responsible for transportation, lunchroom programs, supplies and shares in covering discipline and they all have evaluation responsibilities for some staff. I assign another, they are called associates now not assistants, textbooks, budgetary matters and she shares in the responsibility for discipline and also evaluation of staff. Another has athletics, buildings and grounds, and shares discipline and some evaluations. I take responsibility for all of the new staff or probationary staff members and any persons who have been identified as maybe having some special needs. I take responsibility for those people because I'm the one who will ultimately have to respond if we decide to make changes.

Goldie: Curriculum and instruction.

Mr. Patterson: This is an area that we are all working with too. All of my associates have been involved in some new training. Cumberland County is very much committed to the effect of school process and our superintendent feels that all administrators, not just the principal, all of the associates must learn to be instructional leaders. Therefore, we are all learning a new way of sharing in that responsibility. Now we divide responsibilities among the

staff in terms of department heads and this sort of thing but we will become teachers of teachers and we will become very well versed in the principles of education and all of the classroom models that are being used today such as Tessa, cooperative learning, classroom management, what else do we have--mastery learning and there are some others that we are looking at too but we will become very well versed in these things and be able to teach our teachers. That is what we are going to do. As a matter of fact, we are going to be the model high school in Cumberland County in this process so we are trying to get out front of everybody else and get this going so hopefully we will introduce this whole process before the end of the year and by next year we will be on our way. I have had extensive training and have been doing a lot of traveling this year to workshops with Larry Lasock and Nadeline Hunter getting the training but finding the time to train my people has been very difficult. That is the problem.

Goldie: Discipline.

Mr. Patterson: Discipline is a shared responsibility among four people and we are all responsible for handling any discipline problems brought to us. Now the assistants are allowed to contact me any time they have a situation where a student might be dismissed from school. They always come to me and we work on those together. I don't leave them hanging with one of those because if we are going to dismiss a student that is a case that could wind up before the Board of Education and so I always try to get involved in those. But your routine discipline is shared among the four of us and I am very fortunate right now. I have three very strong assistants including a female who will step right in the middle of anything. She is not afraid of anything and it works out very well. But I don't believe in assigning one person the responsibility of discipline because I know even on those days when I have several cases that I have to handle those are terrible days. I don't enjoy it and I can't imagine anyone else would either. And not only that these people are in training to become principals and they all need this training because discipline is not just going to go away so they have to handle it in order to get the feel for it.

Goldie: Transportation.

Mr. Patterson: Transportation is a responsibility assigned to one of the associates. He makes the decisions about drivers, bus routes, and he handles the discipline and everything related to transportation. One of the secretaries helps with the time cards and things of that nature and of course all of our drivers are adults. It is a real problem because believe it or not the adults are not necessarily more responsible than the kids because the adults who are

available to drive buses are not always the people you really and truly want but we have some very fine people as well but on Friday we had a bus left--no driver, no notice, no anything. Just didn't come. So that is a real problem. We didn't have those problems when students drove the buses. I think we had more control.

Goldie: Utilization of funds.

Mr. Patterson: One associate is assigned the responsibility of overseeing the utilization of funds. She works with the bookkeeper to help keep up with our spending and she generally signs all of the forms and approves the purchases but the actual spending is done by the teachers. So much money is assigned to departments. Usually some decisions made on the basis of how large the department is, what kind of spending they need to do, such as science needs to spend usually more than perhaps math but that may not necessarily hold true every year, year in and year out. So we try to spread the money around and I hold the teachers responsible for knowing what is already in the building. They are not supposed to purchase without knowing what they need and the fact that the media center may not already have it. But that is how we allocate our funds. We try to hold back a little bit for special purchases or equipment needs and things of that nature but we listen to the teachers. We don't just sit up in the office and decide what people need.

Goldie: Cafeteria management.

Mr. Patterson: Cafeteria management is one that I don't enjoy at all. I believe that people who are trained in food service operations, they have supervisors at the central office level. I believe that those people should operate the cafeterias and finally we have a superintendent who agrees with me. So we are turning that over to those folk. I have a manager, I trust her, I always did because if I couldn't she shouldn't be there. She knows more about operating cafeterias than I ever will. I try to listen to the people in there and what they need. I figure that my job is to make decisions about students when scheduling the lunch period and making sure the students behave appropriately and this kind of thing but as far as what is served, how it is served and how they purchase and make up menus and this sort of thing, I don't even talk about it. I try to stay as far away from the actual operation of the cafeteria as I can and that is beginning to be the right way to do it as opposed to the wrong way to do it because we were evaluated on how well our cafeterias do. But I think that is going to change.

Goldie: Buildings and grounds.

Mr. Patterson: I assign an associate principal responsibility for working with our custodial staff and he is

responsible for making sure that things are repaired and sending those work orders in and they report directly to him. Now we all work together. When we see things we will call it in to him so that he will know about it. But we have one person assigned. Now we have a crew of 11 people working in our building and we have people scheduled to come in early in the morning. We have people scheduled to come in the afternoon and work until about 8:30 at night. They do a very good job and we have people at levels one, two and three. I have one custodian, three, who is responsible for the whole staff and fortunately I have a real good one. He is a retired military man which means that I was able to get a man who has another income and he is not totally dependent on this income. I was fortunate to get a good person who can do it. He knows how to supervise people and that sort of thing. But it is a big operation. It is a tremendous responsibility because there are so many things going on in that school all the time. But he is capable of scheduling people for special events. I don't have to do it all and it works out very well. But these people have to be able to coordinate with the central office maintenance staff to get things done and so forth.

Goldie: Community relations.

Mr. Patterson: Well, right now we are working real hard on our volunteer parent's program and it is really going well. We think that this is probably the strongest thing that we have had going for us in a long, long time. I have a very active group of--well right now all of the volunteers are ladies and some of them are in that school every day and that has been real good for us. We have a communications council and we meet with them about quarterly except when we have a called meeting for some reason like we are going to have next week to talk about the school calendar. We have a very active Booster Council and the volunteers are manned by the PTA--was PTA--we call it OPTS now, Organization for Parents, Teachers and Students as opposed to PTA. They wanted to change it and I allowed them to do so. We have a number of small pockets of people who work with different organizations. Example: a bad Booster or the Forensic Boosters--people who have an interest in one little segment but our athletic boosters are very strong because they are involved with a lot of things in the school and even more than just the athletics. Communications with the public is very, very important. The OPTS group has a newsletter that they are sending out about twice a quarter and they are just really getting into this. They would like to do one each month and the finances are keeping them from doing any more right now. We have a school newspaper and each class is allowed to do a letter periodically that can be mailed to parents. For example, the junior class had a mailing just before Christmas to parents so the parents would know some of the things that were facing the juniors like the prom and

what their responsibilities are. The Guidance Department puts out a letter every month to try to keep the students up with things like testing, scholarships and other special events along that line. So those are some of the things that we are doing but that is something that you have always got to be aware of and you've got to do more. I plan to use some of George McKinnon's ideas of bringing parents into the school and I'm talking about actually bringing them in and going to class. That is what we are going to try to do so that they can see the kids in action. We think that what that will do we hope is that it will rub off on the kids even though we know that when mom is in school her kid is going to be perfect that day. But she will see the neighbors kid too. And we think that this will be a good way for the word to get to the community and it might help some students do better in school. That is what we hope will come from it. It worked for McKinnon in Los Angeles.

Goldie: How do you think that the community feels about the 71st High School?

Mr. Patterson: We get good feedback from the community, the people that we deal with on a regular basis. Now we have problem areas just like anyone else and we have our run-ins and things of that nature but in general I think the people feel real good about the school. The main reason I think that is because I think they realize that when their children come if we can motivate them, then every child can be a part of anything he wants to be. I think that is important because I know that sometimes schools can be very political. They are little communities within themselves and they can be very political and that is nobody's fault. That is just the way it is and we are fortunate enough to not have to worry about that very much. It is just not an issue at our school. We have a lot of military people who come and we base a lot of our judgement on what they tell us. The thing that they like is when the kids come nobody ever is really concerned about the rank that their dad may hold. If the kids come in and put forth some effort they can fit right in and have a good chance to be good participants in whatever is going on in the school.

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

Mr. Patterson: The administrative power that I have today is even greater than it was just a few years ago. Our new superintendent believes in site-based management. He feels that the principal and his staff or her staff should make the decisions about what is going on in that school and he has given me total support on every decision that I have had to make since he has been here. He has yet to question one. So I have to say that I now feel that we are in control of our school and I think that is going to become more evident in

years to come. I think site-based management is here to stay if we can just seize control of it and learn how to use it. You see, we haven't been used to having that. It is new to us too.

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

Mr. Patterson: Well, that is a difficult question for me to answer because I've always worked at desegregated schools. I was never principal at a school that wasn't integrated so I am not real sure that I could make a fair comparison. When I first started teaching we had freedom of choice so we always had some Black students but when integration came I happen to be around as we went through all the wars and all of the scares and everything that we went through but I don't remember as a State employee when the states weren't segregated. I went to segregated schools but it just happen to come about at that time.

Goldie: Do you notice any difference in supervising Blacks and Whites?

Mr. Patterson: Not really. You know we have cultural differences and things like that but as far as my role in dealing with them, I don't really see any real difference. The kids are kids and I find myself talking more to the Black kids about the need for education but not because I care more about them but I am concerned about the lack of motivation and it is something that really bothers me because too many of our kids have somehow developed the attitude that they can't do or they aren't supposed to be able to do well in certain things and that sought of thing. Too many of our Black kids will shy away from the tough curriculum and when the going gets tough too many of them want to take the easy way out. I can't do this--he's too tough or he's prejudiced or this is whatever instead of buckling down and saying I'm going to show them I can do it.

Goldie: Do you enjoy your job? Why?

Mr. Patterson: I love my job. Because I like kids. I really do enjoy the kids. I'm even dumb enough that I even enjoy all the activities and stuff. I like that. I go to a lot of the stuff. I don't go as much as I used to but I still go to all the ball games because I love football and basketball. I try to show my face at any time that they are doing something even if I can't stay long. I try to go and just be around a while because I happen to believe that when I am there we aren't going to have any problems. I hate to come in to work the next day and somebody is telling me about the problem that we had last night. I don't like that and so I found that if I am there nobody has to tell anybody. If we are going to have one I'm going to see it.

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

Mr. Patterson: Time management. My greatest weakness is managing time and there is never enough time and that is the problem that I see with the new approach that we are talking about is finding the time for teachers to be comfortable and feel like that they are appreciated and that their efforts are appreciated as they try to learn the new things that we want them to learn and having them meet after school or other times. Finding time when we can meet when we are on the payroll so that they can feel that this is important. So time is the biggest problem.

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

Mr. Patterson: Seeing students succeed. Those intangible things when kids come back after a couple of years and tell you "thank you" for something you did for them. Every year there is always a special one or two and some kid that maybe you didn't think was going to make it, and seeing a kid get a scholarship that has worked very, very hard. Those kinds of things. Those are the rewarding things.

Goldie: If you knew of a young Black male or female that aspired to be a high school principal, what advice would you give them?

Mr. Patterson: I would tell them to think long and hard. It is a job that requires a great deal of time if you are going to do it and do it well. It requires much, much more time than I have to give. I feel very guilty about the time that I don't spend with my own kids. That's the part that I worry about. But I would tell them to think about it and be committed to it and to know what is coming and that they can do it. We really need more Blacks in the role of our high school administrators. We need them very badly because our kids need to see that we can fit in these roles and we can do it. We can do these jobs as well as anyone else can do them. I would really seriously encourage them to go for it. Just be willing to step out front and take the lead.

Goldie: Do you think they need someone of the other culture to say that they can do it or be their so-called sponsor or mentor?

Mr. Patterson: No, I don't think so. I think that everyone needs someone to be a mentor but I don't think it is important that they have to have someone of the opposite race. I don't think that is important at all. I think they do have to realize that they are going to be working with diverse cultures and they need to just be prepared for that but most of the time those can be dealt with with common

sense. You have to gain the support of the people and once you gain that support of the people and they believe that you are fair that is all people are really looking for. They want you to be fair. That's all kids really want. Once you have established that the people will really get beyond looking at the color of your skin. Not all of the time--I don't think they ever forget but I don't see it as a problem.

Goldie: Well, we have come to the end of the interview guide. Do you have any words of wisdom that you would like to share?

Mr. Patterson: Well, the Black principal--when I became the principal at the high school there probably weren't but just a handful so we have grown a lot in the last 7 or 8 years. I can remember in the early 80's there were only 8 or 10 of us in the whole state. We were a dying breed. The Black male in this business is still a dying breed. When I was interviewing for the associate principal's position at my school and one of the times I was specifically looking for a Black male. It was shocking to me. Number one, the number that were available to even talk to and number two, the quality within that and as we retire I'm really concerned about the young ones behind us to replace us. There just isn't a large pool. I think that is because if you have got something on the ball there are so many opportunities out there that they are doing other things and we are not paying salaries that will attract them away from industries and so forth so it is very important that we do something about that. One of the ways is to prove to our young people that they can be successful at it.

Goldie: Well, I appreciate you taking the time. This was a very interesting interview. You shared a lot with me and I am sure that 71st is proud to have a principal like you. I really am impressed. I have been impressed with every one of these interviews. I really have because all of you have certain qualities about you that I have found that administrators are really administrators and we should be proud of you.

Mr. Patterson: Thank you and I just hope that I have shared something with you that will help with your project.