

An Exclusive Interview With Dr. Brian Cram, Superintendent of Clark County School District

By Muhammad Abdulla

This is the first of a two-part interview with the Clark County School District Superintendent. Dr. Brian Cram is at the helm of the fourteenth largest school district in the United States. We are pleased to update our readers on the present state of our school district.

Sentinel-Voice: Would you give our readers a brief synopsis of your background prior to accepting your appointment as superintendent?

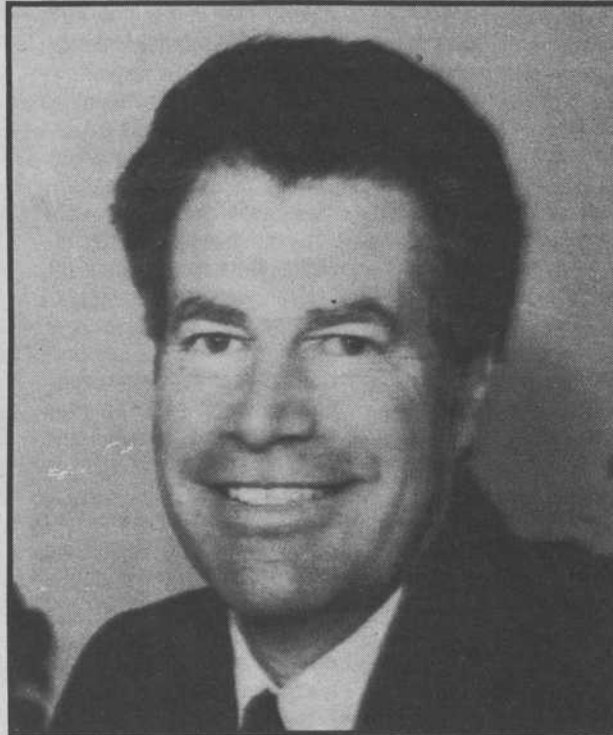
Dr. Cram: I am a native of Nevada. I went through Clark County Public School System and I attended the Fifth Street Elementary School when it still existed...then the Las Vegas High School. I received a Doctorate at Arizona State in Educational Administration...came back to Clark County as an Assistant Principal at Clark High School and became a Principal at Clark High School, then came to the District as Assistant Superintendent over Jr. High Schools and Sixth Grade Centers. And then went back as a principal at Western High School after I had served as Superintendent for a year. I've been employed at Clark County School District for twenty-five years now...Generally, a native-Nevadan. I've enjoyed having been raised here in Las Vegas.

Sentinel-Voice: Before accepting your present appointment, and of course the school district was in a bit of a turmoil, What types of challenges did you face coming in and cite some of the progressive measures taken at that time to restore public confidence.

Dr. Cram: I think one of the immediate issues was that I went to the employees and asked for some input. I did this in somewhat of a formal manner...We sent out a letter to every employee in the school district with posters in every location indicating to employees that I felt like all of us working together was better than one person trying to think about the whole thing...I received about one-hundred or so suggestions. Approximately half resulted in a change of some sort. Approximately twenty-five percent resulted in a significant savings to the school district in terms of people saying... "Why do we need all this paper work? Here is another way to do it." For example, one of my employees produced an effort to computerize all of our payroll systems in all of our schools. It represents a significant savings in time and length. It was the sort of ideas that people had. People had very simple ideas, for example, another one was that we pay people to transport reports at the district, when in fact, we could just put them over our terminals. Things that are very simple in a district as large as ours could produce significant savings and we've actually produced what I would think is a tremendous amount of money to use for educational programs as a result of suggestions of our employees. So, first of all, I saw employee input. Second part is, I was very interested in "flattening out" our organizational structure. I wanted to reduce the number of levels between the Superintendent and the school administrators and the school teachers.

When I first arrived I reduced two levels immediately. We now have two levels between myself and the principals as opposed to four that existed at that time. I felt like I wanted to bring increased emphasis to the individual schools, an "increased empowerment" to the individuals schools. And that has not been completed by any means as yet, but I am working as rapidly towards that as I can. I wanted ac-

tually...to "narrow down the line of authority." I wanted a "flatter organization." Although the organization has gotten smaller in terms of administrative personnel at a non-school level since I've been here, that was not the primary goal. My primary goal was to "flatten that down" where I got as close to the classroom as I could, and I think I have accomplished that at this point. I also wanted administrators to become "school-based." A number of administrative positions, some of the Administrative Superintendents and Area



Dr. Brian Cram

Superintendents, I assigned them to be right out in the geographical area that they served. Instead of being housed at the Educational Center, my approach is "you will be housed" right in the geographical area of the schools you serve. They oversee the operation of elementary schools for example. I have somebody who has a zone of elementary schools, in all these cases I have them housed right where their elementary schools are, because my attitude is they ought to be in the school everyday, they ought to go to open houses; they ought to go to the carnivals; they ought to be there to serve the schools. The schools should not be there to serve the central office, the central office should be there to serve the schools...So what I've done is "decentralized." Decentralized to some extent.

I have tried to improve communications the best I could, by being rather visible at the district. I try to visit on an average of five or six schools per week; don't always make that, but that's my goal. I've been told by some schools that I am the first high official that they've seen at that school in some period of time. My response is, when it's going well in the classroom, then I am accomplishing my job and I should pay a lot of attention to the classroom. It's not unusual for me to go to classrooms and ask the teachers what they need and what I can do, and try to respond to their needs right there and then. I feel like being a superintendent I have to be very careful that

I don't get myself so caught up in the bureaucracy, that I continue to look for ways to serve the students. So that's what it's all about...My answer when questioned is that the "student comes first." If we fully understand that that is what we're about, then we are going to be a very good school district.

If we don't understand that, then we are not going to meet our mission...That means that the "student in the classroom" are the most important entities in our school district, so I am attempting to accomplish that.

I attempted to bring some efficiency in various areas. My intent is to go through all of our major divisions, appoint teachers, administrators and parents, who are appropriate, to be on committees, that would help us to approve the services of all our divisions. We've been through a couple, and we're going to move on. We are now going to begin a study of our maintenance department. We will be involved in a study of our transportation department. We are moving ourselves from division to division...People who are actually those to be served should be asked what can we do better...It is not that I find fault with these various divisions...It's because I think we can always do things better...

I have attempted to get some standardization in terms of how we deal with zoning problems and with year-round decisions...You probably know that we hold a lot of community meetings in terms of zoning that were never held before, because we find that parent input is very, very important and we make some changes based on parent input...I believe that we cannot always expect parents to come to us. My response is that we should "take our show on the road."...So that (parent involvement) has been a dramatic increase in change at the District.

I've been interested in saving money within the organization to transfer that money in the schools, directly. Some areas in which we've done that is that we have an Energy Savings Program. This year we saved 275,000 dollars in energy use. Of that, half of the 275,000 dollars is rebated back to the schools that saved it and is used for instructional programs for kids. Half is put into programs that will institute further energy savings...This only involves half of our schools in the district...When we expand it to include the entire school district, I would expect the savings to be about 500,000 dollars...

I reassigned some employees. For example, I went in and streamlined some of my consultant process, where we do not have as many consultants as we had before. That savings went directly into elementary school counselors. So I've asked the School Board where I am able to institute savings, if I can put it directly in things that impact kids face-to-face and the School Board has been very supportive of that...

Substantial savings have been accrued in terms of reassigning employees. I have consolidated positions, eliminated some positions and streamlined some operations. That savings is the "main", not every cent, but in the "main," has gone directly to school support, like school counselors. I think it is a proper expectation for the public to think that we ought to operate as efficiently as possible, and I think especially where we are using taxpayers dollars. So I am going through and seeing what we can streamline.

I am also insisting that we evaluate ourselves on how well we're serving the schools. For example, I would expect the evaluation of the Assistant Superintendents to be how well are they actually serving the schools? Are they helping the schools? I believe my evaluation should be based on that. Are the things that I'm doing hurting or helping the schools?...

We've completed a "technology plan" for the District. My view is we have to spend a lot of money now to save a lot of money later. If you look at a business and they're efficient, they are heavy in technology, and I think that we are going to have to use technology increasingly. We are not going to have the resources to continue to expand our workforce. We are going to have to "work smarter." "Working harder" will not do it anymore. We have people working to "the limit" now, and we cannot continue to put in more and more people. So we are going to have to "work smarter" and we are going to have to use the machines more than we had to use them in the past...On the "front-side" there is going to be some cost - there is no doubt - on the "down-side," that saves a lot of

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