

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of United Schools Project

Superintendent of schools

O. H. 662

PAUL MUHA

Interviewed

by

John Gecina

on

April 1, 1981

PAUL MUHA

Paul Muha was born on June 23, 1925, the son of Charles and Anna Muha, in Morgantown, West Virginia. After graduating from Morgantown High School in 1943, Paul entered the Navy where he served until 1946. Later he proceeded to further his education at West Virginia University, graduating in 1950 with a Bachelor of Science in Education. Paul Muha continued his education at West Virginia where he received his Master's degree in 1954.

Mr. Muha is currently superintendent of United Schools and will retire at the end of the school year. Paul is actively involved in the community with membership in the Winona Puritans. He enjoys fishing, gardening, crafts, reading, coin collecting and spectator sports.

He and his wife, Valgene, have three children: Barry, Penny, Heidi. They reside in Winona, Ohio.

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INTERVIEWEE: PAUL MUHA

INTERVIEWER: John Gecina

SUBJECT: job responsibilities, accomplishments,
problems

DATE: April 1, 1981

G: This is an interview with Paul Muha for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on United Schools, by John Gecina at United High School, on April 1, 1981, at 1:30 p.m.

Mr. Muha, can you please give me a short background on yourself, where you were born, where you went to high school, a little bit about your parents and some other family member?

M: If I could go back again to my dad, at the age of fourteen he came to Pennsylvania from Czechoslovakia. Later on he went to Morgantown, West Virginia and got a job as a young boy in a glass factory in Morgantown, West Virginia. My mother was born and reared just northwest of Pittsburgh. Somehow, some way, she and her family migrated to Morgantown. She met my dad and they were married. They had five sons. They lived in and around the Morgantown area until somewhere in the neighborhood, I guess, of 1950 or 1960. At that time the state of West Virginia was planning to put in two main highways, two expressways. They started to do the surveying. Then a little later my dad retired. Shortly after he retired, he passed away. They bought my mother's house for a couple of dollars and tore the house down along with sixty some other houses in the neighborhood and put an interchange right where my home place was. Now there is nothing left to my home place, but I can go back there. I have several times and I see a cloverleaf on the super highway going from Erie, Pennsylvania to Charlestown, West Virginia, and from Hagerstown, Maryland over to 79 east-west expressway.

As far as my schooling is concerned, then I went to Morgantown High School. I graduated with the class of 1943. I went to the service in 1943, United States Navy. I went to the Great Lakes and I went to California. I spent about three or four months on a destroyer. The war was declared over. They discharged me and I went back to Morgantown and enrolled in WVU, West Virginia University in 1946. I spent four years there.

Upon graduation I went over to Garrett County, Maryland and got a job in a small high school as a social studies teacher. Two years later the school district was consolidated with two other districts to build a larger high school. So they consolidated three high schools. I was very fortunate. I was a classroom teacher two years to get a job as assistant principal in the high school. I was offered a position as an elementary principal in the county seat of Oakland, Maryland. In the meantime then, I've been going back for my Master's and my principal's certificate. I was always qualified for the job and had this experience and was appointed principal of the elementary school. I spent about a year and a half there. The high school principal decided to go back to Baltimore and I was appointed principal of the high school then where I was assistant principal. I spent four years as principal of the high school. We had in the neighborhood of 900 to 1000 students. It varied and I can't remember the exact number. We had grades seven through twelve in this particular school. Following that I was going to make a fortune, so I was told, if I would get out of education and get into World Book Encyclopedia selling, which I did for two years. I did make--I have to be truthful--twice as much money world booking than I did as principal of the high school. But somehow, some way, world booking wasn't for me. So I got out of World Booking and decided to get back into education.

So I came over to Medina, Ohio and got a job as a math teacher in junior high school. The next year I was appointed as math teacher half day and audio visual director for the school for the other half of the day. Five years later the principal of the school decided to become the high school principal and the high school principal decided to become superintendent, I believe, over in Western Ohio. So I was offered the job as principal of the junior high and I took it. I was principal then for about five or six years. Then the business manager's position opened up in the school district, Medina City. I applied and was appointed to business manager. I had that position for about two years. The assistant superintendent's position opened up and I applied for that. So I was transferred from business manager to assistant superintendent. I had that position for about a year and a half, two years, and I heard about

- the vacancy here at United and I applied. They appointed me as superintendent in 1978. Two months from now I will be retiring after spending 29 years in education, at the ripe, old age of 56.
- G: How would you describe the responsibilities of your position as superintendent here at United?
- M: I'm not sure I know what you mean. Do you mean describe the position, the jobs, or describe the effect that it has had or my opinion of the jobs that have to be done?
- G: Okay, let's reword it then. Let's say, what do you think is the most important responsibility of a superintendent?
- M: All right. First of all, I think not only at United, but in any school district the superintendent has to be able to see the total district. He has to have this, what I call the total bird's-eye view of the district. He has to be able to see what's happening on a day to day basis. He has to be able to know what's happening in buildings and grounds, what's happening in transportation, what's happening in the curriculum, what's happening in the classrooms, what is the thinking of the parents, are they supporting schools, what do they want to know about the schools, and how can parents help. Then I think the superintendent must be on top of the finances, because you and I know, John, that if you don't have money, you are not going to be able to run your school. So somewhere along the line again, you have to be able to think in terms of the cost of the program and you've got to look at the income. Then you've got to plan your program so that you are within the bounds of the income. You can't overspend, in other words.
- G: Would you say that maybe the number one problem that you may face as superintendent is making sure that the school is financially set?
- M: I'm not going to say it's number one. I just mentioned about being able to see the total picture. I'm sure there are times when I was a teacher and when I was a principal, when I was assistant superintendent that I felt that maybe our leadership didn't see all of the aspects of the program, the total district, and maybe we had some problems as a result. So I'm saying that the superintendent must be able to see the total picture and comprehend. Then I don't know if there is any one, particular thing that you would say would be number one, because they're so many number ones. For example, without finances and if you don't have money, you can't operate your schools. But if you're not communicating with your staff and with your public, you can have all the money you want and you're not going

to have an effective program. And if you have all kinds of activities going on, but you don't know what is going on in the classrooms or you're not setting aside time, you're not emphasizing the classroom as the heart of the curriculum and the heart of the school. If you're not emphasizing this, then you can have all the money that you want to and you can communicate all you want to, but you still don't have a good school district. And so I can just go on and on and on that I think all of the areas are important, but I think somehow, some way . . . Today more than any we're talking about money, so money is getting a lot of the emphasis. A school district with all the money, if they are not communicating and they don't know what is going on in the program, they still don't have a good school district. So all of these areas are important. The superintendent must be alert to all of these areas.

- G: Then you would consider these probably the greatest problems that you had to adjust to coming into United District? Was there any particular one that you had a problem with?
- M: I'm going to say this John, and I don't mean to sit here and brag or make any kind of bold statements, but if you go back again to the experiences that I related to you from 1943 . . . In fact, I can even go beyond that because when I was in school, in junior high, I sold newspapers and programs and refreshments at West Virginia football games. I was a pin setter in a bowling alley. I worked in a cafeteria at a local plant, DuPont Plant. I worked on a Coca-Cola truck as a helper to the driver. I was a salesman for an office supply company. I was a salesman for a wholesale grocery distributor. I had a rich background in terms of experiences before I even started into college. And then I was a teacher. I was an elementary principal, a junior high principal, and a senior high principal. I was a business manager. I was audio-visual director. I had the experiences of an assistant superintendent. I think I was well aware of all of the problems that I faced on day one. All I wanted was an opportunity to be able to do them.
- G: Were there any particular ones that you saw coming into United District? Were there any particular problems, something different that you hadn't seen in Marion County?
- M: No, I can't say. I guess it goes back to this school district, Medina City School District, and the Garrett County School District, because that was a county system, although I was in four different buildings there. I think education problems are repeated in district after district. You just have new names and new people, but as far as

saying that there was some kind of problem here at United that was unique to United, I don't see anything. I haven't to this day found anything that would be unique at United that we didn't have in Medina and Garrett County, Maryland in talking with other superintendents and talking with other principals and when I was a teacher. By the way, I also was the president of the county teacher's association, so I've had all kinds of experiences in education, John. I believe that the problems are, and they have been over the years, somewhat the same just with different names. Maybe today our problems are a little different. Now when I say different, they're the same problems in all the school districts, but they are different in that today we have to negotiate and we have to get out a job description and we have to get out a policy on everything we do. We don't seem to be able to function without a rule, regulations, policy, or job description. Years ago I did all those things without them.

G: Would you say then there is more law now interpreted in the schools than there was?

M: Yes. I don't know if you wanted to use the word accountability in trying to pinpoint where the problems are. I don't know whether all these rules, regulations, policies, and job descriptions have eliminated the problems.

G: They've probably created one in particular. Lawsuits are probably more now coming up than maybe they were in the past?

M: Oh, yes.

G: They find little things wrong with the type of law. You haven't handled it right or you didn't go through the right procedures. Mr. Muha, when you came here three years ago, was there any particular type of curriculum that you were looking for at United and did you do anything to promote the curriculum at United?

M: I did this before I was even employed, because in talking with the county superintendent I wanted to make sure that the county office was the builder of the curriculum or the courses of study at United. I know that when you have an independent school district, like an exempted village or a city district, that somebody in that district must be responsible for curriculum. But when you get into a local situation, you've got to have the county office be the builder of the curriculum be responsible for the courses of study, and be responsible for the curriculum. I made inquiries into this before I was ever employed, because I knew we didn't have an assistant superintendent in charge of curriculum. I said that the basic, fundamental reason that school exists

is for the curriculum or the course of study. We can do all these things about finances, communication, football, basketball, track, drama. We can talk about having suppers and PTO's and everthing. We can get ourselves so busy doing so many things that all of that has to be pointed towards the classroom and the curriculum, or none of it is worth anything. So I was concerned about the curriculum and started to talk about courses of study and talking about curriculum from the day that I arrived here on the scene. In fact, one of the first individuals that I talked to was Helen Conrad, who was the elementary supervisor in charge of reading. One of the first people that I had to talk to of our staff members was Helen Conrad about reading. So we started out there. And then with the three principals that we had we started to talk about courses of study. We started to talk about curriculum and what we were doing as far as classroom programs were concerned. Yes, John, I was concerned about that from the very first day.

- G: Mr. Fair, who takes care of our audio-visual aids, is going to bring in a course of study next with computers. Did you have an input for this type of study at United?
- M: Yes, shortly after I arrived on the scene and I knew that Mr. Fair and Mr. Marty were interested in computers, we started to talk about computers and what could we do here at United in terms of getting a course started or making computers known to our boys and girls. Now we said that we did not feel that we wanted to put in a computer course that was going to polish off computer experts. Because we are a comprehensive high school and because we are limited in terms of the number of personnel we have and the financing, we thought we should do something as far as introducing the students to computers. So, I would say, yes, way in the back somewhere between day one and today that Mr. Fair and I, we talked about computers and what we could do here at United.
- G: As you're about to leave the United Local Schools, how do you feel that you are leaving the district? What kind of shape are we in?
- M: Well, I would hope John, that we're in better shape today than we were three years ago.
- G: That may be a loaded question, but I don't mean it to be that way. I am just saying that you've been init and you probably know and foresee some of the problems that are going to be heading in the future, not for instance, that you many have been the cause of it.
- M: Three years ago I think I did make this statement to the

staff, that I wasn't concerned in making any changes in the district for change's sake. I wasn't interested in making any changes because I thought they ought to do it my way. I said that the only changes that I would make would be changes that somebody would come to me and say, "Mr. Muha, I think we ought to look at this area or this program, and I think something ought to be done about it." Then I would look into it and if I felt that change was necessary, then we would change it. I also told them I would begin to look and listen to see if there was something that needed to be changed or some alterations made to the present program. Now, I know that you haven't been here from day one, but I was just thinking the other day, we've made a whale of a lot of changes in the last three years. I could assure you that I didn't make these changes because I wanted to make them personally. But we had staff input, administration input, board input, parent input, and we had everybody in the district practically, including parents, talking about-- Why don't we do something about this? When are we going to change this? How long do we have to put up with this? And so we've made an awful lot of changes, John.

G: Of the changes, can you pinpoint one that sticks out in your mind that helped United grow in the last three years?

M: I would say right offhand, John, that when we changed the concept of junior high and senior high what we did was to eliminate one principal and we made one principal now responsible for grades seven through twelve and gave him an assistant. I have to watch how I use that word. It's not a him, it's a her. But we made that change because we felt that we had two principals who had to do the very same thing with very small schools. They were spending more of their time in some areas that maybe were not related to the classroom and to personnel, mainly the staff. And somehow, some way, we felt that if we had one principal and one assistant that we could assign the daily, routine chores to the assistant, which must be done and done professionally and businesslike, to relieve the principal for the responsibility of the classroom and curriculum and working with personnel. So I go back again to three years ago when I said, "Yes, I was concerned about curriculum on day one." I believe this would prove my concern because we now have a principal who does have the time to evaluate classrooms and work with the teachers and work with our county supervisors on courses of study. Our assistant principal is devoting time to the daily routines of the school. So I think what I'm saying here is that to me it was a big change and one I think was in the right direction.

G: In other words, you are saying that the principal should have the responsibility for taking care of the teachers

and the curriculum and the assistant principal very simply is going to take care of the discipline and any other problems that come up?

M: Activities, lunch programs, busses, and those kinds of things, yes. We did another thing too, John, that I think is significant and had a tremendous effect on the district, and if it will be continued I think will be a good thing for the district. I felt after arriving here a very short time that we were lacking in communication. When I say that I'm talking about the high school, the elementary school, the transportation department, the buildings and grounds, and the cafeteria. And so what we did was to organize what I called our superintendent's advisory council. On that council we have the two principals, the director of reading, the director of the media center, the director of guidance, the director of health services, the supervisor of buildings and grounds, the supervisor of transportation, the supervisor of the lunchroom programs, and then we had the treasurer, a county supervisor, my secretary and then a representative for the UEA, United Education Association, and a representative from the OEA, Ohio Education Association. We sat down and we talked in terms of what is it that we wanted to do. Well, first of all we said that we wanted to share our programs and our departments in our schools with each other so that we would know what was going on and if there were problems, how it was affecting the other departments or the other schools. That way we would be able to help or at least be made aware of and not criticize that department or that school for problems that maybe nothing could be done about. Also we talked about if there was something that we wanted to change, or something that we felt would make the district a better district, that we ought to discuss it in that group first. In fact, every board agenda, before we go to the board of education, we discuss the item in this advisory council. I can't tell you how many items have been scratched from that agenda because somebody on that committee said something that would raise a question in my mind that made me feel that we shouldn't present that information to the board at that particular time. So we have felt from the beginning that curriculum was important. I think we've made some changes there. I think that we're talking about communication and I think it starts with this committee. Then you know and I know that we have some newsletters that we get out. One of them happens to be the news review that we send to all of the mailboxes, which really touch all of the residents of our school district every other month.

G: Was that introduced by you when you came or was it already done?

M: No, it was already done, but it was a one page or maybe a half page newsletter and we've developed it into a four,

five, six or seven page newsletter. I don't know whether people are reading it or not, but at least we are sharing information with them.

And then we started the Citizen's Advisory Council too. This is involving parents. We have about twenty parents who are involved in that. We have had a number of issues and concerns that have been discussed with the parents. We also have staff members on that committee. What we are doing there again is trying to relate to the parents and having teachers present some of the problems that we are having in school and what we are trying to do to make United a good school district. It has been a good experience again.

G: We're talking about group and advisory committees. Has there been one, maybe, major problem that stuck out with the parents or with the community that they look at United and they say, "Well, this needs to be corrected first?" Is there any major thing or has it just been the same material or the same problems all the way through?

M: Yes, I think there is a thread running through the problem here at United. And if I'm reading this right, I can say it existed before I arrived here and maybe it's still here and I don't know how we're going to overcome it. It's going to be one of the things we're going to have a recommendation or talk about when I leave that somebody must take hold of this and work on this. That is there seems to be a barrier between the school personnel and the citizens, or parents and the taxpayers. This is the same thing we are experiencing at other school districts, but here at United I know that we have that problem. I don't think that parents disagree with what we are trying to do with the children, with the program, with the school district in terms of education, but I don't believe they know what we are trying to do. I believe we as school people are guilty of not telling the parents what we are trying to do. I think it's time we got to meet with the parents. I know that the citizen advisory committee can't solve all of the problems, because we don't have all of the parents in there. But I think what we are experiencing and what we have learned is that many parents have the same kind of a problem, that is that they don't know what is going on. So my recommendation, and my suggestion, is that somehow, some way we start out the school year and when the children are in kindergarten, before we do any registering or before we do any kind of programming with those kindergarten children we ought to have a meeting and we ought to have newsletters. We have to have handbooks to present to the parents of the children who are going to be registered in kindergarten. And all the way through when we talk about reading we ought to tell the parents what it is we are trying

to do with reading. When we talk about math, when we talk about science, or any one of the curriculum areas, we ought to be telling the parents what it is that we are trying to do. Somehow, some way, I think we ought to be telling the parents what responsibilities they should have with these children, because we don't have them all of the time. I think there are some parents who feel that we're going to solve all of the problems of all of the children and that's a mistake.

- G: Mr. Muha, about the facilities at United before you came, did you add any? I know that there was a levy in 1980 that was voted down by our taxpayers. That was very simply to put on a new addition at United that we need. Is there anything else that you tried to get at United or that you did get at United, facilitywise?
- M: Well, John, if we go back again to day one, I told the board that what I was going to do was to look at the total district as rapidly as I could and make some recommendations. I guess I wasn't here six months when I realized that we were overcrowded. We have a lack of facilities problem here at United. We had it three years ago and we have it today. I'm sorry that we didn't do something about it in the three years that I was here. When we talked about our needs, we talked about nine additional classrooms. We talked about increasing the size of the highschool media center. We talked about building a principal's office as an administrative wing so that there would be space in there for the counselors, the assistant principal, a general office area, a conference room, and a place where parents who come into the school would have a waiting room, a place for them to sit down in comfort and wait for the principal, the assistant principal and the counselors. The problem we have here is they have to wait out in the hall because there is not an office big enough where they can come in and sit down. We need additional space for the media center in the elementary school. We also need facilities for storage for our band. If you are going to conduct a band program such as we have here at United, and it's a good one and we have eighty some students who are involved in our varsity band, there's a lot of equipment, a lot of uniforms, and a lot of supplies that you have to house. We do not have the facilities to properly store these things. Along with that we certainly need a gymnasium large enough to accommodate all the programs that we're trying to do for the senior high school, junior high school, and the elementary school. We need to consider boys and girls in the programming. We need to consider the community. And our present facilities will not accommodate any of the groups that I mentioned. Drama, plays, speeches, or having community meetings where they invite guest speakers or if our local churches want to

have some kind of meeting, we do not have a decent facility in our community. So what we are proposing, or what we proposed and didn't sell, was to build a gymnasium large enough in the back of this present building so that we could have three playing areas in that gym. And with that present high school gymnasium we could have two playing areas in there. So that's five playing areas.

I think we have a tremendous need and a serious need for facilities for the total school program. I'm talking now of classrooms, reading, media center, and library. We're talking about physical education. We're talking about basketball. We envision that under the gymnasium there would be a locker room, a huge locker room with part of it devoted to girls, part of it to physical education, and part of it to athletics, especially football and track. So if we are going to have an effective football program that is going to be getting a number of students involved and getting the community involved, which we have in that past... we've built a good football program. You were here last year, John, and you helped us to continue to build that program, but we don't have the facilities to accommodate the players in a practice session, fitness training, between halves, dressing room facilities. We just don't have those. I think to continue the caliber of the football program that we have we need to have locker facilities. I think that this facility that we are talking about would take care of that particular need.

G: I can agree with you whole-heartedly being here a year and seeing what some of the athletes had to go through in going home and coming back and going home. It is pretty difficult.

Mr. Muha, my last question is would there be any advice to a beginning teacher, to a beginning principal or to a beginning superintendent?

M: I would say, John, yes. I've thought of this many times. Now I'm not talking about perfect people. I'm not saying that yours truly is the perfect individual. First of all, I make mistakes. I've done some dumb things. I've made some decisions that I was sorry for. I think anybody going into education, whether it's teacher, principal, or superintendent, first of all ought to be honest with themselves and honest with anybody that they deal with, and deal with all the problems on top of the table, nothing under the table. Do not get involved in any kind of political shenanigans or personal shenanigans with anybody. To me, everything must be professional. It must be on top of the table and you must deal with it as a problem or as an issue that is going to make for a better school district, for

the school, for the staff. It is the boy and girl that's going to benefit from whatever you do in the classroom or in the program of our co-curriculum. So I'm saying that anybody going into teaching or principalship or superintendency must be honest with themselves, must deal with all issues above the table and must be professional in all of the dealing all of the time. As far as doing dumb things and as far as making poor decisions or making poor judgement, you'll always have that. I think if the person is honest and they are dealing above the table and they are dealing professional, you can always overcome those. You can look at the next time it comes around, you're not going to make that same mistake or you're not going to do that dumb thing again.

G: Mr. Muha, it has been a pleasure talking to you. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

M: I've enjoyed my 29 years in education. I feel that I have really dedicated my life to education. I know some people get turned off when I talk about dedication, but I'm going to tell you, I think I've worked 50 years in the 29 or 30 years I've been in education because I've been dedicated to education. I've enjoyed it. I've met a lot of good people in the system. I've met some people that were not so good and I've met some lousy ones. But I think that the majority of the people that I've met, and I'm talking now in terms of students, staff, parents, professional people, people in the community, and all walks of life my experiences have been good. I've just thoroughly enjoyed it. In a way I guess I'm sorry to be getting out of education, but on the other hand I feel that I've put in my 29 years and I've got another goal, John; I've got something else I'm looking at. I'm shooting for something else down the road and I'm not at liberty to say at this particular time what I'm doing. You know that I've got to have something lined up or else I wouldn't be moving out of education just to be moving out.

G: Mr. Muha, again I want to thank you for taking the time. The year that I have spent with you, you have been just a great influence on me and I'm sorry to see you leave.

M: Well, John, you've been a real influence here in our school district, high school, not only with the students, but with the staff and with the parents. We really appreciate your coming to United. I know you had to make a decision, just as so many of us had to make decisions to come here. We really appreciate you coming to United.