

An Interview with

Robert Fortenberry

December 11, 1978

Interviewed by

Rebecca Ann Harris

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HARRIS: Today is December 11, 1978 and I'm interviewing Dr. Robert Fortenberry, Superintendent of Jackson Public Schools, on integration of Jackson Public Schools. Dr. Fortenberry, would you give me a brief summary of your background?

FORTENBERRY: Thank you, Rebecca. I'm delighted to talk with you today on a subject in which I've been very involved through the years. I was born in Louisiana. I grew up in Mississippi. I went to public schools in Marion County and graduated from Columbia High School in 1950. Then I went to Mississippi College in 1954 – graduated from Mississippi College. After that, I went to work – when I graduated from Mississippi College, after that, I went to work for the government and worked military intelligence. I served in the Philippines and Formosa, several places in the Far East, came back after some years with the government, married a lady from McComb and went to work for a construction company – worked in Georgia for awhile, then I came back to Mississippi and became a teacher, a coach, later Assistant Principal at Moss Point High School.

After leaving there, I went to school at Auburn, where I earned a doctor's degree, was on the staff at Auburn for awhile, and worked for them and a paper company, American Can Company in south Alabama – Choctaw County, Alabama. From there, I was Assistant Superintendent of Schools in Huntsville, Alabama during the – all the days of the rapid growth and the space industry boom in Huntsville. I went from there Bibb County, Georgia, where I served as Assistant Superintendent of Instruction. Coming there now, five and a half years ago, I've been Superintendent of Schools of Jackson. Jackson is a good city. I've enjoyed it. It's my place to be. These are some of the points of the background. I have a couple of children – one who has graduated from Jackson Public Schools, one who has spent now six years in the Jackson Public Schools and looking forward to graduating three years hence.

HARRIS: Okay. What were some of the problems you faced when you first came here?

FORTENBERRY: I think that any new superintendent has a problem with establishing credibility. I was the fifth superintendent, I think, in about – in less than five years in Jackson. The turnover had been extremely rapid in superintendents – a great deal of turmoil that was an outgrowth of the massive desegregation that had taken place. But, perhaps, the chief difficulty I had was that of establishing credibility with the people of the community. The people had to know that the superintendent was going to stay awhile, that he could deal with the problems, that he would be fair and honest with all the people – it's worked out fairly well.

HARRIS: Why do you think the Powell School System failed?

FORTENBERRY: The Powell School System? I'm not sure that you could say it failed, Rebecca. The – there were several things that were undertaken there at one time. It was time – it was a large school. The school was probably – the number of students there was larger than the num. . . – than the space in the building. There were some twelve hundred space – some twelve hundred students, and there were 1,800 children in the building. Also, it was an unpopular grade arrangement. It was a fifth and sixth grade centers [sic]. The people here were accustomed to one through six organizations. The children were bussed from wide areas of the city. This was an unpopular move. The instructional programs was [sic] pretty good. And a lot of – lot of facets of the instructional program are – are – were used then and continued to be used, and a lot of schools in the – in the – the Jackson schools today. I wouldn't say that it failed. I would say that, probably, the odds were against it ever being very successful from the time that it was initiated.

HARRIS: Do you think that individualized learning is still working today. It is unuseful?

FORTENBERRY: Oh, I think individualized instruction is – and I hate to use the term because it has a lot of different meanings for a lot of different people, but individualized instruction is – that's the way learning takes place. And, while the packet method of instruction is probably not as prevalent as it was in some earlier days, individualized instruction is still very much a current thing, and very much being used. It's used in – there's some individualized instruction used in every school in the district.

HARRIS: Did the majority of the community support integration?

FORTENBERRY: Oh, I don't think so. I don't think you could say that the majority of the community supported integration. I would not even say that the majority of the district today – the people in the community today support integration. I – and once again, when you talk about support, you would have to define that term. I think, perhaps, the majority of the people in the community today realize that it is a reality – had come to the realization that it's a reality, that it is necessary. But, I – if it were put on the ballot and were voted on, I'm not sure it would carry a majority vote today.

HARRIS: If the church had supported the – the integration, would you think it would've worked easier?

FORTENBERRY: Well, I think that human rights is basically a moral issue and – rather than just the term “integration.” I think human rights is a better term. I think it certainly would've gone much easier had we – had it been recognized as a moral issue and had been dealt with more forthrightly by the churches. In fact, some of the problems that I've – that I have today – have had today is

the fact that we have received limited support from the moral community on – in a broad scale basis on the total question of human rights. I think the great moral issue of our time is that of human rights, and I wish that the churches would have dealt with it in a more forthright manner.

HARRIS: Do you think that sports helped the integration along easier?

FORTENBERRY: I think in some ways it certainly did. There were a lot of things that helped and I think sports was one of them. Although you setup a syndrome that in which you characterize people in certain roles and believe they cannot do other kinds of things, but sports by and large did help, I think, bring together some forces that supported the integration of students. Yes, I'd say that.

HARRIS: How'd the political leaders prepare us for integration?

FORTENBERRY: Oh, in recent years, I think, have political leaders really begun to prepare us for this, in the former governor's administration – he began to – to employ Blacks or appoint Blacks to positions on boards. That helped a good bit. The – there's some evidence of this today. Some political leaders realized six years or so ago that Mississippi had a substantial black vote and began to say and do things which would make for a – make for a vote coming from both black and white people, and openly sought those votes. The – the political leadership of the community is now beginning to recognize, or has begun, or is now beginning to recognize the fact that there's a substantial number of black votes, but I would say by and large there has been little real planning for the development of biracial support systems by political leaders or – or most any other segment of the community for that matter, except public schools.

HARRIS: Do you think integration has caused the change of discipline and behavior in the schools?

FORTENBERRY: A lot of people are saying a lot of things today and they call it discipline, when they're really talking about racism. The schools and school discipline problems reflect the society in which they exist and as long as we have society – a society in which violence and racism is [sic] both encouraged and permitted, then the schools are going to reflect that. I think there have been great social changes which have taken place. How much this has had effect on discipline and how much the other things have occurred – that have occurred have affected discipline, you really cannot separate the two. I think a lot of people are saying a lot of things about discipline today, when they're really talking about their racial feelings.

HARRIS: How do you think that the discipline in school should be solved?

FORTENBERRY: I think the discipline in the school should be solved by a very close, working relationship between the home and the schools about what is expected of students, about the responsibility of the home and the responsibility of the school, and them working together to achieve that. I think that – I think that we – we must have a clear understanding about what is expected of discipline and recognize that there's a role for the school to play and a role for the home to play. When we get together on these things, then we'll improve discipline – the discipline throughout society, although I would have so say that the schools, in my judgment, are not places that are filled with – the schools in Jackson are not filled with violence and thugs and all other kinds of things. I think that most of the students of the Jackson Public Schools – approximately 33,000 a day – come to school, respond very well to discipline. There are some who are undisciplined and we have a difficult responsibility of putting some of those out of school practically every month.

HARRIS: Why were there such large federal grants of money after integration?

FORTENBERRY: Part of the process of doing away with the dual school system and moving toward a unitary school system was federal programs. During the – President Johnson's administration, the Great Society Movement, there was a great deal of legislation passed, which was to provide large sums of money to help students overcome past discrimination, to help school districts overcome the problems related to dismantling dual school systems, and building unitary school systems. All these things were a part of the American scene at that time. A lot of that money today has gone away because there is not the emphasis on education at the national level that there has been in previous administrations.

HARRIS: Where is this money going? Who spends it?

FORTENBERRY: Do you mean the money that's coming to the school system today?

HARRIS: Yes, sir.

FORTENBERRY: The primary money that we get today is Title I – ESEA Title I – monies. This is primarily employ – this primarily employs a number of teachers to offer remedial services to those students that are not performing according to where they could be expected to perform. There's – there are many, many programs which – which operate under the auspices of ESEA Title I. We have a kindergarten program, we have reading teachers, we have math teachers, we have a lot of programs that operate under that. Then we have another program in which we get some million dollars plus each year – is the ESAA (Emergency School Aid Act) money, which is money specifically designed to help schools overcome problems of the desegregation process. Most of this money is going to buy services for students that help them

achieve – provide teachers to help them achieve at a higher level than they are now achieving.

HARRIS: Do you think we'll ever return to the concept of neighborhood schools?

FORTENBERRY: The concept of neighborhood schools is basically one that is designed in the minds of many people to take us back to – to segregated schools. Now, if the term “neighborhood schools” is designed to say that we're going to have segregated schools again, that'll never happen. In my judgment, it cannot and probably should not happen. I think that as we are able to demonstrate that we no longer have a school system that discriminates against students, that is designed in a specific way to create racial segregation, then we can accomplish that. But, I think if you'll look at – across this city at the present time that it would be difficult to demonstrate that. So, I don't think that we could – that we will have neighborhood schools that follow racial lines again. I think that we will, at some time, have schools that – after we have demonstrated that we no longer discriminate, after we've demonstrated that our school system is no longer designed to segregate, I think we can have – that we can have schools which will allow students to go to school closer to home. In fact, we've done a good bit – we've done some of that in the last three or four years.

HARRIS: Okay. Thank you, Dr. Fortenberry.

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