

Portage Public Schools Oral History Collection
Interview with Dr. Pete McFarlane
Conducted by Tom Vance, Community Relations Manager, Portage Public Schools
at the Portage District Library
September 18, 2008

Note: Dr. Pete McFarlane served as Superintendent from 2002-2007.

Mr. Vance: Tell us something about your career before you came to Portage Public Schools.

Dr. McFarlane: I graduated college in 1969 having studied pre med and I decided not to go that route. A teaching position in St. Charles Missouri was available and I took that position for one year. I did a really terrible job. I had no background in teaching when I graduated from Notre Dame. Fortunately, I did not get paid much. The next year I applied and got a job teaching math and science at an inner city school in Alton Illinois. It was about 70% minority and low income. I stayed there for about 9 years. During that time I started working on my masters and the preliminary courses that were required to get certified in education. I got my masters in physical sciences and education through a National Science Foundation grant. Southern Illinois University was starting a doctoral program in education leadership and I went back to school to do that in 1976. With working and coaching I finished my doctorate in 1981. Two years later I went back to school and took specialized classes in education administration to get certified to be a superintendent. Meantime, I transferred to a junior high in my district and was placed on a team that examined the value of junior highs verses middle schools (grades 7, 8, 9 vs. grades 6, 7, 8). We opted to go with the middle school model utilizing team teaching. I taught at West middle school in Alton with two other teachers for one year. The district eliminated the position of middle school assistant principals and replaced that with an Instructional Coordinator. This was a non teaching, administration position. I held that position for two years. This was a great experience. At that time, the central office position in Curriculum and Development opened up and I held that position for 10 years. Next I took a job as the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum in Normal, Illinois for six years. Then I took an Assistant Superintendent position in Naperville, Illinois. Actually it was the Indian Prairie school district which had over 21,000 students. I supervised the 21 elementary school principals for two years and frankly it was not all that challenging. I was on the internet one day and the Portage superintendent position came up. I was familiar with Portage because in college some friends of mine dated girls at Western and I had made trips to the area. The district was high quality and appealing to me but I thought I had no chance of getting the job. I went through the interview process very relaxed and I was offered the position.

Mr. Vance: You were superintendent for 5 years and retired for one year now and you have had time to look back and reflect. What do you think was your most significant achievement as Superintendent?

Dr. McFarlane: I told the Board when I arrived that this was a good School District and I did not plan to cause a lot of upheaval that could create problems. But as I observed how the District was running I thought there were some basic components to managing a human learning system that had some issues. I had been interested in how human systems worked for a longtime and I had been studying them. Some issues had to do with Human Resources. For example, there really was no connection with how we decided what a job was; how we posted it; how we interviewed for it; how we followed up and evaluated people based on job expectations. Those staffing elements were only loosely connected and everyone did what they wanted. In the area of curriculum there were little fiefdoms—the elementary fiefdom, the middle school fiefdom, the high school fiefdom. Different people were responsible for those at the district level and there was not a lot of conversation or coordination and a huge waste of money, I thought. So anyway, I took a look at the basic operating system and focused on some components that I thought needed to be changed. One was curriculum articulation and development, i.e. setting expectations for student achievement. Another was in the Human Resources area. Another was District office supervision and management. Another was evaluation of staff. This is part of Human Resources but it was separate as well. We set high expectations for everyone but in addition, people who were being evaluated became a legitimate part of their evaluation. Staff had something they could rely on. If they were doing good work they knew that evaluation was in their file as a way of protecting them and it was a service to them if they decided to move on. Anyway, I looked at the District and saw some things that needed to be done. I think those were some of the most important things that got accomplished. There are some people who will say “You were so visible”. I always did that wherever I worked. That was basically so I could find out what good things and not-so-good things were going on around the District and could comment to people on both those points. I learned more about the system and about teaching in general because of it. I think other people might say the visibility was an important contribution yet I think it was not as important as the other work.

Mr. Vance: By the time you arrived, the State of Michigan was beginning to experience serious financial troubles which obviously impacted the School District’s funding. Can you comment on that?

Dr. McFarlane: I remember two weeks after I started work, Pfizer bought Pharmacia. I thought, Oh no! Then there was an announcement about some significant State budget troubles within a month or so. I knew you have to have a budget you live within. I have always been a fiscal conservative when it came to money that public schools, or any public entity that I am dealing with, had available. Here is the amount you have to work with. So, you set some priorities. I was really fortunate to have an executive team to work with who were good at what they were doing and could take that direction. I would say to them; you need to set some priorities and we have to find a way of cutting. How would you like to do that? Should we take a straight percentage? Or should we take a look at those things which are most important and take a higher percentage on others? Then I would talk with each one of them because they really were the experts and I got the information I needed. I knew at some point I would have to make some decisions that would not be popular; decisions about cuts. Yet, I wanted all of those folks to have

ownership in it because they knew more about it than I did. I was fortunate to have some really good people to work with.

Mr. Vance: Portage Schools and the other districts within KRESA made history in 2005 with a regional millage. It was the first time that had been done in Michigan. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Dr. McFarlane: I was very proud of the people in the District for how they handled the regional millage. We had a public committee that was formed. We called together a Blue Ribbon Committee to help the community understand what the District was facing. That committee helped us understand that we could be frank with the community. We communicated what the cuts would be, in programs and people, should this millage not pass. This is why we needed those dollars. We were honest with people and employees were even informed that they would be let go should this millage not pass. I think it was important that we had a great group of people behind this and a great essential committee called "Yes for Kids". Great leadership from this committee, great support from the District and the community helped the millage pass. Portage carried the millage with about 70%, I think. This was one that Portage stepped to the plate and carried it across. And the second time it passed again. I was very proud of the community—what a great group of people.

Mr. Vance: Another key event during your years was the bond campaign and planning for the projects to update the facilities. Please talk about the process for the eventual approval, in the fall of 2007, of the \$119 million bond campaign.

Dr. McFarlane: It is interesting about these projects in quality districts. In Bloomington and Naperville as well as here, there were several building projects because they were rapidly growing communities. I had a chance to be involved in those as well as other bonding projects. There are fundamentals that always need to be in place. You need to make sure the community knows what is going on and that they have a chance to complain about it—what they like and don't like; and they see you make changes with that input. I don't think you are ever going to please all the people. When we first started this process, Tom Noverr told me that we would have a certain number of people who would always vote no. Of that number, a certain number would be very vocal and you would have to deal with that and move on. So, I think the work that we did was in preparation for the bond that did pass. It was too bad the first vote didn't work out because I would have loved to have seen the larger one pass (the nearly \$150 million bond). But, as long as it got done that was the most important thing. Our work of helping the people recognize there was a need; setting a goal that could be moderated for the next time; and getting people excited about the possibilities that could happen were all important steps we accomplished. Though it did not work while I was there, I think it was part of the steps that needed to happen to get it done, eventually. I don't feel badly about it. I only feel badly that the group that was still there after I retired, had to do it again.

Mr. Vance: The role of the school district and community engagement. You mentioned the Blue Ribbon Committee with the 2005 millage and the involvement of the community with the bond project. Can you talk in general terms about the challenge of a school district to stay connected with both parents and other constituents?

Dr. McFarlane: I think that is a good point. You really have communities that you must stay connected with. For example, we had smaller meetings with former Board members and sometimes with former Superintendents. We would use those meetings as a way of keeping them informed. We wanted them to feel close because of the service they had provided to the District. Then you have the City Manager, Mayor and others. We were fortunate to see a change in that leadership during the last two years. If the City Manager who was there when I arrived had still been in place, I don't think we would have seen that kind of cooperation and I don't know if it would have passed. We did make sure that we involved the city and all of the politicians who needed to be on board. In addition, you have the communities of parents. Elementary parents are different than middle school parents are different than high school. In this town you need to know where the dividing lines are. In the last millage issue, the Northern and Central issue was huge and it came up again and so did the stadium. You need to understand who the communities are and what is important to them. We also have the ties to the other school districts in the county. You don't want to separate yourself by making yourself this exclusive organization because you really need to work with these other Superintendents. They can help you whether it is a county wide effort or your own. So, there are a lot of communities that you need to pay attention to and you have to outline who they are. Each one of these has a different way they want to get information. You can never communicate too much—except for the one guy who indicated that it was enough information to choke a horse!

Mr. Vance: The issue of state and federal mandates and how that impacts running a school district. That is something that has changed over your career. How has that helped or hurt public education over the last decade or so?

Dr. McFarlane: Anytime there is a lot of money at stake politicians will want to have their hands in it. During the 90's and even prior to that, all aspects of the economy were functioning at a fairly high level so not much attention was being paid to education. As we became a more of a global economy—and it happened rather rapidly especially in Michigan we felt the negative impact of that most acutely—there were a lot of people being squeezed. A classic example of some really lousy politics that impacted education is the change in high school graduation requirements. That law was thrown together with the intent of having certain components in it well before the first meeting was called. There were only a few months of open meetings, that were not sincerely handled. You could tell, because I went to one of them and none of the legislators, who were there, were listening to those who had concerns. The Governor wanted the changes and the State Superintendent of Schools wanted the changes. What they are finding now is that there are basic components of those requirements that are actually detriments to certain students. An example would be those who struggle with mathematics or those who are enrolled in alternative schools. What they are finding is that it is such a huge flaw that

the state will have to repair it. They tell us now, that they knew it was not going to be perfect but they knew they could fix it afterwards. But the amount of agony and work that had to go into making it happen was huge. I just wish legislators would stay away from those kinds of things. I know that is not going to happen. As long as there is a lot of money involved there is going to be a lot of people with their fingers in it.

Mr. Vance: You had 38 years in education from teacher to superintendent. Now that you have had a year to sit back and reflect do you have any observations from that journey?

Dr. McFarlane: I have learned a lot about how teaching and learning actually works and actually takes place. I learned when I got into administration and started observing teachers, that there are a lot better teachers out there than I am. Thank God. I also learned that good administrators have to understand how human learning systems work to be most efficient and most effective. It was very complicated and very complex but it was enjoyable trying to work through all of that. I enjoyed working with 99% of all the people I worked with. I enjoyed the people and I enjoyed learning about everything in order to get here. I don't know what will happen next. I considered doing some more college teaching. I had done some of that before and enjoyed it. But right now, it is nice to have some separation.

Mr. Vance: Is there anything else you would like to add to the record for anyone trying to learn from the past?

Dr. McFarlane: The real work of education is done between people. It could be student to student, parent to student, teacher to student, teacher to teacher. Whatever it is, it is done between people. Administrators really don't do that work. All administrators do is to try to help make it happen. I wish that more of the real work in education could take place. I wish that legislators would have enough sense to stay out of things they don't belong in and that administrators would have enough sense to simply support great people doing great work. Maybe it is wishful thinking but that is what I hope happens.

Mr. Vance: Thanks for sharing your experiences. On behalf of Portage Schools we certainly appreciate your leadership.