

Interview with Principal Dawn Montgomery
5/22/02

****Do not quote bracketed items because they were not clear enough to transcribe directly. They are PARAPHRASED.****

Lindsey Johnstone: This is Lindsey Johnstone interviewing Principal Dawn Montgomery on May 22nd at 8:00.

LJ: If I could get some things about your background...

Dawn Montgomery: Sure.

LJ: Because I personally don't know that much. Where were you working before you were at Century?

DM: I was an assistant principal at Evergreen Middle School.

LJ: And how did you come to work here?

DM: Well, in 1997 - that was the first year that the ninth graders came from the middle school to the high school and so - I came with the ninth graders.

What were some of your first impressions of Century?

Wow, um. Well, you know, it was a big beautiful building and it was... there was a lot of work to do - it was a major project to open the building. I put together the Student-Parent Handbook that first year; that was an adventure. And I hadn't been an assistant principal at a high school before. I took my first administrative position at Evergreen and I had been there for three years. It was a big adventure, very exciting.

And then you became principal after two years?

Yes, that's correct.

How many vice principals were there when the school opened?

Well, Mr. Orme and I were the very first vice principals. [Asks about the status of the Orme interview] And shortly after that, we hired Mr. Zehr because it was a very interesting opening - there were quite a few problems bringing in diverse communities of ninth graders that had never been together before - didn't know each other. And it created some issues for us and having two assistant principals just wasn't enough.

What kinds of issues were there?

I think there were clashes between gangs of kids that didn't know each other and hadn't been together before. And we had a group of kids - not really unlike the kids we have now - but everyone was [fighting] for position. You hear a lot of people saying we had problems

with the Christians and the Atheists and it wasn't really an issue about religion. It wasn't really an issue about this group against this group. It was really just about just trying to find their place. And there was quite a bit of conflict. There were more fights that first month of school than I can remember since then. It was problematic, and I don't think Liberty is going to have that kind of problem because we were so new to Hillsboro - for kids to be moving around like that. It was very interesting.

Did you hear about any problems like that at other schools?

When they opened? When they first opened? Well, no, I didn't. I'm not aware of any other openings of high schools where they had the kind of problems that we had when we opened.

[Asked whether she'd like to continue with the questions or show me her documents as she had suggested before the interview. She left me the decision.] How did the change from the 8-period schedule to the block schedule affect people? How was that taken by the students?

I think that they had the easiest time. At first, I think they were reluctant to move to the change. It was a longer period to be in classes, for sure. So that change was a little difficult, at first. But I think that at the end of a year, two years, they didn't want to go back. The teachers didn't want to go back. Initially, the school was planned to open with a block schedule but because the ninth graders were moving and that was such a huge change, they decided that they were going to start them right away.

What differences have you noticed between Century and any previous schools that you've been at - either your high school or other schools you've taught at or Evergreen?

Well, one of the things I'll never forget was the conversation I had when the planning team at the point where they were looking at vice principals. I remember a conversation with Mr. Schmertzler and he was talking about the school and some of the things that they were interested in doing: we'd come in community based, the offices - instead of being departmental - were going to be inter-department and multi-departments were going to be represented there. They were really looking forward to some teaming and having students in smaller communities. Well, I've got a huge middle school background; I've worked all my career in middle schools and that was really what I wanted to do. I really saw that things needed to happen in the middle schools, where students were on a schedule that was similar to the high schools kids, where they were going every fifty minutes to another class [and that doesn't really make very much sense.] So, the reason I went into administration was to see more connections with kids and more community service. And when he said that that's what they were going to do at the high school level, I got really excited. I thought that that would be really interesting. I spoke Spanish and there was a large community of Hispanic-speakers and that seemed like a good fit. I was really excited about it.

[We've heard that some of the original ideals of the planning committee could not be met, such as that there are not as many integrated classes as originally intended. What goals are still being worked towards that have not been met?]

As you know, we have some integrated classes. I think the most frustrating thing for all of us since we've opened - the hardest thing to put into place - because we've grown so fast has been with the small communities. We've really had trouble realizing the school into groups of 200 kids or so with a group of teachers so that they were going to get their core subject

areas from one group of teachers. I haven't lost sight of that. We applied for a Small Schools federal grant, that we're hoping to get this year. I see that when Liberty opens in 2003... that we're going to do that. That's my goal. That's the one thing that I think the planning team saw at that point that has been the hardest to put into place.

Was the transition from vice-principal to principal hard for you [and, if so, why]?

It was. It's a big school, and when you think about it, with 2000 students, and about 150 staff members - 100 teaching staff and at least 50 classified staff - it's a lot of people to manage - a lot of people to keep track of. It's a daunting job, from that respect. But it's the most rewarding job I've ever had. Just to be in a position to oversee such wonderful programs - the students do amazing things. I mean, the perfect example is seeing JagFest on Monday [May 20]. It's an amazing thing to see kids performing and being recognized for the great things that they do and I appreciate it as a leader of the school in a way that I have never been able to see it [from another position].

How do you feel about the current teaching staff at Century? Are there any teachers that have left that you wish could have stayed?

Well, always when a good teaching staff retires, it's hard to see them go. You know, with Ms. Young leaving this year, and Ms. Haack - I know there will be other teachers from the original planning team who will be retiring in a couple of years, and it's going to be difficult. [But the teachers we have and get to replace the retiring ones are great too.] They're really great people to work with because they're not afraid to get in and try new things and to experiment and they don't worry about failure or change so much - they really want to do things [to make education] exciting. That's wonderful to be a part of.

[What is SES? What does it dictate in regards to our school? What does it mean for Century?]

There's no doubt we've had the lowest SES in the district [for] at least the last two years. It affects the school in that we're working with some students that don't have and can't afford. Sometimes they don't go out for after-school activities or athletics because they don't think that they have the kind of finances available for it. And students that get involved - the more they get involved, the more successful they are. That's really hard to insure for students that don't have - that are [on the lower end of the economic scale]. It does affect us. There's no question about it. But I also feel like we have a wonderful diversity and I wouldn't change it. I love the racial diversity and the economic diversity. I think it makes us interesting and as long as we take care of each other and we respect each other, that's a good thing.

[What is being done to get more people of lower economic standing involved? Are there any specific outreach programs?]

It's really important that we communicate that there are ways for them to go out for soccer, for example, or basketball - that they can be out and being involved in clubs without having a car. For one thing, for example, we're starting to provide transportation in the mornings and in the afternoons for students who are getting some tutoring, and that's helped. But we need to continue to find ways. We need to say "what's keeping you from being involved?" and then find out how to be more involved.

[How do the standardized testing results (CIM and such) affect curriculum here at Century?]

One of the most exciting things is getting that testing online. The closer we can pull that standardized testing into immediate feedback for students and teachers so that you can go in and say "okay, I'm ready to take this math portion of the multiple choice test" - you go in, take it online, see your results, see what you're not doing well or what you still need to work on - the teachers can see that - that's where it is. [That feedback has to be more immediate so that teachers and students can work on it to improve]. That's a trend that we have been really lucky to be right up front with that. That TESA testing system from the state - I see that being one of the most exciting things about it. Because I really see that standardized testing is not an evil thing - it helps us say, "here are some standards we want all of you to meet" and that's a good thing. It's just getting it in place so that it's meaningful for both kids and teachers to say, "here's what my kids can do, here's what they can't do, and here's what I have to teach them". It's an immediate source of testing feedback.

[What is done when students aren't meeting those standards?]

It means that, in my mind, let's take writing for example - let's say students are really having difficulty clarifying their writing and they've got particular areas that they need to practice - then teachers across the curriculum can pick that up and teach it and encourage individual students and help them individually when they have difficulty. It's the same for problem solving. Our scores have stayed really flat over the last five years that we've been testing. I think we need to find ways to help students improve.

We were doing some research and we noticed that in the first couple of years, Century students were just hitting right below the passing marks - right below the district and state averages. Have we improved some?

Somewhat. Yes, the scores have definitely improved. We were noticing this year - and I don't know whether it's related to the TESA system and that's it's easier for students who've been finding it more beneficial to take the test online, where the scores are back so quick - that, as well as I think we're focused - if we continue to be focused on helping students use those specific skills, they will continue to go up. And they are. But they've been flat.

[How do the results of the annual safety survey affect Century?]

We continue to look at the trends of our students, and we know that the majority of students take the survey seriously, but there are a lot of students who don't, that say "yes, I get offered cocaine everyday at school" and that kind of thing when we know it's probably not true. But look at them seriously, you know. Where *are* the issues at school? Is it safety? Is it the parking lot? Is it restrooms? How safe do students feel? That's a real critical piece for us to know because [it's important to feel safe at school. If they don't feel safe, we need to know.] I think a good example of a way that we respond to the safety survey and other kinds of responses from students is [our dress code rules] - I have difficulty with the way we enforce our hat rule [because we should really pick our battles] - it's a hassle to address students with something that seems so trivial. We try to look at what are our gang issues, what needs to be addressed and not be allowed at school - and that's an example of how we respond to complaints from kids.

What are some major problems we've had here and in what ways have they been resolved?

Overcrowding, I'd say, has been difficult. Every year but one year, we have added teachers and classes after school has started. There's nothing more disruptive than going into a language arts class and adding a section and moving kids from other places and sticking them into the section with brand new teachers that we've hired, that hadn't started from the beginning. It's really hard - on kids, it's hard, on those teachers. We've had to collapse a teacher office to build another classroom and we're going to do another one next year in order to survive one more year before Liberty opens. We're just crossing our fingers that that's going to give us enough room to fit every class into the school. I'd say that's probably been the most pressing issue that we've dealt with.

Were there any other problems? We've heard that each year has had their own specific problem, such as last year there was the vandalism in the bathroom.

There tends to be student discipline issues that come up dependant on the group of students or some individual students that are having difficulties and vandalism continues, graffiti and vandalism continue [to be something to work on]. We added a security person last year that we continued with this year that's helped. [Interruption]

What have been the highlights of your time here so far?

Oh my! I think working with an incredible group of students and an incredible staff has been the best thing. Certainly, our JagFest week this week has been a lot of work for a lot of people. But it's so wonderful to see kids having fun, and being honored. That's always a pleasure. It's great to see our athletic teams do well. It's fun right now to see our baseball team win the Metro League - and that's a first for us. But I think seeing all those firsts is just really exciting.

How do you describe the culture of Century?

I would describe it as excitingly diverse. It's forward thinking and I think accepting. The one thing that I hear from guests that visit, including substitute teachers... is how wonderful our students are. Our students are just so respectful of each other, respectful of adults, respectful of the building - for the most part - and we have individuals that aren't and we deal with that. I just think we have a really wonderful community and we hear that all the time.

What traditions do you feel have been established in the past five years?

Certainly, JagFest and Jagalooza and Java Lava and all the things we associate with this week. That's certainly a big piece. Our block schedule, right now, [is a tradition]. The politics of our block schedule across the district have been an interesting thing to work with. We haven't talked very much about that but just getting it implemented - teachers have to waive parts of their contracts in order to keep it. It's motivated the district to try to get the rest of the high schools on a block schedule and we're in the middle of that and it's pretty difficult times. They wanted us to go to a schedule and we fought to keep the schedule we have and it's helped us kind of bind together... I think we'll continue to do that. That's something that speaks a lot about who we are.

Century has a fairly unique architectural design compared to other schools in the district. What do you think are some of the most successful features of the school?

I think the fact that everywhere you go in the building that we have natural light is a big plus. I've worked at Evergreen for a few years - you know, it's a cavern. There are so many classrooms that don't have any natural light in them. It's pretty difficult to live and work in when you don't have that natural light. And the technology that we have available and how much we've grown to use it, need it, get familiar with it - I think our JagTV is the perfect example of how we've taken this full circuit TV system and made it [so that] we've got national recognition for that and it's really exciting.

What is the most reward part of your job?

Working with students, in a different way than I did as a teacher or a vice-principal. It's the part I don't get to do as much, [that I really miss] about being in the classroom, or even as an assistant principal, I was working with a lot more troubled kids. But I was a lot more one-on-one. The nice thing as principal is that I get to be involved and get out and see kids at the stage that they put a production together or have a school project - an example will be seeing your museum. I loved to come in and watching Ms. Ducykinck's AP classes doing their Vietnam project and their Korean war project, which were just amazing. This is going to be very exciting too. Those kinds of things are really what make my job the most exciting. There are so many other things we do, but that's my favorite.

What is your perception of Century's reputation in the community?

I think that we are seen really favorably. I think the community respects what we do and they come and watch our students perform, whether it be in a play or out on the field or even JagFest on Monday night. I think we're an important part of the community and the more we can be a part of the outside community by doing community service and excetera, [the better]. The high school is kind of a focus for where we live and it needs to be accessible to the them and go out and [help them].

We've noticed a trend of a lot of kids coming in and out of the high school mid-semester. How does that affect Century?

Just the mobility rate? Yeah, we do have a high mobility rate and it has to do with our SES. Our economic status means that we have a lot of families that move around a lot and with the economic times being a little difficult right now, I think it won't get better. It affects us. Students [are less successful when they] come from one school doing one thing and another school doing something else. There's no continuity in the learning process. We have to continue to find ways to tap those kids into being successful because that's just the reality for those kids.

When Century was being built, some things were cut out to maintain budget, like canopies at the entrances. Do you think in the future, if the money came up, that they would be built?

You know what strikes me as being the biggest need and we won't ever be able to change it, but take a look at our gym. One of the things that ended up being cut was the size of the gym and it's not big enough for our student body right now. That's one of the most difficult things that I don't think we'll ever get - we'll just never have it, in my mind. We'll never have the amount of money it takes to really have the size of gym that we need for our population. Maybe when Liberty opens, it will be more the right size and we'll be fine. But the realities are here today, on the 22nd of May when we've just seen Ballot Measure 13 go

down, we're faced with some hard times in terms of money so we're going to be cutting, quite a bit, versus adding.

What do you think might be cut?

I think, days. I think we're going to see a shorter school year next year, and that will be bad for all of us, for students going onto college, like you. [There will be] cuts in all school employees' salaries. It's a sad day for Oregon, until we figure out how to fund our schools and how important our kids are.

Is there anything else?

[She gave me some items, such as newspaper clippings and newsletters for the benefit of the project and we parted ways.]