

Interviewee: Joe Rodriguez

Interviewer: Shannon Sprague and Linda Sah

The following Interview was conducted on behalf of the oral history program of the Washington County Museum and Century High School. The interviewee is Mr. Rodriguez the superintendent. The interviewer is Shannon Sprague. The interview took place at Century High School on Wednesday May 19, 2004 at 2:15pm.

1. What has been your involvement with Hillsboro's Hispanic population?

Basically I've been a junior high school/high school principle, assistant superintendent and superintendent working with all students in a community and have had the opportunity over the years to work with a what has been our largest growing population of I think student, and that's our the Hispanic population. I've had the good opportunity also of helping to mentor and work with a number of aspiring teachers and administrators who were Hispanic and who wanted to move into positions in teaching or administration, and I feel as though I have been instrumental in helping them accomplish that.

2. What are the goals of the Hillsboro School District regarding Hispanic students?

I think it comes down to opportunities for students to, to ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed and be successful in school not only educationally but also from a co-curricular view point, being involved in athletics and activities. While the opportunity may be there we need to perhaps bend over even more so to help students take advantage. And to have that occur, I think all students have an opportunity but to often than not students have so many other obligations especially minority students to be able to access those kind of programs. So we need to work hard on trying to make sure that happens.

3. Would you explain the main programs and their provisions the Hillsboro school District has created to respond to the Hispanic community in the last 30 years?

We have done some remarkably positive with our migrant summer school program, we're assistance to migrant students who come to us. We still on occasion get students who come to us who are from Mexico, who do not even speak Spanish, who still are still coming from an Indian dialect and that has always been a challenge to us. We run an extensive English as a second language program, with the largest population is Hispanics but we also have Russian students, Korean Students, Vietnamese Students who are served in that program and very successfully. We've work, as part of our strategic plan, to have our primary focus on making sure we partner with Hispanic families, so they feel apart of our community and don't feel as though their out there somewhere but their working with us. Our office of Hispanic outreach, which we just started this year, has been very very successful in accomplishing that. And we've been very active in trying to recruit roll models as teachers, counselors, in classified employees, and administrators who are bicultural

and bilingual and if we aren't successful we try as much as possible to have a bilingual individuals hired for positions even though they themselves may not be looking a little Hispanic.

4. What are the plans for extending the dual language immersion program to other elementary schools and what's your opinion?

Oh, I didn't even mention that did I thank you. That's a program that's at W.L Henry right now and I'm very excited about it because it has the potential of bringing together both Latino and non-Latino students in an environment where the issue is to improve both English skills and being able to improve Spanish skills and that really has a positive impact on all students. For this next year we're not expanding it to any other schools but my guess is going to be, as we've seen in Forest Grove and some other school district, it will expand. One of the things that, I would hope as we grow as a school district we will look at having some other immersion programs. A French immersion program that exists in Portland Public Schools would be nice to have in Hillsboro. The larger we become, the more students we have, the more that you're able to do magnet programs like that. The bilingual program at W.L Henry in its first year did kindergarten and the next step is to continue to grow it and by the time there is about a third or fourth grade program I think we'll be in the position to expand it to other schools. And I hope that happens. The focus will be the degree to which staff in the school will decide that that's important to do. Another one that we're doing is a movement at Groner elementary school, we host through and house the deaf and hard of hearing program for Washington county in the district and so we had kids from Groner elementary, Thomas, and Hill-High the kids who are deaf and hard of hearing and so American sign language their looking at trying to do that as a magnet program to help with learning another language, in this case sign language. I see that magnet model as being something that we would head toward.

5. How successful is Hillsboro school district in working with Hispanic students' parents? And could you describe how they work with them?

I think we still have a long way to go; the outreach program has been very helpful. All of our home school consultants who work with migrant students are always out there working with families trying to connect with them and trying to make sure that they're getting services outside of the educational field so that kids are getting medical care and social needs that they need taken care of before they come to school and that's been very positive. We have a lot more to do though, I think, there's still some levels of not understanding and trust and language barriers. How you can help a teacher who really cares about kids and wants to see the Latino students succeed but can't speak Spanish, the more we help them with that translation the more I think kids will be successful. But we still have a way to go. The key is to continue all of those efforts in connecting with families, but we still have work to do.

6. What are the long-term goals of the Hillsboro School District in relation to Hispanic students?

Well there are probably three that come to mind. One is that, I had hoped that as we opened Liberty High School this year that we would get more Hispanic students, liberty has a large Hispanic population, that we get more Hispanic students involve in sports and activities. We got some, but that's a challenge, we need to continue to do that more and more in all of our school. There are some interesting factors. When older kids, who are in High school, have obligations at home to take care of younger children, siblings, and deal with coming home and taking care of their other kids in the family or going out and working. And the more that we're dealing with economic situations where families are dependent upon those kids to earn money for the family, that mean those kids aren't involved in activities and programs. The more that you have those students involve with other students, the more you diminish the effects of the alienation that exists between some groups of kids, the more that they interact, the more they feel as though they were all part of a group we're together rather than being in separate groups. So that's one, I think really engaging kids in that. The other one is that all students need role models, not every role model for a Hispanic student needs to be a Hispanic person. They can be elders but its really helpful and easy for kids, whose language skills are limited, to have someone to whom they can turn and someone who they can turn to with the language where that's not a barrier and being able to do that. So I see that as they real key, of us hiring and recruiting teachers, classified employees, and administrators who can be role models. And that applies to all kids; we still have not be able to hire as many African American employees as we should. We really need to be considering that. Its good when kids see others who are like them in role/positions of authority so they feel as thought, maybe I can aspire to being a teacher, being a school administrator. The last one is the whole effort, that's a community effort, to try to make sure that all kids feel welcome and safe in schools. That's goes beyond just the schools responsibility, that's the communities, the police, and social service agencies to make sure that the needs are being met. Our summer school migrant program and whole migrant program has done a wonderful job of trying to make sure that kids are being provided in there schools. But not all kids are migrant students, and so that's really important that we are able to connect with kids. So those are the area.

7. What are some problems the district has faced in providing for the needs of Hispanic Students?

Well, problems have been that I've watched this community from 1978 till now change from a rural farm community were initially there was tremendous alienation for Hispanic students who were migrant students. They weren't welcome in the many of our community areas, a lot of people did not want to see there children go to school with those kinds of kids. I've seen that change a lot over the past years, but its still not completely gone away with. We still have, in Washington County, a significant problem with economics with a lot of very poor folk and the further west you go in Washington county the more you get it. We now have 38% of our students

on free and reduced lunch in our school district. That's up significantly, much more than Beaverton, Beaverton is about 28%. Forest grove is 54% free and reduced lunch. They have an even large minority population of Hispanic students and so I really think one of the things we need to be cautious on is how we can address some of the issues that are related to poverty, some of the issues related to the inability of families to provide all of the things that they would like to provide for there children. How can the school help on that, with the changes we've seen, I don't know. But we do provide an environment now that I think is safe and secure for all students. We've worked hard at trying to bring together different groups of kids and try to minimize those issues that are on the outside that can disrupt the inside whether they be gang related activities or whether they be economic issues that occur for kids.

8. What is your history with some of these issues? What have you done and what is your opinion about them?

Well, I think that one of the things that we try to do is make sure that the funding level for school is the best we can do, although the last two years have been pretty difficult for us. We have really tried to maximize federal dollars and resources that we get beyond the state to make sure that were providing quality programs. The emphasis on quality programs has been, I think is the real key that we've tried to do. If your going to provide supportive programs they need to be provided with the best quality, adults working with kids with the resources that they need. We're not there where we need to be, but I think it seems that we've tried to do that. I thinks that's the bottom line, I think if there's anything we've tried its to do is to try to hire the best most competent individuals to work with students. In this case were we need folks who are bilingual, we've hired wonderful people. We've been fortunate with some programs like Portland state, which has a bilingual pathways program that's enables classified employees and instructional assistance to become teachers. We've been very fortunate to have a broad group of folks who work really hard to make it possible for students to be successful. Actually the bilingual program was originally also set up to take high school students who were bilingual to help train them for high school teachers. That hasn't happened to the degree that I had hoped, but I think it will in the future. But the real key is that I think we've done a lot but there's a lot more to do in relationship to making sure all students feel welcome. To do that we need to break down some of the barriers, some of the programs that our high schools have doing, breaking down the walls is an example to try to make kids work better together. The issues that are out there in the outside world need to stay in outside world for the issues of trying to make sure that we can work well together in school. But then you have to address those issues and talk about them and I hope that that's something that happens more often than not. But I sense at time that it doesn't, that we might not spend as much time talking about the issues.

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9. In your opinion, how successful have the Hillsboro school Districts ESL and migrant education programs been?

I think that migrant ed. Program has been a phenomenal success, I've watched it over the years and Henry Williams, who is now retiring at the end of this year, was instrumental in getting that started for the high school district, we've run the program for Washington County, the summer program, for years and its been very very successful. I can only say that our migrant ed. program has well served student and migrant families over the years and continues to do so. Our ESL program has been relatively successful, but there is still debate out there about how you should deliver English services to students. I don't think that debate has been resolved, there is still argument about well should it be a bilingual program, well should it be a total immersion program in English, and I don't think we've really come to grips with what the best delivery mechanism is. There are arguments across the boards. I think we've tried and experimented with a variety of things, I think we've found some things. Number one you try to get kids into mainstream classes as soon as you can, that's important. You continue to try to help students maintain their language, their native language, because that's really important. It's easier to learn English if you already understand another language and understand grammar in another language. English I a difficult language to learn to begin with, and so it is really is important that if we have kids coming to us from Mexico that we try to provide them with the opportunity to have Spanish for Spanish speakers and those kind of programs were they keep there language and writing skills up to speed. Our ESL program have tried to do that, but there still is a tendency for ESL programs to be two things a pull out program, which I don't believe is successful, where you take kids out of there regular class and work with them. The other one I don't think is successful is, I think the longer you keep kids in sheltered classrooms the longer it take them to be involved with other students and learn the language. I'm going to be visiting Japan at the end of June and I don't speak Japanese, my wife will probably be able to do a much better job than I am because she is better with languages. But if I wanted to learn Japanese, I would want to go to Japan and immerse myself in the language. I would want to go and learn to speak it and be there to learn it. Rather than try to take it in the classroom setting, so one of the thing we need to remember is if we have kid who cant come to us who don't speak English, one of the best ways to make a living is to put them in contact with students who speak English. And that immersion is very very important. I view that as being critical, the daily contact with students who speak another language and of course the younger they are the faster it happens. So I thinks we've tried a lot of things, I thing we do a very good job but I think we're still at times debating what the best way is to have ESL be successful.

10. Which schools have had the most progress or success with these programs?

With ESL?

ESL and Migrant or any other programs.

I think our migrant program is really a k-12 program and has been very very successful and there are schools where there are no migrant students. So obviously they don't have any programs. But our high schools in particular have all done remarkably good work with the migrant programs. I think again this summer Century is going to be hosting the Migrant program in the summer and that's great to be able to do that. The ESL programs I again would say all of our schools have a concentration of non-English speaking students, and they have been successful. I can't single out any one particular school. Each of our schools is a little bit different, but when it comes to trying to provide an environment for learning, I think all schools have done a good job.

11. What is the average Hispanic student score's on CIM or state test? How can the district improve the scores?

There's no doubt that the test results, whether they be SAT's or CIM, for Hispanic students are not where we want to be, just because the dropout rate isn't where we want it to be. But we've made great stride in reducing the dropout rate over the past 5-6 years. We've also tried as much as possible to assist students to be successful on testing. The issue really comes down to the issue of making that a priority and having kids be in situations where their English skills are sufficient to be able to do the test. While some of the students can take a look at a math test, a multiple choice, and it can be done in Spanish, it really, the English can't. So its really critical that again that piece, what is the ESL program that is working that will bring students as fast and as soon as possible to a level of English proficiency so that they can score well on the test. We also have to set our Horizon a little higher, our expectations. Students can learn, students can be successful and whether there Hispanic students, poor students they can be successful. We need to keep encouraging them. But the research that's out there is pretty clear; poverty is probably the biggest factor in students' success. You look at kids entering elementary school; the families that are affluent have already read books, they've already been exposed to literacy. Kids who come from families who don't have resources or money, poor families, they've ended up watch much more T.V rather than learning to read or being ready to read, literacy. And so I worry about that as a issue, and that transcends ethnicity, because it's an issue across this country that poor students, students from poor families have much more difficulties in school and on test. That's the real issue for me. Is that while language is a problem, I'm convinced that the real issue is that there's an issue of economics, and that the economics of this country need to be addressed at some point.

12. To what extent do you feel that you understand the aspects of the Hispanic students' lives?

I am not a native Hispanic individual, my last name is Rodriguez but that doesn't mean a whole lot. I 'm not someone who is as familiar with the cultural background as perhaps I should, but I've lived and worked for a number of years in situation, not only here in Hillsboro now since 1978, but for 10 years in inner-city Miami Florida working with African American students and their families, Cuban families. I feel as though I have a pretty good understanding of some of the needs that are their, but one of the pieces that I just mentioned is the one that I see that transcends it. I think that the real issue isn't the fact that there are cultural differences and language difference. I believe that the real issue is that families who have no money are not able to attend to the educational needs of their kids like families with money. I worry that the haves and have-nots in our Country have created the biggest issue for us and that is that, how do you help a child that has never seen a book who comes to Kindergarten, or the books that they've seen they don't understand because nobody's been their to read to them. Not all poor families are that way, not all poor families send children, but on average that's the issue. How can we make sure that the advantages that the more affluent families can provide their children so they're ready to learn, ready to be successful, how can we make that reality for families who don't have that. So for me that's a driving force, and I understand that a lot more than I do some of the cultural issues and social issues that may be, or language issues, because I think that's more of a problem in our country. The example I've always used, it's just as an example and I can use the example for any cultural group, but I'll use it for Hispanic families. Nobody wants to live next door to the... let me rephrase that... very few whites in upper middle class to middle class houses want to have Miguel the Migrant worker living next door to them. But, what about someone who was very wealthy and famous, I worry about that, the example. The African American community, is Joe the garbage guy living next door to you or Michael Jordan. Who do you want to live next door to you, well gee Michael Jordan hey that's pretty cool. I worry about that that that's a driving issue for us and I think in our community that's going to be a driving issue. When people with money move into Washington County where are they going to live, going to buy houses, are they going to buy a house in Hillsboro or are they going to buy a house in Beaverton, are they going to buy a house in Beaverton or are they going to buy a house in Lake Oswego. I worry about the further, we've seen a tremendous increase in our school district on the number of students on free and reduced lunch, and it used to be down in the high teens low twenties. Now we're up in the high thirties and it will be about forty in another year unless our economy changes significantly and I don't see that happening. I really worry about that because that transcends all of the issues related to ethnicity, race because when people are poor they are then competing against other poor folk and there's no room. So I really worry about that, and it worries me from an educational view point because it means again that the students with whom we work are coming to school with other problems, beyond just needing a good education or needing to learn a language as fast as possible.

13. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I haven't already asked, regarding the Hillsboro school district and Hispanic students?

The only other thing I would say is that the partnership that we've had with other organizations in Washington County have been wonderful. Our relationship with the Police has been absolutely phenomenal. At this point, we've had such wonderful outreach programs for the Hispanic community with the Hillsboro police. It's really. What I can tell you right now it that not every community has the kind of support that our school district has had working with the Hillsboro Police department. I know that the police are viewed in many of our sections of the community as not very positive, but when we have police officers in our schools who relate to students, that really helps out the district and minimizes other problems. Relationships with community action agency and other agencies in town to help provide services to the kids. Central cultural out of Cornelius, our relationship with them for medical care . etc. We've tried to do many thing across agencies to try to provide for students and its interesting to me again that while we can say that the issue is that well we're not well serving Hispanic students in some ways really when your look at it we're really have trouble serving students who are below the poverty level. It become very very difficult to do that because there are so many other needs that are there, whether it be hunger, whether it be housing, whether it be being able to come to school in clothes so that you don't look so different that people ostracize you. So I really see that as the work that we've done over the years that's been very positive. Trying to build relationships with other agencies to try to met the broader need of our students and families.

14. Compared to other ethnicities do you see Hispanics being always the main problem or do you see improvement with other ethnicities while Hispanic are at the same level or do you see a general improvement everywhere?

I think it's hard for any one to feel that there in a situation were their different, or whether they feel that or whether others communicate that is always a problem. So I think for all students its important that what we do as educators is try to make everyone feel welcome, to try to work to make sure that all students feel as though they've been accepted and to work on how students can interact with each other in a positive way. That will help minimize the issues because every ethnic group or racial group when you're a minority you will feel some things perhaps that are not positive. It incumbent upon us as educators to make sure that that doesn't happen and when it does happen, because it will, because we've not gotten away from how we feel about different groups, different people, than it become incumbent upon us to try to address that as an issue. When students are interacting and theirs restriction between two different groups of kids what can we do to make that friction go away of be minimized so that is becomes a learning process. One of the greatest things that is happening right know is that as we enter into a global society and more and more interactions, hey if very body's becoming different and maybe we need to celebrate that difference and enjoy and learn that if were going to be viewed as a Hispanic student that that's not really what the issue is that the issue is how can you be viewed

as a contributing adult down the road with others. So I think, I don't know if I've answered your question completely but the issue is that there is a real need to make sure that students and teachers and adults learn how they can work together and minimize the issues that people may have, to unlearn some of the prejudice that people have about other groups and the only way to unlearn is by interacting in settings that are safe and secure. That one of the things that students can do, rather than trying to interact in settings that are not safe and secure where other issues surface.

15. When you were talking about the economic issues have you noticed that it is worse for Hispanic students in general than maybe whites or African Americans or is it kind of equal, living below poverty line does it seem to be more in, Hillsboro, with Hispanic students?

There are more Hispanic students in Hillsboro so it becomes more of an issue I think, on the number of students. So if we were in parts of Portland we'd be talking about the issues related to African American students. So I think it really comes down to what are the larger populations. But I think still in our country on culture minority groups, anyone who's a minority is going to have some difficulties in gaining acceptance, becoming a part of the system, because again they may feel as though someone has been putting them down or more importantly very often someone is putting them down. And that's really the Question of how we can some how deal with that. I think if there's anything that public education has done over the years it has been always trying to be a leveling influence, to try to make the playing field for all students as level as possible to try to get kids to interact in a way that's positive and understanding.