

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Public Education Project

Teaching and Administrative Experiences

O. H. 737

ROBERT PEGUES

Interviewed

by

Mary Belloto

on

December 1, 1981

ROBERT L. PEGUES

Robert L. Pegues was born in Youngstown, Ohio, a son of Robert and Inez Pegues. His education experience is varied. He taught elementary school from 1959 to 1964, then served as Federal Project Director, Adult Basic Education from 1964 to 1966. He served as principal at Tod Elementary School from 1966 to 1967 and as administrative assistant for urban affairs from 1968 to 1969. He became assistant superintendent of the Youngstown schools in 1970 and superintendent from 1972 to 1978. He was director of the Office of Field Services and Educational Research at Youngstown State University from 1978 to 1979. He is currently superintendent of the Warren City Schools.

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INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT PEGUES

INTERVIEWER: Mary Belloto

SUBJECT: innovations, quality, federal aid, drug
problems, discipline

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B: This is an interview with Mr. Robert Pegues, superintendent of the Warren city schools, for the Oral History Program at Youngstown State University. The topic is public education. The interview is being held at the administration building in the boardroom at 261 Monroe Street in Warren, Ohio. The interviewer is Mary Belloto.

Mr. Pegues, where did your career in education begin?

P: I think that what happened, in 1948 I had a teacher named Mary Mackentar. She was my seventh grade teacher. I just enjoyed school. I was talking to her and it just occurred that I wanted to be a teacher and teach boys and girls like she did. She said, "Well work at it." I just stuck with that plan and I ended up becoming a teacher. I think that perhaps Mary Mackentar's biggest thrill was in 1970 when I became assistant superintendent of the schools in Youngstown. That is how I got interested in teaching. I've had many teachers and relatives encourage me along the line.

I might even add that when I was at Youngstown State College that I was in ROTC and rather successful in ROTC as officer commissioned second lieutenant. I went into the service and they tried to get me to make a career out of the service, which I thought at that point I might try. Dr. Essex, superintendent of the Youngstown schools, sent me a letter while I was in the service in 1958 and said that there was a position for me if I could get out of the service. I sent the letter to the Department of Army, and they released me with the understanding that if I wanted to come back I could continue my career in the service. I started teaching at Lincoln School December of 1958. I never went back to the service again.

B: What were the steps leading to your present position?

P: I taught sixth grade and seventh grade for about seven years at Lincoln School and then I was asked to become director of adult basic education; that was back in about 1965, 1966. At that time the adult basic education was just coming into being. As a matter of fact, we moved the first program into Youngstown public schools; it was called Project Second Chance. I stayed in that program for a year. I just thoroughly enjoyed that program. That program was to service adults who had less than a sixth grade education. They were able to get instruction to read and write, and arithmetic.

After spending a year in Project Second Chance I became a principal at Tod School in Youngstown. I was a principal for a year and a half. Then I was asked to come down to the central office as sort of an administrative assistant for urban affairs. I stayed in that program for about a year and a half, and I was encouraged to take a leave of absence and go to Cleveland and work with the Educational Research Council of America and to act as a consultant for superintendents throughout the country. I mainly went, I had no intentions of leaving, but it was with the understanding that any programs that I felt would benefit Youngstown, I would be able to bring those programs back to Youngstown. It proved to be a very, very rewarding experience. I traveled all over the country acting as a consultant. I stayed in Cleveland for a year and a half and returned to Youngstown.

That October or November the superintendent then, Dr. Vera, appointed me as assistant superintendent of the Youngstown schools.

In 1972, May 25, I was appointed superintendent of the schools. I stayed in that position in Youngstown for about six years. Then that brings me up to my superintendency.

B: Can you tell me a little about your own early years, where you were born?

P: I was born on Andrews Avenue in the section of the city called Smoky Hollow. I was the oldest of nine children. I was the first grandson on both sides. I had what I consider somewhat of a storybook childhood; I just really enjoyed myself. I had both mom and dad at home. As a matter of fact, I enjoyed where I lived at. After I grew up some of the people indicated that that was the slum. I didn't know it; I thought it was the best section of the country to tell you the truth.

In my early grades, kindergarten up through grade four, I would say that I somewhat struggled. I didn't really care for school that well at that time. I think I was somewhat spoiled. I was pretty much accustomed to having my own

way. You have to make adjustments in school and I think this was on account of me being the first grandchild and the first son. Both grandparents lived close by and if mom and dad didn't let me have what I wanted, I was able to go to grandma, and they gave me whatever I wanted. As you grow older you have to grow out of that. By fifth or sixth grade I started settling down and in seventh grade I decided I wanted to be a teacher. I went to Hayes. In elementary I went to Wood Street School, Madison, and then I went to Hayes. I stayed at Hayes for a year and then I went to Rayen. I felt that I had some really outstanding teachers, teachers like Mrs. Whittington for biology, McIntire for Latin. I graduated from Rayen High School and did fairly well. I enjoyed it.

B: Do you think having the one, excellent teacher as you have mentioned helped you to pick out good qualities in the succeeding teachers that you had?

P: I had a number of what I considered very excellent teachers. I think when I mention Mary McIntire I reached that point to where I was seeking. I had a number of outstanding teachers and I do feel that I've had some teachers who weren't outstanding. I tell parents today that sometimes having mediocre teachers is sometimes a learning experience also. In light sometimes I hate to say it, we don't always have superior situations and so we have to learn to cope with the sometimes not-so-pleasant situations. Fortunately I feel that the mediocre teachers are a few. Basically I was very fortunate in having what I call real outstanding teachers in the school system. Of course, Rayen High School at that time was well-noted for its academic program. I struggled and I had to work hard where some youngsters seemed just to learn everything very easily. I had to work and I appreciate it because I think it also taught me how to apply myself in college. Even though some of those things came very easily in high school, I wasn't able to cope so well in college even though the grades were so high in high school.

B: What about your higher education, where was that?

P: My higher education, of course, I'm a Youngstown College graduate. I was the highest graduate from 1958. As a matter of fact, 1958 was a rather interesting year for me because I graduated from Youngstown College, went into the service, and started teaching all in the same year. That was kind of an interesting year for me.

The following year I got married and then I started my master's work, basically because of the encouragement I got from my aunt, Dr. Jennings, who was a teacher at the time. Our principal, Mr. Fairbanks, also encouraged me to get my master's in school administration. I went to Westminster College to get my master's and then from there I went to the

University of Pittsburgh for my Ph.d. When I was made superintendent of Youngstown, that had to go by the wayside. Then I started later on at Akron and things got difficult again and I had to set that aside.

B: As far as your own career in education is concerned, how would you describe the years and teaching methods, environment, and instructional tools, and also discipline?

P: As a student?

B: No, as a teacher.

P: I go out into the schools frequently as superintendent and I try to teach at least twice a year. I see many of the same teaching methods, teaching techniques that I utilized back in the late 1950's and early 1960's. I see a return of the teaching methods that went by the wayside. I think we talk about assertive discipline; well, that's not really new. The techniques used in that type of program we actually had years ago.

B: You called it assertive discipline?

P: We didn't call it that. That is just a different title. I see many new techniques, supposedly, with new titles. If you go back, you'll find that they function under old titles.

Discipline, I think discipline is pretty much what the building principal and the teacher demands. I can go in buildings today and find excellent discipline. Though in some places you will find poor discipline. I think that was the same years ago. I would like to say that many times I hear much criticism about young people today. I hold a different view; I feel that with the problems society faces today that our young people do a very outstanding job. I didn't have the problems that young people are facing today. When I went to high school, I knew nothing about drugs. Even your best youngsters have to learn how to deal with the drug situation. I think our young people do a fantastic job of coping and learning to deal with new problems that they face in society.

B: They have more choices to make, don't they?

P: Many more. Television alone just changes the tone and quality of life that we have to deal with.

B: How about the instructional tools in the teaching environment itself?

P: I think the instructional tools today are just fantastic. There is no question about the instructional tools at the command of the teacher or principal today. They far outnumber what

we had twenty or twenty-five years ago. Even textbooks, you compare and I know there is a lot of controversy many times about the textbooks, but the textbooks today are beautifully written with photography and so forth. The tools today are just far greater than what they were twenty-five years ago.

B: Do you foresee that improving still?

P: Yes. I see more talk in terms of educational television, computer. I know that there are some adversaries to this, but I think what will happen is that we'll strike a balance where they will be utilized not excessively, but to meet the individual needs of our growth.

B: How do you see pupil motivation today or back when you began teaching compared to today?

P: Like everything else I think that that still rests with the master teacher in the classroom. I'm one that if a teacher has gone to college for four years and learned to be a teacher and then you're in a classroom of twenty-five, thirty youngsters, of course, you're the pro. I think that teacher has to find a way to reach girls and boys. It's work. People many times think teaching is an easy job, but if you're going to do a good job, it requires work, hard work. If you're going to be a master teacher, it really requires extra work, home visits, reading the records of your students, that extra touch where you reach out and make that youngster feel that he or she is indeed important. I think that's the motivation. I think that Mary McIntire, when I would go into her classroom, she inspired me just by the way she handled the classroom. I don't mean that she didn't have discipline, but she demanded girls and boys to obey the rules and regulations, and yet she had a human touch. I think a teacher has to be able to go into a classroom and care for boys and girls. They have to love people. I think if they have that type of approach that very few young people won't respond to that.

B: Can you talk about some of the innovations in education that you've seen?

P: I think perhaps that some of the innovations that come on the scene, some have come and gone. One that I would like to mention is called open classroom. I wasn't much of a supporter of open classroom at first.

I think in terms of the educational television that has come on the scene, it is just fantastic. We are now at the threshold for utilizing that more and more to meet the needs of those students. There is no question about our computer programming; they're just becoming a really fine instrument. I think that

there is a concern in the country that we might, perhaps, be going overboard with computers, but I think that we're in that growing stage.

When we talk about innovations that have come on the scene, I think we sometimes don't look at it this way, but our public relations with the community is an innovation. In my own case I think it's so important to have parent advisor committees and student advisor committees. If you think back, years ago we had P.T.A., but it wasn't really the type of relationship I think school boards and superintendents and principals are fighting for.

Of course, we see various styles of school buildings come and go. I was in a building this morning and we had a fine program in a building almost seventy years old. I walked out and maybe one day I might have to make a decision to close that building. There was something rather unique about that old building; it's a small building and it had a family-like atmosphere. I'm not so sure that we need to retain some of those types of facilities. I think we're going to have to take a look at ways to contain some of our older buildings and have them compete side by side with ultramodern.

B: Would you say that the expanded curriculum was one of the innovations?

P: Our curriculum today, anyone who comes into any of our school districts today, no matter what anybody says, I hear boards of education talking about what young people had thirty years ago, forty years ago. There is just no way that school districts are offering what they had yesterday compared to today. Our schools have just done a fantastic job in applying all types of curriculum offerings for our young people. I see this growing. I think we should be expanding our curriculum, not only in the academics; I do have a concern that we are losing out in the foreign language areas. We have to beef that up. What has uniquely happened too is that our vocational education programs are expanding. Certainly we are doing a much, much better job of meeting the needs of handicapped and our special students. I think our public schools are doing a mammoth job with all sincerity, in spite of all the criticisms the schools are getting.

B: What effects do you feel that federal aid to education has made on the educational system?

P: There is no question about it; I think federal aid has aided the school system. There are pros and cons on this. I happen to be one who feels that without federal aid this school district could have probably gone under. When one gets federal aid, there are some strings attached and sometimes people don't like the strings attached. By and large I feel

that the federal aid has been a supportive agent in the functioning of our American schools. I am cautious; I am watching what is happening now. I do not like to see federal aid just dropped completely from the public schools.

B: Do you feel bussing has made the education of children more difficult than it was twenty years ago?

P: What do you mean by bussing?

B: I think the rules or the guidelines for the bussing of students changed a great deal over a number of years. I think initially it was beyond three miles and then it became lower and lower.

P: We're talking just about the miles that we bus all our elementary school youngsters who live beyond a mile or more and our high school youngsters two miles or more. I think once again it has been a help in our situation here more and more. There is no question about the youngsters who live in very isolated situations; I feel that our bussing program is not a hindrance if we're looking at it from that point of view. Talking to one of the principals, he feels that the bussing program has helped him as far as administering with the building.

B: One of the things I'm thinking of is in terms of costs; the costs of that bussing have increased dramatically with the cost of fuel. Is it in some way going to offset the costs of the smaller buildings in neighborhoods as opposed to the centralized systems that prevail so much today?

P: I think that with the high cost of gasoline many parents weren't taking their youngsters to school. I'm certainly not opposed to boys and girls walking to school if they can, but I'm not so sure as I look at our modern society . . . where we can we should still provide transportation for your youngsters. Our mile, two mile system seems to be working very well now. We want to remember too that our public schools are service oriented. We're not in the schools to make a profit. Our profit is when we get boys and girls to start off in kindergarten and they go here through school and graduate and take responsible places in our society; that's our profit. If it means that we have to pump more dollars into education, I think there should be a priority, even if it means that we need to provide transportation to youngsters in our large cities as they do in our rural areas. I think that's just part of, in the long range, a profit to our communities and a profit to our country.

B: It has been said recently that the quality of education overall has declined in recent years. Would you agree?

- P: No. As a matter of fact, I strongly disagree. Those who make those statements, it is very difficult to compare what happened to our public schools in the midst of what is happening to our society in general. Unless you are able to equate the two in such a fashion as to weigh every factor, I think it would be a mistake to say that the quality of our education systems are deteriorating. I would also say that it is important to point out to citizens that probably the problems that we face in our schools today are merely reflections of the problems that we face in our open society. Until we correct some of the problems in our open society it is unrealistic to think that some of those problems aren't going to throw into our schools.
- B: I think some of those statements are made with the publicity on the lowering of scores on the SAT and ACT.
- P: I think we have to be very careful on test scores. I'm not against test scores; I think they should be a part of the overall picture. Certainly there have been people who have not been successful on test scores and yet have done very well in open society. I think test scores should just be part of the overall evaluation of the student.
- B: The statement has also been made in some places that the quality of education in private schools has surpassed the quality of education in public schools.
- P: My good friend Jack Augustine and I probably agree that both public and parochial schools face pretty much the same type of problems. I think in all fairness I would have to say there is a major difference in our public schools in that public schools do not have the right to deny that youngsters attend school. I think that makes a big difference, whereas our private schools can deny youngsters entrance. I think public schools, and rightfully so, should be open to all our boys and girls, and that this country, perhaps the greatest country in the world, should have education at the top of the priority list and should make it possible that no youngster ever have to be denied an opportunity to go to school. I feel our major trust should be to maintain a strong, viable public school system.
- B: The costs for each of these systems of education have merged. Do you feel that there are some things that can be done to reverse that situation?
- P: I feel that with the economy as it is, I think that makes it a little more difficult for many parents to send youngsters to private schools. At the same time, our costs are going up. I'm not sure that that's not an individual situation where people want to send their youngsters to a private school for whatever reason and will continue to do so if they can afford

it. At the same time we in the public schools have to try to contain costs and still offer the very best program we possibly can. I think there needs to be a continuous effort of both public and private schools and parochial schools working together. To our auxiliary services and so forth there is a sharing; I think that effort needs to be continued.

B: How much of a problem do you feel that drugs continue to be in the school system today?

P: There is no question about it; it is a problem in every school system.

B: If there were a percentage of students in any system, would you be able to give a percentage of students involved, say in the Warren system?

P: No. Years ago people would say they were bad students and involved in this or that. I think we should try to educate our youngsters in why they shouldn't be involved.

B: What about the topic of sex education, do you feel the schools are doing a better job today?

P: I think they're doing a better job, but that is still a challenging issue with the families. The state has made certain mandates that we follow. I think that someone has to do it; I'm not opposed to having sex education in the schools, especially with permission from parents. Many times parents get upset about this, but many times parents aren't doing it; they aren't educating the young people. When you see the statistics of young ladies who are pregnant, something has to be done. The schools have to pick up this part of the education.

B: If it were possible for you to implement any changes in education today, within your own system here, what would they be?

P: To tell you the truth, the changes I want, I gradually implement them anyway; they just take some time. What I want to do is just strengthen what we have going for us. Perhaps more than anything else I think that I want to implement a philosophy in our schools for our girls and boys. Schools are for our children. I think what I would like to see happen more and more, and we're working at it, is that we do everything we can to reach all of the individual needs of all of the girls and boys. Sometimes we're missing that. We need to do it in such a way that we make the girls and boys feel there is a place for them in our society, that they are needed. I think that is what education is all about.

- B: Do you feel that parents come in and try to oppose or try to dictate what types of learning . . .
- P: Let's face it, parents are concerned about their boys and girls and they should be involved. Sometimes what happens is that they relive what they wanted and don't really look at the needs of our boys and girls today.
- B: What advice would you give to a college student planning to teach elementary or secondary school?
- P: Today I would say that if you don't, and I tell students this, if you don't like people, don't get into teaching. It's a hard job; if you're not willing to work, it's not a job that you can make a fortune in. If you're not willing to work and put in extra time in helping girls and boys be successful, then don't go into teaching. I only ask parents to do three things: Make sure the youngster is fed and clothed, and tell him when he gets to school to obey the teacher. If a parent does that, we don't need to ask for anything else.
- B: Do you feel that in some ways in recent years there hasn't been that dedication in individuals in the teaching field?
- P: I've dealt with that issue and I'm asked that question many times. Again, I have to think society has changed. There used to be a time where you had rules that if you taught in the school system you couldn't be married. In terms of my high school days many of the teachers weren't married. They didn't have to get home and care for a family and cook and do the laundry and so forth. So many times a teacher could say, "Robert, you stay after school," and kept me there until 6:00 until I knew my Latin. Many teachers can't do that today; they have families.
- B: One more question. Your own personal experiences in education, what would you say would have been your single, most rewarding?
- P: They've all been such beautiful experiences. I guess as I think back, the day I was appointed superintendent of the Youngstown schools and met with all the teachers in Youngstown.
- B: How about your worst experience?
- P: Probably the worst experience I had was trying to get the WRTA transit authority into our school system. What we were trying to do was join forces with the transit authority. That was a very negative situation.
- B: How about any humorous experiences?

P: I've had many of those also. One that sticks in my mind is the time that a teacher sent a youngster to the office and he was to be paddled and I asked him, "What's the problem?" He looked at me with big eyes and he said, "You know, Mr. Pegues, I try to be good." Whenever I deal with youngsters, it seems like I think back to that one youngster.

END OF INTERVIEW