

Interview

with

BOWMAN BURTON

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By Goldie F. Wells

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INTERVIEW WITH MR. B.K. BURTON
By Goldie F. Wells

Goldie: I am in the home of Mr. B.K. Burton in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. The date is January 21, 1991. Mr. Burton, I would like for you to introduce yourself and say that you know that this interview is being recorded.

Mr. Burton: I am B.K. Burton, 120 South Moring Avenue in Rocky Mount, North Carolina and I am aware that this interview is being taped.

Goldie: Mr. Burton, I wrote to you and asked you to fill out a questionnaire and you did and I really appreciate it. I am doing some research. I want to compare the role perceptions of black high school principals so I am interviewing principals who were principals in 1964, and principals who were principals in 1989. When I wrote to the State Department they sent me a listing of 41 black high school principals and I have learned that some of those are principals of alternative schools so we have less than 40 black high school principals in the state of North Carolina. Back in 1964, there were over 200. So what I am doing is interviewing and seeing if I can pull together to see if the role perceptions are the same and I am pleased that you have agreed to share with me this morning. I want you to tell me how you became a high school principal.

Mr. Burton: I guess the best way to describe how I became a high school principal was I started off as an assistant principal in a high school and then I became principal of an elementary school, K-5. I went to a new middle school from the elementary school. It was non-graded, multi-age but open facilities. I was asked if I would go to the middle school and straighten the discipline out--kids were putting each other's heads into the commodes and they would not go to class because of the freedom of the open space and multi-age and grading so you just couldn't keep kids at one place. They were just roaming around so I went to the middle school and stayed there for ten years and at the end of my tenth year, a consultant from the State Department of Public Instruction was doing a workshop for superintendents and the superintendent from Edgecombe County where I am now at North Edgecombe High School asked the consultant if he knew where he could find a good black strong administrator that could stay at one of his high schools, to take over a high school that he could not keep a principal at. He had several principals in four years so I told him I would come down here, but I wasn't looking for a job. I was not interested in leaving the Burlington area. I'm on my seventh year. So that is how I got to be a high school principal.

Goldie: Did you teach at any time?

Mr. Burton: Yes, I did. I taught approximately 9 1/2 years. That is all the teaching experience I've ever had.

Goldie: Did you do that here in the state of North Carolina?

Mr. Burton: Yes, I did. I did most of it in Granville County, Oxford.

Goldie: Now I want you to tell me something about the high school that you are the principal of now. Tell me about the students, the racial makeup, and some of the demographics.

Mr. Burton: Okay, the racial makeup of the high school that I am principal of now is about 90% black and 10% white. It is up a little bit this year because they closed three private schools around us so now we are probably up to about 70% black and 30 % white from the closing of the private schools. Out of the last two years, I would say, probably about 80% of our seniors have gone to four-year colleges. When I went there they had not had a senior to go to a four-year college in the last four years but our test scores are up, we are above the state average now. We got our report card last week, and we are above the state average. Within our school, with our Competency Tests we are 93% to 98% in Writing Objectives, Math, and English. We have very few discipline problems. We do not have a drug problem and overall our discipline is real good during our instructional day and at our extra-curricular activities. We are a 1-A school with about 530 students and an assistant principal and we have 38 professional staff members.

Goldie: What is the racial composition of the staff members?

Mr. Burton: We are about 80% white and about 20% black. I am the second black principal that has ever been in that school.

Goldie: How many high schools do you have in your system?

Mr. Burton: Two.

Goldie: But yours is the one that is heavily populated with the black students.

Mr. Burton: That is correct. They've only had one black high school principal in Edgecombe County for one year since integration.

Goldie: I guess that is why you are really invaluable to come to this community.

Goldie: Now I'm going to ask you something about your responsibilities and I'm going to give you areas that I would like for you to address. I want you to tell me about the supervision of personnel and your selection of teachers.

Mr. Burton: That is one of the things that I am having to adjust to. I'm getting there but when I first came here it was the policy of the superintendent and the associate superintendent for personnel is that they select staff for you. That was one of the areas that we had a lot of bickering about because I let them know in no uncertain terms that I do not wish you to hire anybody who is going to work for me. So I've been given the chance to talk with people now but more or less it is still one of the things that they want total control of. That has improved a lot. When I came to North Edgecombe it was about 95% white in the school and so each time I have lost a staff member I've been able to replace them with a black. We need some role models for our black young people and I constantly say that.

Goldie: Supervision of the ones that you do have. After you hire them how do you go about supervising and evaluating your teachers.

Mr. Burton: I do all of my evaluations for my ICP's. AS for my career people, I mix that up with my assistant principal. However, if there is a career person that I have some concerns about performance-wise then I will do that observation and evaluation myself. I use a data sheet for all of my staff members and we report at the end of every six weeks. At that time the teacher must put down the five subjects that they teach and they will have to tell me how many in that class made A's, B's, C's, D's, and how many failed. If there is a large number of students in the C, D, and F area, then I call that teacher in for a conference because you might be teaching but you're not teaching effectively. Too many students are not able to comprehend what you are supposed to be putting across to them and I will spend a great deal of time in those teacher's instructional areas.

Goldie: Have you come up with a way to get rid of the dead wood?

Mr. Burton: I've been successful in documenting a teacher's performance to the point that the teacher resigned, not that I have had to dismiss anybody.

Goldie: Tell me about curriculum and instruction.

Mr. Burton: We did a survey within our school among our staff and our students to rewrite our curriculum. We used our survey to determine what our students needs were and then we rewrote our curriculum. We have had it in use for

the past three years and our student outcome has improved since then. That is how our test scores have gone up. We also are working on improving our attendance in our school, because we can't teach them if we can't get them there everyday. The homeroom with perfect attendance gets a pizza party and all the students with a perfect attendance for six weeks get their name in the paper, their picture on the bulletin board, and they are recognized on the intercom during announcements at the beginning of the day. We also have a banner that they wear saying that they have perfect attendance for the reported period.

Goldie: Do you stay within the guidelines, I know that we have the BEP and you say that you have written the curriculum that meets the needs of your children. How much are you governed by the BEP?

Mr. Burton: We stay within the guidelines of the Basic Education Plan. However, we really stress teaching our CBC because that is what we are tested on at the end of the year.

Goldie: Discipline.

Mr. Burton: As I said earlier, we don't have that much of a discipline problem. We have a system-wide discipline policy but usually handle our own discipline. We stay within the guidelines of the policy but we handle ours in-house. The only things a student can be suspended from school for are serious offenses and fighting, and for anything else we use in-school suspension.

Goldie: Do you get involved in the discipline process?

Mr. Burton: Unless it is fighting or unless it is serious, the assistant principal and the disciplinary committee handle it.

Goldie: Transportation.

Mr. Burton: We just hire the bus drivers. That is not a major problem for us. We are not suffering with a shortage of drivers. There are a lot of responsible ladies who don't work and some who work third shift who drive our buses. The assistant principal is in charge of buses.

Goldie: Utilization of funds.

Mr. Burton: We don't per se get a budget other than Current Expense. As for Capital Outlay, the superintendent controls everything. So if you need something that falls under capital outlay then you must ask him for it.

Goldie: Do you give the teachers a chance to input into what you use your instructional monies for?

Mr. Burton: Instructional supplies, yes. They select all of that.

Goldie: Cafeteria management.

Mr. Burton: I hired my cafeteria manager and my cafeteria manager reports to me but she runs the cafeteria.

Goldie: Buildings and grounds.

Mr. Burton: That is a job that the assistant principal and I do together. He meets with the janitorial staff periodically and I might meet with them once or twice a year but we have a good janitorial staff and our buildings and grounds are well kept.

Goldie: Community relations.

Mr. Burton: That is a team effort that every staff member and student shares in but, I am the head cheerleader for North Edgecombe High School and I do take the school to the community. I visit the churches that my students go to and each time I visit a place I always ask for a few minutes so that I can talk about North Edgecombe High School and the students and ask them for their support.

Goldie: And you do get support. Do you have an active PTA?

Mr. Burton: Yes, we get a lot of support, and we have a great PTA.

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

Mr. Burton: We have board policies that we have to adhere to, but other than that I have total control.

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

Mr. Burton: I don't know.

Goldie: You don't think that the desegregation of schools has anything to do with where you are right now?

Mr. Burton: I'm not sure because I think had it still been segregated--well, yes, I would say yes because it would have had a black principal already if it was segregated. So yes, I guess it has played a part in me moving around.

Goldie: But if we had been segregated, you would have been a principal. But the move took to this area because of the situation that was caused by desegregation all these black folks being there and white folk not knowing how to handle these problems is the reason why you are here.

Goldie: Do you know which year your school was desegregated at North Edgecombe?

Mr. Burton: I sure don't.

Goldie: Do you find any difference in the way you have to supervise the white teachers from the black teachers?

Mr. Burton: No, what is good for one is good for the other. I'm very outspoken and I tell you what I want you to do, one-on-one and in staff meetings, and I expect it to be done.

Goldie: I have one principal to tell me that he had a problem with the blacks thinking that he was playing favorites with the whites. He said he had problems getting the black teachers to volunteer and lead any of the groups and clubs and then when he had to assign it to whites they would say that he was catering to them. Did you not have that problem?

Mr. Burton: No, because I don't play favorites. My favorites are those staff members committed to quality instruction.

Goldie: So you are just fair all the way around.

Mr. Burton: Oh yes, oh yes. I shoot straight from the hip and right across the board.

Goldie: Do you enjoy your job and why?

Mr. Burton: Sure, I love my job because I love the young people that I work with and I love my staff. It is a joy for me to go to work everyday.

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

Mr. Burton: Finance. If funding were greater, we could move mountains.

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

Mr. Burton: To see, as my seniors graduate, that they are now interested in furthering their education.

Goldie: Now with the declining number and the small number of black high school principals in the state, if you knew of any young black educator that was aspiring to be a principal of a high school in North Carolina, what advice would you give?

Mr. Burton: I would have to say to them that they are going to have to be flexible, tough-skinned, roll with the punches and whatever you say, stick to it. If you make them, in making all of the decisions that you have to make, if you make a decision, stick to it. You are going to be the person who is going to have to answer to any decision that you make so you make them and don't let anybody make them for you. In making a lot of decisions you are not always going to make good ones so when you make a bad one, apologize for that one, chalk it up and keep right on making decisions. You are going to have to know your job and do your job. Get a good education, get some teaching experience, and most important you must care about people.

Goldie: Would you say that a black person needs a sponsor of the other race to say that they can do it before they can receive the promotion.

Mr. Burton: I would hope not, but you do need an effective track record.

Goldie: Have you found that to be the case?

Mr. Burton: Yes, in some cases but I would hope not. A prime example is Dr. Dudley Flood's recommendation to Mr. Hall. Dr. Flood is not white; he is a respected educator. But I know what I can do and I'll tell you what I can do. I will also tell you what I am not going to do. I would hope that is not the case but yes, I guess that is it.

Goldie: Any words of wisdom that you'd like to give.

Mr. Burton: We need some black role models. We need blacks in leadership positions and especially at all levels of education--elementary, middle and high school--because eventually blacks are going to think that they cannot be a high school principal so why try. So we need to continue to encourage and find students who are good leaders and make sure that they will go into the leadership roles.

Goldie: Do you think that because we do not have black role models at the high school level that this has caused the decline. You said that you didn't have any students who were going on to four-year colleges the years just before you came. Do you think it may be attributed to the fact that they were not steered in the right direction by the counselors.

Mr. Burton: The white counselor became the drop-out counselor and I hired a black counselor.

Goldie: That has been a help since you have a majority of black students going to the universities.

Mr. Burton: I was told by both white and black staff members when I came here that they thought that the white counselors were telling them to go to service or go to community college and they were not encouraged to go to college.

Goldie: Do you think that a black high school principal has to be active in recruiting of black teachers.

Mr. Burton: Sure, if not you won't get them.

Goldie: So that is why you were so glad now that you have the chance to go out.

Goldie: I really appreciate this interview and I know someone is waiting for you right now. You are a busy person and I appreciate you taking the time today on this holiday to share with me and when I finish with the research and doctorate I will get it back to you. Thank you very much.

Mr. Burton: Okay. Thank you.