

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

By Muhammad Abdullah

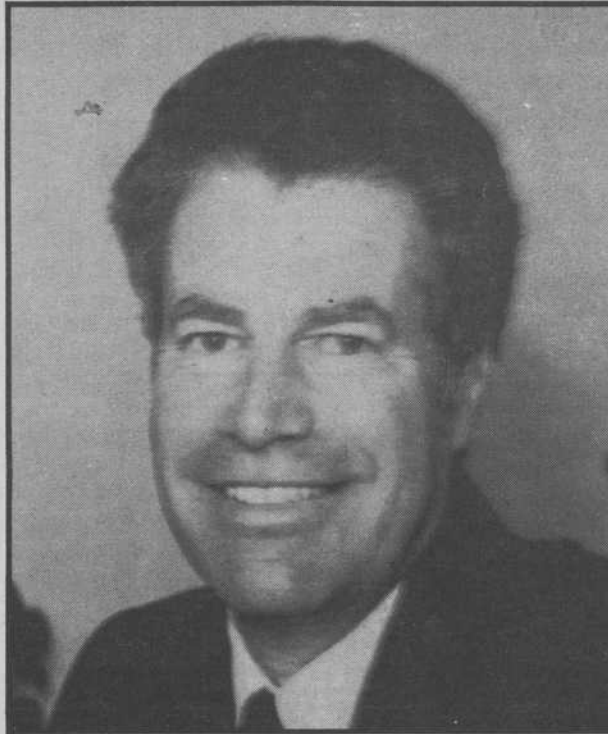
This is Part II of the **SENTINEL-VOICE EXCLUSIVE** interview with Dr. Brian Cram, Superintendent of CCSD. We left off last week with Dr. Cram responding to the question of "restoration of public confidence" in the Clark County School District.

SENTINEL-VOICE: Statistics show that the school is comprised of 14 % African-American students and yet over 50% are in Special Education classes. What steps are being taken to reduce this disproportionate amount of African-American students in Opportunity Schools and other Special Education type schools?...Secondly, testing or examination methodology. The testing or examination methods appear to reflect the socio-economic situations of Caucasian students, and those testing from lower socio-economic situations seem to have a higher failure ratio. How are you dealing with this disparity of those students who are not in the higher socio-economic ethnic group that fail to pass these IQ and achievement exams?

DR. CRAM: I will go to the Special Ed first. I think that as we institute Early Childhood Education programs and we get kids sophisticated in terms of school and getting ready for school, I think we will have less students in Special Ed. I think this is a "cultural thing." I don't think it has to do with "inherent intelligence" at all. I think that what happens is "a lot of students fall through our various cracks" because "they do not come to school running at the same speed" and that has to do with "experience"...It has very little to do with "actual intelligence" in my mind. Primarily, it has to do with experience...So my answer is that we will "reduce enrollment" in all of our special programs, for all of our students, when we go into a "full-fledged" program of Early Childhood Education...I think secondly we will have to "hone and improve" our methods of diagnosing who's in and who's out...I think we will have to get more sophisticated. We are becoming more aware of that problem. Plus, I think the move to put students in the "least restrictive" environ-

ment is absolutely appropriate. That is, you move students out of "special programs" as much as possible into the "mainstream," and we are going to find "more and more students" moving into the mainstream "totally" as a result of that experience. So, I am not in favor of "role-housing" students into a category. My approach is if they need "special assistance" let's give them the assistance they need, but let's get them back into the mainstream as soon as possible.

Now, in terms of testing, we use "standardized tests...Testmakers have become "increasingly concerned" about the "cultural biases" in tests and have attempted to improve those. The thing that we can do is purchase more tests. For instance, in the elementary schools, we've gone to a brand new battery of tests for two reasons: First of all, the old tests had norms that were "computed ten years ago," (the norming group, the group that you compared with) when you showed "good performance" with them, you're looking at "poor performance" in the past, because as opposed to what anyone may say, we are actually showing some improvement in achievement here." So we don't want to be compared against the "poorer group" in the past academically. My answer is, "I want to see where we are right now, "so we are using newer improved tests." I think, the other problem is, we are basically a "test-oriented society." When you go into a business, you're tested; when you go into a university, you're tested; when you go into a school, you're tested. We are attempting to make students where they're "acquainted with" and "know how to take tests." We are not teaching...I am absolutely opposed to teaching "test items" to students. That's "cheating" and that's wrong. But we do find that a number of students don't know "the rules" about tests. They don't know that if you "guess" on one test there's a penalty and if you guess on another one, there's not a penalty. Those are the rules that students in other school districts know. My answer is that we want



Dr. Brian Cram

our students to "know the rules" so that we are on a "level playing field" as far as that's concerned. As to the validity of testing, testing has value, but it has limited value. I don't think that we want to assume that testing tells the "whole world" about a student, because it does not. It tells us about a very "narrow slice." What tests tell us in the main, is how well a student will do on another test. That's the main predictor of tests. And for that purpose, tests are fairly accurate. But that purpose is very, very narrow. But we don't want to just narrow our vision, but that's all we're looking at.

Plus, many of our students, some sixty to eighty percent, in that range, will never go to a university, and will never have to worry about these tests again. So, I am more concerned about preparing them for "the world of work." Where they understand what it takes to succeed in a job and that they have the basic preparation for that. Because we often times get very narrow when we spend a lot of time talking about "college-prep," when in fact, most of our population in the "public school" never goes on to college. They go right into the "work market."

SENTINEL-VOICE: What is the percentage that goes on to college after high school?

DR. CRAM: I would say, ballpark figure, approximately thirty percent go

on to college, and approximately fifteen percent stay on after the first two years. So you can see what we are looking at. We are looking at the "small number." For us (the CCSD) to spend our time dealing with the small number I feel is an absolute disservice to the other part of our population...For us to engage all of our efforts in dealing with that thirty percent is an absolute disservice to the other part of our student population.

SENTINEL-VOICE: Dr. Cram, let's talk about busing. The busing situation tends to have an affect on the student population: Traveling itself can be stressful. African-American students will experience busing for approximately eleven years while some Caucasian children and others may only experience busing approximately one year depending on zoning. Also, some students may live in areas where they have a K-6 (kindergarten through sixth grade), with a Jr. High School and high schooling in the same area and "never experience busing." What steps are being taken in order to change this unfair busing situation?

DR. CRAM: I guess I see two things connected with busing. First of all, we have a large number of minority and non-minority students that are being bused in our school district. Anybody living within two miles from their school is bused. And

we tend to have rather large high schools where the high schools are zoned throughout miles and the junior high schools as well. So a lot of students are being bused throughout the district.

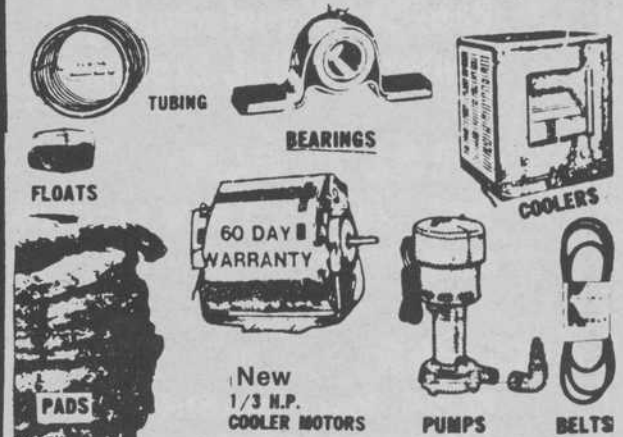
As to the African-American students being bused, I think you have to examine the concept. What we do know in examining the African-American students in the District is that "the students who live outside of the so-called "WEST Las Vegas area" tend to perform higher than students who live on the West side. We are not sure what that's all about. My guess is, my experience tells me that the prime factor in student achievement is "income." If I had to provide you with one factor, that factor would be income. If you had one factor that would predict how well a student achieves, if I had to provide you with one factor, that factor would be income. We know that there is an absolute relationship between those two (student achievement and income). So I think as students come from lower income homes, they come with a disadvantage of not having some of the things that money brings. It does not mean that they are "bad students." It means that they do not have private tutors. They do not have the cultural experiences of those whose parents

have money. When you look at "national statistics", there is a very strong correlation between "how much money the family makes" and the "academic performance" of the student. I think that there is a factor in this that "cuts across racial lines." I think the prime factor is "income is a determinant of achievement." So somehow we are going to have to try to level that whole thing out. My greatest concern is, whatever it takes to get the "best education" for the kids is what should be going on. There are pros and cons to busing kids, African-American or white. My concern is where are they going to get the best education, period. So whatever produces that, is fine. If that is a neighborhood school, that's fine with me. If that's moving students to regional schools, that's fine also. The prime thing we should be concerned with is not "where they are going to school" but what they are learning."

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