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An Interview with John D. O'Bryant

by
by Harold Horton

The following is an interview with John D. O'Bryant, vice-president for student affairs at Northeastern University and former president of the Boston School Committee. A new, appointed, school committee was sworn into office on January 6, 1992. This interview with the former president should offer a unique perspective on past achievements and future hopes for education in Boston.

Horton: Who first approached you with regard to becoming a candidate for the Boston School Committee?

O'Bryant: After I served as campaign manager for Mel King in 1959 and 1961, during the time when he was a candidate for the school committee, Mel literally drafted me to become a candidate myself. So, I campaigned for the school committee and was elected in 1977.

Horton: Looking back, what was the highlight of your experience serving on the school committee?

O'Bryant: It has been personally fulfilling to me to realize that some of the original goals which I set for my tenure on the school committee have been achieved. There has been a reduction in patronage hiring, two African-American superintendents have been employed during my tenure, and there has been an improvement in the standardized test scores of elementary and middle school students in reading and math. However, this is yet to be achieved at the high school level.

Horton: What do you consider to be the strengths of the Boston public schools?

O'Bryant: In my opinion, the current strengths of the Boston public schools are its strong and very capable superintendent and its stable school administration. However, I would like to point out that the Boston public school system has been experiencing steady improvement in all areas over the past five years.

Horton: How do you feel about having an appointed school committee?



Harold Horton



John D. O'Bryant

O'Bryant: It was most unfortunate that the voters of the city of Boston permitted such a hostile takeover of the school committee by the mayor. We have all been disenfranchised and I am not in support of any form of disenfranchisement.

Horton: What is your general attitude toward the METCO (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity) Program?

O'Bryant: When METCO was started in 1965, there were no black members on the school committee and there were very few black teachers or administrators employed in the school system. At the time, METCO provided another free educational option for parents and their children. However, since the desegregation order, there has been an increase in the number of blacks in the school system. Today, 20 percent of teachers and 25 percent of administrators are black. I believe that the Boston school system is much more accessible to black students now. Therefore, there is less need for the METCO program.

Horton: To what extent is school reform possible in light of the current fiscal status of the school system?

O'Bryant: As a prominent educator, you know as well as I that when people speak about reform of urban school systems, all too often they are referring to cuts. We don't need to cut any more funds—if anything, we need to increase the budget to a level where we can restore programs, including music, art, and interscholastic sports competition for both boys and girls. In order to legitimately introduce reforms in the schools, there first needs to be a complete educational audit or assessment after which immediate short- and long-range citywide programs should be developed. Such an assessment would include a study of staffing concerns, multicultural curriculum programs, student services, and the status of school facilities.

Horton: Do you believe that black, all-male classes, schools, or academies should be established within the Boston public schools?

O'Bryant: Yes, if there is a need for such programs. This can be determined by a review of the rationale used for establishing similar classes, schools, and academies in other cities.

Horton: Overall, how do you rate the quality of education offered in the Boston public schools: good, satisfactory, fair, or poor?

O'Bryant: Honestly speaking, the overall quality of education that is currently offered in the Boston public schools is good. There has been too much negative misinformation disseminated about the schools because of the mayor's campaign to take over the schools. The system is doing much better educationally than it is given credit for. Superintendent Lois Harrison-Jones, through four recent town meetings, gave parents, teachers, students, and citizens a true picture of the current status of the quality of education being offered.

Horton: Are you satisfied with the extent to which parents are involved in the Boston public schools?

O'Bryant: Parental involvement in the Boston public schools really varies amongst school zones. However, if the recent town meetings are any indication, there will be a steady increase in parental participation in the schools in the near future.

Horton: What about the current fiscal crisis and the threats of possible staff cuts?

O'Bryant: The current fiscal crisis was created by Mayor Flynn by drastically underfunding the schools. The school budget for 1990-91 ended up with a \$23,000 surplus. A number of teaching and administrative positions have been eliminated over the past several years and any additional cuts will

seriously impair the educational programs currently offered to Boston's public school children.

Horton: How can colleges and universities in the Boston area be of greater assistance to the Boston public schools?

O'Bryant: Currently, a number of local colleges and universities have established collaborative relationships with the Boston public schools. These efforts are carried out through pairing an institution of higher education with a specific school. Educational expertise is provided to the participating schools by the faculty and staff of the college or university. Dr. Robert Sperber of Boston University administers this program for the Boston public schools.

Horton: In closing, I would like to thank you for taking time to hold a dialogue with me on such an important matter. I am certain that I will be back in touch with you regarding the progress of the new, appointed, Boston School Committee. It is refreshing to hear your positive attitude toward the quality of education that is offered in the public schools. Research reports on the quality of urban education are, for the most part, negative. We often read about one school's academic program which is exemplary, but one school that works is not enough. It is really ridiculous to speak about giving up on a generation of young people in our urban schools. Students in urban schools are as bright as students in suburban schools—it is a matter of caring enough about the millions of students attending urban schools to determine exactly what needs to be done in order that a quality education may be made available to them.

Dr. Harold Horton is associate director of the Trotter Institute. He holds a doctorate degree in educational administration from Ohio State University. Dr. Horton has taught as well as held administrative positions at the elementary, secondary, and university levels.

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