

Gail Merrian Interview Transcript

Interviewer Natalie Fennimore; assisted by Rocio Cabrera

Can you just give us a little bit of your background in the Hillsboro School district with the Hispanic students?

Sure. I started back in 1971 as an assistant in the Migrant Ed program and this was when the county ran the program and it was for Hillsboro elementary schools. I then moved to woodburn for a few years and came to back into Hillsboro in 1983, into the Hillsboro elementary school district, as an ESL teacher. I worked through to unification as an ESL teacher/ coordinator of our program, I have worked both migrant and ESL and I started doing Migrant summer school in 1971 and have doing it ever since. And right now I'm the director/ coordinator of ESL/Migrant ED in the district.

So can you just explain some of the programs and the provisions that were created by the district in the last 30 yrs. or so?

30 years? I'll go back to what I know, and I don't know if Henry talked about this to. The migrant program actually started here in the county in the late 60's, I don't know exactly what year, and it was the work, one of them was Bob Warner, he was the former superintendent and principle at North Plains Elementary. And he pretty much along with Sunny Montez, and I can't remember who else, started the summer school project, and then it became part of, the ESD the Washington county ESD under Jose Garcia and, so we've always had, from the very beginning we've always had Washington county Migrant summer school. And in the 80's, around 85' 86' they ESD was disbanded as far as Migrant education goes and each school district was given there own grant; and so Hillsboro elementary had there own migrant grant during the school year, and Hillsboro union high school had theirs. But we still got together and did migrant summer school and at that point the union high school became responsible for Washington county migrant summer school. And we still are, the only difference today in the migrant summer school is that forest grove has pulled there elementary out and so has Beaverton, they do there own elementary, but the older kids 7- 12 still come to us for migrant summer school. So that's the summer program and the summer program has always been one that considered to be comprehensive, that in addition to all the academics we also try and give the kids experiences they've never had. For years we took them to swimming lessons and we did that because one of the major causes of deaths in migrant kids is drowning and that why we did summer school swimming lessons because we thought if we could teach them how to swim or float then if they ever fell into an irrigation ditch they'd have half a chance. Then we also took them on a lot of field trips because a lot of our kids came to us and they'd never seen a city they'd never seen a museum, or they've never been to the beach so we decided that one of the things that enriches kids besides coming to school everyday, is the experiences they have. And then we also do things like music and dance and PE, today after years of being cut we still have a real full academic program for all the kids, preschool through grade 12. But we've had to cut out a lot of the field trips and the swimming lessons and thins like that, and what we do, is we try and bring the assemblies into them. Whether it be arts, we've had artists and residence, poets and residence, and different authors. The regular migrant program, which is the school year program, is continued since the late 60's as well. And

each school district has there own, in this area, it's out of the county, and through this I think one of the things we offer to the kids is tutorial. We tutor them in different subjects, we have after school programs, and we also offer emergency medical, dental and health. And this has been something that's been since it's beginning. And then we have the parent involvement component and that program is probably one of the most successful programs our school district has ever done, we've always had a real active parent involvement component, where they get together, they meet, and they also act as advisors to our grants what we do with kids. But in the last, I'd say five years we've started a parent, it's called the family literacy activity called Latinos en Frontarias, which is also reading without borders, and what we do is we bring the parents and we have trained facilitators and we buy books, children's books, and we try to by them in bulk, and it's really good literature and we read these books we the parents, with the facilitator sitting around the table to lead the discussion. Followed up with, they have a writing component, they write a story, a poem something about the book that resonates with their life and then we publish their books. We gather all their writings, and we publish it, and we have their kids illustrate it. So the kids, the whole family is involved, and our goal there is to get books at home. First they get to take home the book that they read, and then they get another book, they get the book that they've written that they've helped write. And probably, write now we have nine schools involved in doing this, and it's the one single thing that parents ask for every year is "Are we going to do the reading?" Many parents end up learning to read with their kids doing this. So it's been really a neat activity, so we hope to continue that for a long time. Other programs, we've just finished up a HITET grant, which is Hillsboro intensive training for ESL teachers. And that's had many components and that's how we got the parent/family component in there. But we've also trained, administrators and teachers and cultural awareness and cultural competency and we hope to continue. And we've also trained, I think it's, 40 some teachers, they get what we call the ESL endorsement they've taken special classes and on their licenses they have and endorsement to teach ESL kids. So this doesn't serve kids directly, but indirectly we're training people to serve kids. Other programs for kids over the years is our ESL program, we have grown, when we unified in 1996 in k-12 we had 1100 students, today we have 3,000 students in ESL, and right now I'd say our ESL population is about 22% of the district and if we look at Hispanic kids alone they make a quarter or 25% of the district. So our ESL program has expanded to include Spanish literacy, which helps the kids learn English better, and then we have one elementary school that has started a dual language program, where it's, and it's kindergarten this year at WL Henry and each year we're going to add a grade, and we have the kids, it's about half and half English speakers and Spanish speakers, and there learning eachothers language. 50% of the day is in English 50% of the day is in Spanish, And we have another school planning, Minterbridge is in the planning, so that's a real special program for kids. We also have a special grant called the refugee children impact grant and that money goes, again for family literacy, and also for helping kids if they need special help in school, after school programs. And I think the last two years we've really increased our after school programs, most of our high schools, two or three of our middle schools, and I would say about half of our elementary's are doing after school programs for kids, and that's, kids have somewhere to go for help with there homework, so, that's kind of in a nutshell. So migrant Ed's been with the county since the late 60's and has gone from

the county level to the district level and ESL has been developed I would say, probably since the early 80's. And it followed us into our unification, we are the 4th largest ESL program in the state and the 5th largest Migrant ED program in the state. So our parents continue to come, we grow every year.

So, your pretty successful working with Hispanic parents, so are there any long term goals of the Hillsboro school district that haven't been accomplished?

Yes, I don't know if Henry talked to you about our strategic planning goal, Strategy 3 where we are trying to increase partnership with the Hispanic community. Not all the action plans of that have been put into place, last year, this year we were finally able to fund the office for Hispanic outreach. Olga Acunia is the coordinator I don't know if you'll be talking with her (*yeah*) we funded that with federal funds coming in from the government so with migrant funds and title 1 funds and staff development funds, because we felt it was really, really important to have this office to reach out to parents, because even though we had a big parent component in Migrant Ed and title 1 we realized we needed a lot more. And so some of the things I think we still have to do is, I think we need a lot more parent training, so that parents no how to get involved and feel welcome in their schools I think we've stated training for staff and cultural sensitivity and cultural competency, but I think, my goal is to train every single staff member in this district, so that they understand different cultures and different languages, and we have a good start but it's not nearly enough, and that's part of the strategy to. The other one is we've started mentoring for teachers, we have Union America for Latino teachers, licensed and administrators, I would like to see that expanded to our assistant or our classified staff and I would like to see it expanded so we have a mentorship for kids. Especially with the middle school, high school levels. If we could connect them with adults who could help them through so that our drop out rate would decrease. Another long term is we need to train regular education staff, not our ESL teachers, but everybody who works with kids and how to work with our English language learners. Because we have them in every class now, they make up a quarter of our population, if you look at our district, practically 1 out of every 4 students will be ESL, or migrant. So those are some long terms, things we still need to attend to.

Kind of switching, How has no child left behind act affecting high school outreach programs?

It's made a huge difference, both good and bad, I'm going to start with the positive. The best thing its done for us, its put our children in the spotlight, they cannot relegate them has what we called "ghosts" we have report on their progress. We can't hide them anymore, we can't hide the dropout rate, these kids are part of our schools, so that's the most positive thing that's come out of it is we really have to look at all of our students as belonging to us and no special group is hidden away in darkness. And as a result of that we are really looking at how to help them to succeed in school. Because you have to look at why are they not succeeding and what can we do to fix that? Because there are penalties with it, under title 1 if you don't have adequate yearly progress, and they look at, I don't know how much you know about they look at different sub groups and our ESL migrant kids fall under every single one. They look at socioeconomic status, they look at migrant status, they look at ESL statues, they look at ethnicity, and they look at special ED. And we have kids in all of these, and if one group doesn't make, then the district or the school doesn't make it. So we really have to have it so all of our

Good
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NO
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kids are successful. And out of that will be better training for staff and better programs for kids. The negative side to that, is the fact that it is so punitive, that if you don't make it they start by taking money away, and you have to do all sorts of action plans. What that means for our staff is a lot of paper work, where its impacted our program is ESL, it's called title 3, it brings in extra money, but it also brings in a lot of extra paper work. We have to, and our ESL kids will look at making adequate yearly progress as well, and we have to do a lot more paper work. So that's the negative side, the punitive, or how they punish us, take funds away, so we have to do special things, but the best part is, and I like to look at it from that view point, is that we have to look at all our kids and serve all ours kids and I think that's really good.

Do you ever see a difference between progress and success at difference schools, how they handle it?

Yes, definitely so. Let's take ESL migrant Ed, we have the basic same handbook on how the program needs to be, and every school needs to have newcomer ESL, for new arrivals, they need to have content ESL where we help kids with there subjects and they need to have a Spanish literacy component. How it is in every school is very different, it depends on your staff, and how experienced your staff is, it depends on your kids. For example here at century you have many minorities represented, school like WL Henry, they just have English and Spanish. And I think the quality depends on the staff there understanding of how to work with the kids and a lot of the time just how many there are, some of our newest teachers just need time to learn, and some of our schools like WL Henry have 432 ESL students, and then we have schools with only 15, so, that makes a difference to because then, I would call WL Henry and ESL migrant school because most of the kids belong in either program. And then a school like Lennox, with fewer than 20 kids, those kids kinda get lost in the shuffle.

Do you feel, especially with the recent budget cuts, that ESL that's given their fair share or have they been hit harder?

I don't think they've been hit harder, mainly because the growth in the district right now is ESL, we make up our growth. In the last year, this school year we took a 5% cut, and that was really hard because we still got new students and it was based on numbers from last year. But I don't think its any harder a cut then any other of the Ed classrooms in fact, the way I saw the district they tried very hard to keep our numbers and our staffing and our resources as high as possible. But yeah, we took a cut and it was hard.

So do you see a lot of the same problems in secondary schools as you do in elementary schools, or are high school and them completely different?

There are some similarities and I would say what's the same is training all staff to work with the kids and understand who they are and how to serve them. And then it ends there, they are very different. Elementary is very child centered, so theirs a lot more collaboration that goes on, so we can push into the classroom easier, pull the kids out, go in and work with teachers, it's a really different perspective. And so we might, and also we aren't governed by periods, or a schedule like that, so if want to take some time and say to a student you know we want you to stay in the classroom for awhile and see how you do and will check up on you, we can do that, because his not into its third period you have to do this this and this. I think at the middle school high school level what makes it hard is you are, you have to fit into that schedule and our kids don't always. And there's

not as much choice, if you want to graduate you have to take this course, this course, and this course. All those basics, lots of times our kids come to us and they've never finished elementary school. So they don't really fit into the mold yet, so finding a way to be successful in school can be really tough if they only have one or two ESL courses a day, and then they have to fit into general ED the rest of the day, and that's really hard. Also I think that they are so close to graduation, that's a lot more pressure, and just the level of the academics it's a harder to collaborate, because you have your schedules and you have to be somewhere every period, and the same with teachers there's not a lot of time for teachers to collaborate. We used to meet K-12 our staff and we had to split our meetings, we found the issues we talked about for elementary were really different from the issues the teachers had in the secondary. So we had to separate all our meetings so we could deal with both.

You mentioned some of the programs that are supposed to help with the needs, but how do you guys assess the needs of the Hispanic students?

I can tell you what I hope there doing, it's in our guide books. It's, when kids come in, we do two things, the first thing is we look at there language, are they bringing in another language or do they speak English, and we asses language, and we asses them both English and Spanish. Then we're supposed to asses achievement, where are they, especially in reading and math, so that we no where to place them and, this is the way it should be done we are supposed to meet and decide what kind of a program especially at the high school level, and they are supposed to have a graduation plan from that point, here what it will take for you to get through school and then we also have another form for the regular teacher. We give them information, levels, things that they can do, things that they probably couldn't do, what language would be best to learn in. They don't always find the teacher everywhere, but we try and give them that information just so they understand the kids more

Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

All I know is that are statistics, we have just grown substantially. Probably as long as I've been in migrant ED, migrant ED is probably one of the most successful programs and I'm proud to be part of, I've been in migrant ED for 32 years and its still, especially in this county we are seen as the leaders, and we've been able to bring parenting. I still think we need to work on our academic programs for kids, cause migrant kids they fall through the cracks just because they are more mobile, there moving, it's like a moving target, if you catch up with them to help them finish, and that we've been able to add a preschool and that's been one of my biggest wishes to add a preschool component. We have to parts to our migrant preschool, we have a classroom at Brookwood, that I wish everyone could go visit, they just graduated with their little caps and gowns in the kindergarten, and the parents put it on and they planned the whole thing. And then we also have what's called HIPPIE, home instruction for parents of preschool youth, and in that program not all parents can have their kids go to school, and it doesn't cost as much as a classroom, so what we do is we go out to the home and we teach the parents how to be there child's first teacher. And then they get books and units that they can do with their kids, and someone goes out and meets with them once a week and they come into our center every two weeks for some training. And that's been real successful the whole idea is to get those kids as many experiences, and also to help there parents. So I think the migrant program is and will continue to be one of the most

challenges

successful of our programs. One of our biggest challenges still is the large dropout rate, and we have to figure out how we can help our Hispanic or Latino kids stay in school, we still have a huge, you know, when you compare the drop out rate to our Anglo population, which is under 4%, 4.2%, and our Hispanic drop out rate which is up in the teens, something has to be done, and it isn't the kids fault. Part of it's the system, but we're trying to figure out, and that's why I think a mentoring program is so important, and one of the things that I'm real pleased with is we have people like Olga Acunia, she went to school here came here graduated and came back to teach. We have I think about 6 people who've done that, I thin that coming back into the community is a huge advantage for our kids, because it gives them I think hope that they can make it to. I think the other thing we have to work on is what I call institutional racism, and that can be real almost subconscious and silent, like teachers not expecting as much from the Latino kids as they would from the southeast Asians or things like that, and that where the cultural sensitivity come in, cause I think sometimes people aren't aware of their own biases and there own racism, and racist ideas. So I guess that's all. That's my soap box.
Thank you very much