

CAROLYN HENDERSON

Interview 147a

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Rebecca Donahoe, Interviewer and Transcriber

ABSTRACT: Diboll Superintendent Carolyn Henderson talks with Rebecca Donahoe about her career before becoming superintendent of Diboll Independent School District in 1995 and about the challenges facing Diboll schools. She was the first female superintendent of the Diboll schools as well as two other districts throughout her career, and she comments on the hiring process and her perceptions of it as a woman. The Diboll schools face unique challenges, according to Henderson, due to its lack of population growth and the funding issues that entails, as well as the high rate of poverty among the student population. She worked to bring the district into compliance with legal requirements, manage facility construction, and balance the budget.

Rebecca Donahoe (hereafter RD): I am interviewing Carolyn Henderson and she is the superintendent here at Diboll I(ndependent) S(chool) D(istrict). Today's date is June 1st, 1999. Mrs. Henderson, first I would like to ask you where you were born and when, and kind of your background before you came to Diboll.

Carolyn Henderson (hereafter CH): I was born in Houston, Texas, and spent all of my life when I was growing up in Alvin, Texas. South of Houston. I went from first grade to twelfth grade and graduated in 1969 from Alvin High School. After I got out of high school, I spent a few years being a bookkeeper for a company and got married and had a child and when I was about 22 years old, decided to go to college. And ... I sold Tupperware and became a Tupperware manager, worked my schedule around where I could go to college while doing that to pay for my education. And at the time was living instarted at Victoria College first for a semester in Victoria, Texas. Moved to Corpus Christi when my husband was transferred there. And graduated from Delmar College with an AA degree and spent two years at Corpus Christi State University, was the name of the University at the time, and got my Bachelor of Science degree from there in December of 1977. I graduated from there Magna Cum Laude and got a teaching certificate with first field English and the second field Biology. I did my student teaching in seventh grade-gifted education at Baker Jr. High in Corpus. They had a vacancy in eighth English and Science at the time. So they ...after I graduated in December and had finished my student teaching, they hired me to take that position in eighth grade starting when they came back from the Christmas holidays in January. And so I got a year's experience credit from teaching from January to May. My husband was transferred back to the Houston area at the end of May, so we moved to Conroe and I got a job teaching high school English to ninth and tenth graders at Montgomery High School. I taught there for two years, decided to stay home with my children, they were young. By this time I had another child and go back to college and work on my Master's. I got my Master's Degree from Sam Houston State University in Educational Administration in 1984 and got my Mid-Management certificate at basically the same time. And that was

in May of '84. At the very same time period while I was finishing up in May of '84, I was at that time, back teaching English. I taught in '83 and '84 at Shepherd High School in Shepherd, ninth and tenth grade English. And they had a vacancy come open for their elementary principalship. I interviewed, got the position and was elementary principal at Shepherd from 1984-85 school year to 1987. In March of '87, during a school board meeting I was somewhat blind sided in that in this March board meeting I was called into the executive session and was asked if the high school principal resigned, would I agree to take it. And they wanted an answer immediately and I didn't even have any idea this was coming down. And this school board wanted me to take it, and so that was an interesting deal because they didn't.... in that board meeting the high school principal for whatever reasons resigned and the very next motion was to reassign me as the high school principal. It was supposed to start July 1st of that year when I made the switch over, but by May the 1st, the high school campus was pretty much out of control. We had situations where students were doing protests and they were taking, for example, tea at lunch and throwing it down hallways. It was totally out of control. So the superintendent asked me to go ahead and make the shift from elementary school on over to high school that first week of May. And that was an interesting scenario because the principal who was outgoing was still there through the end of May and then I moved in and they took the elementary counselor who was mid-management certified and she came in as elementary principal. And it was an interesting deal and I stayed two years as high school principal at Shepherd High School. And in that time period, I went back and got my Superintendent Certification. And I attained my Superintendent Certification around the first of January in '89. And in consultation with my mentor, the superintendent of Shepherd, he advised me if I wanted to be a superintendent to put out resumes at small, one-A school districts first, that I would have probably a good opportunity to break into the field in a smaller school district. So that is what I did, and my very first interview was with Blue Ridge Independent School District in North Texas. It is a little one-A school district and community near McKinney, Texas. And I went up there and had my first superintendency interview and was hired. And I spent three years as superintendent at Blue Ridge, and it was a little bit, slightly larger one-A school district. And after spending three years there, I was ready to progress upward, because my dream had always been to get back to be a three-A superintendent, because I had spent most of my teaching in three-A and liked that size of district. So I was hired at Pottsboro, which is also North Texas, as a superintendent, by Sherman-Denison, and that is one of the smallest three-A's in the state. And it had roughly twelve hundred students in the district. After spending three years there, I was very homesick and wanted to come back to the East Texas area where I had spent most of my years. So I put out resumes and was hired here at Diboll, and I have been here four years.

RD: You basically got out of teaching fairly soon and went right into....administration.

CH: I spent the minimum amount that the law requires as a teacher, and I spent the minimum amount the law requires as an administrator to be a superintendent. So it was a very fast track program for me in my career.

RD: Is that what you had planned to do from the time that you started or did it just kind of evolve that way?

CH: I was very goal oriented and so definitely it was at that time planned. Looking back on it now, if I had it to do over, I would do it differently.

RD: Okay. So you basically came to Diboll because of the homesick for East Texas or what did you see in the district?

CH: It also was an advancement for me, because this is a larger three-A district, it is larger than mid-size. So I could still stay within the three-A range that I, you know, prefer and think that my talents do well at. But at the same token it was an advancement for me and it got me back to the area, and it was a real pull for me that, you know, that I was near my brother living here. So I felt more like one of the people here, although I must admit, that the North Texas people and the communities, the two where I spent six years total, were wonderful people and it taught me that regardless of where you go in Texas, Texans are really...genuinely friendly people. And I saw that when I was in Corpus, which down there, they consider themselves South Texas, even though up here we only consider the Valley, South Texas. They make a distinction. They call themselves South Texas in Corpus and the Valley people are the Valley people. So I have been really in areas of Texas except for West Texas. And I have a lot of West Texas friends and they are really very friendly too. Prior to going to North Texas, I didn't know a whole lot about it, and never spent time in that corridor from Dallas to Denton to Denison area. And I noticed that their small communities are just like anywhere else. They are very friendly people, but at the same token, there were some cultural deals to the regions. And...well, just listen to my speech, you can hear the southeast Texas drawl that is not part of other places. And so I really did feel like when I came back to Diboll that I am coming home. And it is interesting because Diboll is only about forty-five miles from Shepherd, so I almost went full circle here. You can almost draw a circle and I have come back to the area where I spent the longest period in a school district.

RD: Were you the first woman superintendent at any of these other schools, or just here in Diboll?

CH: I was the first woman superintendent to my knowledge at all three of the districts where I was superintendent. And interestingly, I don't know if there is a parallel in this, I would like to think there is not, but each board who has hired me, except for the one in Pottsboro, was all male board members. It... that was the case in Blue Ridge, that was the case in Diboll and there was only one female on the board in Pottsboro when I was hired. I don't know if there was a parallel to that... I have interviewed in other places where there was more of a mixture, and did not get those jobs and have often wondered if there is something to that or not, but I never felt like, particularly that I was discriminated against. Although I think there is a distinction between prejudice and discrimination, and while I might not have undergone any sort of discriminatory act, I do think that it does exist on cultural mindsets when you are a superintendent in smaller areas. And East

Texas is a very very conservative area. I have often believed personally that East Texas was one of the slower to change on lots of things. In your urban or suburban areas of Dallas, or Fort Worth, or Houston, or whatever, you tend to see a lot of people moving at a faster pace in schools with innovation and change and stuff. It is a little slower to come it seems like in the rural areas of East Texas. And so, when I first put out resumes for a superintendent's job, I didn't even get interviews in East Texas, at all. It was North Texas that seemed to... and I have often wondered if there was a parallel to that, that perhaps there was less of a mindset of bringing a woman in during those years. What I have seen now, is a rapid growth of females being accepted into the superintendency anywhere. But by the same token I can honestly say that I have a feeling that when there is a woman superintendent in a school district, and things go awry and that person leaves, if there is a perception that, You know, the leadership was not there, I have noticed.... I can't name one school that turned right around and hired another female. So whether there is something to that or not, I don't know, but I do know that a lot of times when I have put resumes out before, I have also noticed the parallel that I will get interviews in school districts where there had been a male. I have never been given an interview in a school district where the prior one, and some things went awry, was a female. And it is interesting to think about whether there is a parallel in that because of the mindset of traditionalism, conservatism in people.

RD: Do you find people pretty open here in Diboll, because this is our first time with a female?

CH: Actually I did when I was hired here. I do know that I have a feeling that when I was interviewed at Diboll, that I was not front-runner. But we have a tremendous grapevine that goes throughout the educational administrative, ... especially the superintendent groups... and the word had gotten back to me that the other two gentlemen who, there were three of us in the finals, were definitely maybe ahead of me in people's perceptions. And that I had gotten maybe that far because I had a very strong resume and strong background and had had six years of superintendent experience. So during the interview here, I was asked a lot of detailed questions about my knowledge on construction, my knowledge of finance, and I have often wondered if the other two gentlemen went through as grueling a questions. But I had had a lot of experience in construction. I remember those answers, and I talked about how when you build a building, you don't cut corners on dirt work and slab work and the piers and the beams and casing it if necessary. And the types of roofs and why you know sanding seam roofs for example can be your best bet, but if they are erected wrong by the person, then they can be.... Those types of things caught their attention I think of the board members here at Diboll during the interview and they could see that I had had experience and we talked about things like the importance of doing soil testing with an engineering firm and that... and utilizing those tests. Well at the time I didn't know it, but Diboll was sitting here with problems with a high school with the very thing that I was talking about had been done and had caused problems, and I didn't even know that at the time. But I was just simply answering the questions of "If you are building a new building, what are some things that you really want to pay attention to...." And they had to do with specific construction issues. And I didn't know at the time that Diboll was dealing with a

construction manager. So they were very valid questions from the board and I am assuming that the other candidates got asked in that detail. But I know that I did, and I know... I think it was important. I think that was one of the turning points. It was a very pro-athletic town here and I know that I got asked that and I don't know whether some of that had to do with my fact of being female or not, and I would assume that is a valid question that they would ask anybody. I would really assume they would on that. But I know that I think that it was a positive when I told what was really in my heart. I believe that you can have high academics and high athletics; you can do both, there is no reason to choose. And that I have always, everywhere I have been, encouraged any programs we have to be strong programs. And they don't have to necessarily conflict with each other. There are ways to cause them to be harmonious with each other. And so, I think that that was a plus. And so my interview went very well. However, I was asked to come back for a second interview and did so, and at that time interviewed with the site-based team in a very interesting way that I have never seen since. The school board here chose to bring in seventeen individuals. And they wanted those individuals to hear some of the things that I had said during the original interview, so they made sure certain points were brought out. But at the same token, they allowed each of the seventeen individuals to ask me questions. And so that was somewhat grueling in that here was a boardroom packed with people I had no idea what they were going to ask. And then the more interesting thing was that when it was over with, the board chose to call each of the seventeen people in, one at a time and talk to them in private about whether, you know, I should be offered the position and hired. Well, you can imagine, that took hours and hours of just sitting out there. And I have never been through anything like that before where that was done, but I think that it worked well and ...and then was hired at the end of Mayin ninety....

RD: I thought it was '94

CH: In '95.

RD: '95.

CH: The '94 - '95 school year. So this board meets at the last Tuesday of each month, so it was that one that I was hired at. Another interesting thing on that is that of course, you have a board election the first Saturday in May. So I was actually doing interviewing here in April and continued on with the second one in May and we had a change of one person on the board and that person at the end of May, it was interesting to see what that person was going to do on voting for me, because they hadn't been through all the search part with me. The person did vote, so it was a 7 – 0 vote.

RD: Oh, well good. Would you mind kind of giving us a rundown right now about where the school district is.... What our ethnic breakdown, what...you know, just an overall view of the school as you see it?

CH: As I see it, one the interesting things about this school district is that it is not a growing school district, which is not the norm for Texas schools. In particular since we

are in a county where the other school districts....the other five are growing and ours is not. And we are only eight miles from Lufkin. So that is a very interesting deal. And it is hard to speculate why, other than most people just say housing. And that is a real problem in doing the budget here every year. Very, very much a problem because you are gaining state aid that you didn't really earn and that And they will cut the state aid the next year. And you have all these things going on, so it has been interesting on making sure that the district is fiscally sound with a scenario like that. And so where I see the district, is that the ethnic breakdown is probably going to remain somewhat similar on ethnic breakdown, and that is, we are roughly 40% Hispanic, 40% Anglo, and 20% black. As far as the changing demographics, we are seeing a pattern of a rise since I have been here in the four years of the low socio-economic at-risk students. And it was roughly at 50% when I came, and now it is up to roughly 60%. Now whether that is because we have just done a better job of getting the children who are entitled to free and reduced lunch on the program, or whether there is actually a growth in that area, we haven't spent a lot of time trying to determine. But what we have noticed, is that some of that is due to the changing growth of a lot of the children who do move in fit the category of low socio-economic. So these are very high demographics. From my beliefs and the research I have read, and my philosophy that is very strong on this, is that the only thing that hurts a child academically is to be a child from poverty, because they have not had often the experiences that children who come from middle class or the upper middle class families have. For example, the parents in the summer time that can afford to take their children on vacations and take them to Disney World in Florida, and make stops along the way and let the children see the battleship in Alabama... and do all these types of things. That child is enriched and...and when that child is studying history and it's about Florida or something, they are going to have an association with things they have seen that your children from poverty do not have. And they are going to have experiences verbally to share and to talk about that the children from poverty will not have. So these are things that I think definitely affect, and I really believe has nothing to do with ethnicity. I also believe that you can have children from single parent families that are very well adapted and do very well, so the biggest factor that seems to be the difficult in working with the children in Diboll is the fact that they are low socio-economic and do not come often with the experiences. Their parents often don't have money to buy them Little Golden Books that they can read and stuff before they come to school that middle class do. So we are very proud that over the four years that we have had a steady increase in our indicator, which is our TAAS scores on the academics by the state standards that we have steadily risen and risen compared to other people in our group that are like us with the low socio-economic kids, at-risk kids.

RD: What do you feel like your focus was whenever you came into the job four years ago? What did you see that Diboll needed, that you focused on throughout your superintendency?

CH: The board had a perception and I met with all teachers in small groups and all administrators and I took notes. And what I found was, about... was several things each group was saying was a problem. And when you have everybody saying the same thing, whether it is or isn't, it is a perception that it is a problem. And biggest thing Diboll had

when I came in that everybody was saying, was that we had a lack of leadership in administrative team, we were running five separate school districts. Every campus was operating like its own little school district. There was no continuity between them and that arose from a tremendous revolving door in certain administrative positions in the superintendency and the assistant superintendency and the high school principalship, in the junior high principalship, because of the turnover in administration. And so when that occurred each campus was pretty much on its own, with the lack of those high level leadership ones. In order to survive, each campus had to pretty much be its own entity and try to do the best it could for its school. So the feeling was is that there were a lack of leadership, a lack of staying in those high levels and getting a continuity going where we were united. Each campus belonged to one school district. And that there was a lack of a lot of procedures and that there may have been some things that should have been done here to follow law that was not done and I indeed did see that. We were not in compliance on some issues all the way from pest management to asbestos, to records management. Some of the types of things on that the school district was way behind, it was out of compliance and there were just a lot issues like that. In the midst of it all there was a lot of construction going on. It was not coordinated well in some cases, perhaps by the construction manager that should have been. So at the moment the school was holding its own academically because the teachers were doing a good job, and the administrators that had been stable were doing a good job, but there was a lot of chaos and confusion from pulling it all together as a whole.

RD: What do you see as the future needs of our district? Like facilities, or curriculum, or technology? What direction do you think we need to go?

CH: Well, due to the wonderful, almost three million dollar grant from Temple before I came with the infrastructure being, the network being put in place. I think that in terms of technology what the district must not loose sight of is to continue to stay abreast of keeping it current with the hardware and the software and the network capabilities. And this is going to require vision on the part of people to cause the money to be there because, as I said, the school district does not gain additional state aid every year, the district loses state aid every year. And yet we are already at a situation where the tax rate is almost to the point where it can't do much more because of the dollar fifty (\$1.50) cap unless that is changed. Besides each penny here only brings in locally about \$20,000 and we already maxed on Tier II money, so you don't gain any additional state aid from that. It's going to be a necessity for someone to really continue to understand the financial status and the budgeting in order to have enough money to keep the technology part where it needs to be and not ever let it get back to a stage where it is such disarray that you need lots, hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars to fix it. In terms.... There I have given two, I have given the technology and I have given the concerns with the financial that this district could have if somebody didn't understand those concepts I have just named. In terms of academics, I think that the staff needs to continue to have outstanding training and put into place an organized way to work with the at-risk youth, the children from poverty. I think that the...we have our data now that shows that the campus that we had through my observation, followed the Brazosport method the most did show the most gains. To me that is significant. I think that the other campuses

should take note of that and should try a little harder to put a little bit more of it in place, and they will reap the rewards....

(END OF SIDE ONE)

CH: It is difficult in a school district that is losing enrollment, rather than gaining. Or even a school district that is staying the same, to come in and build buildings because you certainly can't tell your public that you are doing it due to growth because that is a lie, you are not. And so it is a little harder to sell it on because we want to have enhanced programs. And there is only so far you can go with that. That is for new construction. And of course for the main things in schools is trying again to budget wisely and to utilize funds to have a preventative maintenance program where your upkeep on your buildings and facilities is very, very good. One of the ways that I have tried to do that is to every year having a meeting with all administrators and supervisors to gather data of facility needs. And we come together as a team and make a list of those and hash thought it and then it is actually prioritized by everyone. And that has been a wonderful way to do it so that we have a team that actually does that, rather than just the Board or myself saying that so and so has this need and it is the number one priority. We tend to be more organized and miss less when we bring everybody in as a team. So we do that every year. And then that is what our budgeting is built upon, trying to take care of those needs.

RD: That is all the questions that I had, do you have some things that you would like to add?

CH: Well, I....

RD: Something that you feel strongly about?

CH: I am not sure that they would be totally applicable. Probably not...I hope I have given you what you needed.

RD: Oh, it was real good. Thanks a lot.

END OF INTERVIEW