

Board Conference
With The Superintendent-designee
Dr. Wilmer S. Cody
May 12, 1983
8:15 p.m. to 10:20 p.m.

Board Members Present: Mr. Blair G. Ewing, President
Dr. James E. Cronin
Dr. Marian L. Greenblatt
Mr. Kurt Hirsch
Mrs. Suzanne Peyser
Mrs. Marilyn J. Praisner
Mrs. Odessa M. Shannon
Dr. Robert E. Shoenberg

Others Present: Dr. Wilmer S. Cody,
Superintendent-designee

Mr. Thomas S. Fess, Ombudsman/Staff
Assistant

A. Review of Decisions in San Francisco

Mr. Ewing stated that in San Francisco they had discussed two categories of activity to be required of the new superintendent, priority items and items that would come up as a matter of course. The Board needed to sort through these lists, get Dr. Cody's views, and associate a list of priorities with a timetable. Mr. Ewing called attention to his memos of May 3 and May 10 on the San Francisco discussions and on the plans for the meeting of May 12 time table.

B. Next Steps in Developing Objectives, Priorities and Plans to Reflect What the Board Wants the Superintendent to Do

The Board could decide, Mr. Ewing said, whether it wanted to review progress quarterly or yearly and could work out a scale for recording their views as to quality of performance. He suggested they start with what they wanted Dr. Cody to do. Mrs. Praisner commented that there were certain things that might be included in an evaluation of the superintendent that went beyond the school system's priorities. There might be long-term priorities with specific goals for each year. Dr. Cody said they might have a list of general responsibilities with a rating scale. This could include personal objectives for the superintendent and school system priorities.

Mr. Ewing said they should start the evening with some discussion of where they wanted to go, continue this in June, and wrap up the discussion in July, or if possible in June. They should talk about some of the things they wanted the superintendent to focus on in his first year. He called attention to the list that came out of the San Francisco discussion in his memo of May 3.

Dr. Cody indicated that he had been meeting with the senior staff

and thought that one of his responsibilities in the first year would be to involve the Board and senior staff in setting goals and establishing priorities. There might be public hearings or surveys of the community, which would then require that he take two to four months to develop a priority statement. It was his preference that they have five or six items with system-wide implications; however, that was not to say that a lot of other things were not important. He asked the Board whether they were in agreement with the process of involving senior staff to help develop ownership in the goals that were established.

C. General Discussion

Mr. Ewing thought the Board ought to develop a list of items with substantive implications and focus on the issue of asking the superintendent to go through the process of refining and developing a set of objectives for the future. For example, one of the items might be the improvement of the instructional program. They would want a set of priorities developed for the system as a whole of which the quality of instruction would be one. Mrs. Praisner thought Dr. Cody was saying that the Board would not set priorities alone, but that it would be a joint effort working with the community, staff, students, and Board. Dr. Cody explained that the priorities would be the Board's but in a process where support was developed for these priorities.

Dr. Shoenberg noted that the job of the superintendent was improvement of the educational program. He pointed out that for better or worse since the publication of the report of the Committee on Excellence any discussion the Board had on instruction would be in the context of that report. On June 14 the Board would start to discuss those issues and translate that into proposed changes in the county. He said that if those discussions were carried on with the Board and senior staff they would probably have a better result. Senior staff could help the Board with their goals should be included in the Board's retreat with the new superintendent. Mr. Ewing said there was also a need for the Board as the employer of the superintendent to make clear what was expected of him. Dr. Greenblatt thought the Board should have a clear idea of what it wanted and then discuss that with the senior staff. Mrs. Praisner thought it should go the other way. There should be a give and take with staff, with the Board making a decision. Dr. Greenblatt said that it was the role of the superintendent to discuss objectives with staff. She thought that in their first few meetings the Board had to establish what it was they wanted the superintendent to do. Out of the Board's objectives would come the priorities for the next year. She hoped that they were not planning a massive public effort to get opinions.

Dr. Cronin remarked that there were two substantive elements to the superintendency. One was to be an educational leader, and the other was to run the schools. Dr. Cody had to find out where the schools were, learn about the budget, and get through negotiations. He felt that one of the highest priorities was to get a handle on the

budget. Dr. Cody agreed that there was a whole range of issues about which he had to be knowledgeable including getting to know who was doing what. He said that by the middle of next year the Board should reach some major long-range priorities. The goal should be to move from the general to the specific. Mr. Ewing said that in the first few months the superintendent had to learn about the budget and negotiations and carry through through successfully.

Then came the development of a specific set of long-range priorities. He thought it was crucial this summer and during the next year that the superintendent do everything in his power to make the decisions in the B-CC and Blair areas worked successfully. There also needed to be continuing effort to improve relationships with the minority community. Dr. Shoenberg commented that one of the problems was the expectation that at least some aspects of the improvements be reflected in the budget which posed a serious timing problem. Mr. Ewing suggested that they had to do this by increments, saying this was what they were going to do this year and having things such as the seven-period day carry over. Dr. Cronin remarked that he did not see this first budget as Dr. Cody's, and Dr. Shoenberg commented that the community did not care whether they had a transition going on or not. The public saw this as the school system's budget. Mrs. Praisner pointed out that some changes were not necessarily budget related.

Dr. Greenblatt asked whether there was anything in the administration they would like Dr. Cody to look at, such as a review of the central and area office functions. She said they had agreed to look at the facilities planning process. Dr. Shoenberg pointed out that this topic was on the Board's agenda for May 23 and might be worth an hour or two of retreat time.

Dr. Cody drew the Board's attention to five items in Mr. Ewing's memo: bargaining, budget, long-range goals, B-CC and Blair, and improving minority relations. He said that these pointed to objectives for further discussion. For example, how would they know when they had improved relationships and what would be the basis for deciding whether bargaining had gone well. He agreed that all five of these were major responsibilities of the superintendent. Dr. Greenblatt asked whether their goal was better relations with the minority community for better achievement for students.

Mr. Ewing remarked that there were a lot of things that were not on his list, such as closing schools, which was a time eater. Mrs. Peyser agreed that this should not be a priority. Dr. Cronin commented that the closing process needed to have confidence built into it because the numbers used in the process were uncertain.

Mrs. Praisner stated that the first thing the new superintendent should do was to get to know the system and develop working relationships which would make the other things possible. Mrs. Peyser said that her priority was for kids to learn more, and in order to do that the superintendent would have to visit schools. She did not think improving management should be a goal. Mr. Ewing

wanted the superintendent first of all to gain the understanding, confidence, and support of the staff. He said that from all the feedback they had received, they knew that bringing in a superintendent from outside the system created a degree of tension. Therefore, Dr. Cody had to work harder to reduce that. Dr. Cody said that for this reason he had spent two hours with the staff this afternoon. He suggested that a year from now he would like to discuss staff and community views of his performance. He noted that most evaluation forms listed both of those as categories.

Dr. Greenblatt remarked that a new superintendent had an opportunity to evaluate the school system. He could look at the individual schools and test data and make recommendations for improvement. She wondered whether this shouldn't be a public discussion to give principals and teachers their marching orders. She noted that they were doing some of that with the MORE studies which was the management side, but on the instructional side they had not done anything.

Mrs. Shannon remarked that she had several things she would like to see done. The first was that the average achievement of students in MCPS improve, pulling up both ends of the continuum. The second was that decisions made this year be successfully implemented. The third was that the Edison Career Center be successfully launched. The fourth almost tied into Dr. Greenblatt's remark which was an assessment of the state of the art, an evaluation of the school system. She said that there were a lot of things that could go under these objectives, but the objectives, while broad, were measurable. In regard to achievement, she explained that during the election campaign statements were made that Montgomery County was not the top school system. Dr. Shoenberg thought it might be interesting to develop a comprehensive set of measures that would make some sense to them. Dr. Cody said they would have to decide what needed to be measured beyond the traditional CAT scores. Mr. Ewing said he would like to know whether they were making improvements in a student's ability to think and analyze. Dr. Shoenberg thought that Educational Accountability would be interesting in doing something like this.

In regard to B-CC and Blair, Dr. Cody explained that he was still on the periphery of getting involved. He commented that there were certain characteristics of the plans that were not going to make it easy. Dr. Shoenberg stated that they were looking for the best effort that could be put forward.

Mr. Ewing remarked that as they made observations about what it was they wanted the superintendent to do there were implicit in those comments things that they wanted him to spend less effort on. He said he would like to see the Board have a moratorium on school closures so that they would not have to address that issue for several years. This would send a message to the community that their priority was in programs and educational improvements. Dr. Cronin remarked that part of the evaluation of the school system was developing an assessment of teacher competency including content and

method.

Dr. Greenblatt said that in regard to bargaining they had to decide their goals by the end of the summer. Mr. Fess reported that the staff was planning a retreat. Mrs. Praisner asked that the Board be informed of the date so that it was on the Board's calendar.

Mr. Ewing said there seemed to be agreement that they had to get ready for the budget and negotiations. Dr. Shoenberg said they agreed that they wanted some kind of program improvements plan. Mr. Ewing said that one of the items he listed was developing a good working relationship with the Board. He indicated that in past years the Board had not been notable for peaceful working relationships with its superintendents at all times. He thought they should spend time on what characterized a good working relationship. Mrs. Praisner commented that there were certain procedures that Board members might be uncomfortable with. There might be ways of reducing the paper received by Board members. She said they should talk about how the Board operates and how they received their materials. Dr. Greenblatt remarked that maybe they had to decide what the Board was to do, rethink the role of the Board. She pointed out that the more time they spent in Board meetings, the less time Dr. Cody would have to run the school system.

Dr. Cody said that a number of members of the senior staff had expressed the feeling that everything was a priority. Not only were there many meetings, the staff was worn out by the number of requests. He thought it would help if they had a sense of direction with five or six major topics. It was Mr. Ewing's view that organizations worked best when they did have a clear set of objectives and a coherent statement of purpose. This would involve having some plan of action for the organization and measures of its progress. He noted that they had the Goals of Education which were very broad, and specific policies, but the Board was always reacting to what came along and the staff never caught up. Dr. Cody explained that the staff was not saying they were put upon, but they wanted to be more constructive. Mrs. Shannon remarked that a level of frustration came out when a plan was too specific. If they enumerated specifics, the next layer of specifics would have to be added. If they had one big goal, the specifics would sort out. Dr. Cronin commented that the Board asked staff to prepare report after report but did not see the larger picture of what they were doing with the materials. Mr. Fess explained that the "system" in its relationship to the Board was encrusted with a lot of responsibilities imposed by previous Boards. They had never taken the time to sit back and say what they wanted. The situation was complicated by the fact that nothing went out without the personal review of the superintendent. The real frustration for staff was wanting to do the best they could and not having enough hours. He thought that somewhere along the line the Board had to look at how they did things. Dr. Shoenberg said that superintendent should be able to say no to certain requests. Mr. Ewing said he would much prefer that, when a request was made which warranted it, the

superintendent responded by saying "none of your business," or "we don't have an answer, or "in six weeks you will get an answer." He said that some Boards had pre-Board meetings so that the actual public meeting time was less. Dr. Shoenberg agreed that the Board should discuss this at their retreat. He commented that they were a big school system and were operating as the Board of a much smaller school system. They had to start figuring out how the Board of a big school system operated.

Dr. Cody explained that in Birmingham the perception of the Board was that things were taken care of by the superintendent and his staff and the Board members were kept informed. He said they only had a public hearing when there was a major issue. One of the methods was to allow a certain amount of business meeting time to organizations and not schedule entire meetings with them. Mrs. Shannon reported that the Council had a time on Saturdays when one Council member was available to meet with the general public. Mr. Fess said it was important for the eight Board members to determine how they wished to be served. Dr. Greenblatt suggested that they had to control their agenda and say there would be a maximum of four meetings a month. Dr. Cody remarked that if priorities were set it would be easier to decide what could be dealt with. Mrs. Shannon suggested they discuss the items that disturbed them, and if there was consensus the practice would be discontinued. Mrs. Praisner thought that they should keep this subject in mind for the retreat.

D. Next Steps and Summary

Dr. Cronin suggested that each Board member submit a list of priorities for the next two or three years. These could be collated and given to Board members. Dr. Greenblatt thought it might be interesting to visit a few of the neighboring Boards of Education to see how they conducted business. Mr. Fess indicated that he had a whole packet of material on the subcommittee structure used by various boards. Mrs. Peyser wondered whether the subcommittees used by the Board in the budget process saved time. Mr. Ewing pointed out that the Board's audit committee had been successful. Mrs. Praisner asked whether staff spent less time on the budget when the Board used the subcommittee process. There was not consensus on this point.

Mr. Ewing thought there was a fair amount of agreement on those major things the Board wanted the superintendent to do. He felt that a good working relationship with the Board was important as well as a good solid relationship with the senior staff. Dr. Greenblatt felt they should distinguish between working with the superintendent and agreeing with the superintendent 100 percent of the time.

Mrs. Praisner indicated that she had received an ERIC search on superintendent evaluations. Mr. Ewing hoped that the Board would proceed to define the goals more specifically at its next meeting with Dr. Cody (set now for June 14).

The meeting ended with agreement to discuss specific goals, objectives and priorities for the superintendent for his first year, and methods to evaluate him, at the June 14 meeting. Board members and Dr. Cody agreed to be prepared with specific suggestions for both the substantive goals and priorities and methods of measurement.

