

Interview with Hon.. Wilhelmina Delco  
Date: May 29, 2001  
Interviewed by Dr. Rosalee Martin

RM: Tell us who you are, please.

WD: My name is Wilhelmina Delco, and I'm a resident of Austin Texas. I've lived here since my husband came to do graduate work in the early sixties. I have held public office in three different levels of government: school board, community college, and the state legislature, for a total of twenty-six years.

WD: Thank you so much. The reason why we asked you to come and share with us as we look at the crossover, desegregation to integration, is because we recognize that you did serve in public office. I want us to look and specifically focus on the time that you spent on the school board.

WD: I was on the school board in Austin from 1968 until 1974, and I was the first African-American elected to the school board. I will always believe that I was elected, although other African-Americans had run for the school board, I was elected because the election took place two days after the assassination of Martin Luther King [Jr.]. I'll always believe that the strong emotional pull of that convinced people that it was time to have someone on the school board who represented that heretofore unrepresented community, in light of the assassination and the perception that Austin was the kind of community that nurtured that kind of diversity, at least on that level.

RM: When you became a member of the school board, were Austin schools integrated?

WD: Not really. I think that what Austin had at that time was a pattern of voluntary integration that said that if you chose to go to a school, you could go, and it was at your own expense, but the school district did not promote the desegregation. As a result, for all intents and purposes, it was mostly the more ambitious, aggressive, highly motivated parents that took their children to other schools.

St. Stephen's [Episcopal School], as a private school, was doing the same thing. So they were offering scholarships to African-American students in an effort to integrate St. Stephen's. But basically, most students, in the name of desegregation, simply started going to the schools that were closer to them. The Austin School District had made a commitment to do it one grade at a time, and my memory says it hadn't progressed very far.

RM: During the years that you were on the school board, could you just talk about the attempts to actually integrate the schools.

WD: I was elected to the school board in 1968, in May. The first team from the federal government, which was the Department of Health, Education and Welfare [HEW], came to Austin that August saying that Austin was in noncompliance with the desegregation laws, that their efforts to do this on a voluntary step-by-step basis was too little, too slowly done. So they asked Austin to submit a plan.

We were in and out of courts from talking to the members of Congress, and we did go to Washington and talk to the two senators, who at that time were--to show you how long ago it was--it was Senator [John G.] Tower and Senator [Ralph W.] Yarborough. We went to talk to them about what posture we were in and we ended up going to the Fifth Circuit Court in New Orleans.

Well, of course, the courts decided that the jurisdiction was a local one, it was not a federal one, and they, on the federal level, remanded the case back to the local board. All

of this, of course, was an outgrowth of the *Rodriguez* decision that had been carried from San Antonio all the way to the federal court.

When they said it was a problem that the states ought to deal with, then that was when I left local schools and ran for the state legislature. By that time it was a question of equitable funding. It wasn't the warm bodies; it was the equity of services and support that these schools got.

But back to the actual desegregation in Austin. The courts ruled ultimately after we went to Fifth Circuit that we were in noncompliance, and as a result of that noncompliance, they ordered the closing of [L. C.] Anderson High School and St. John's Elementary School and that those students would be dispersed to the other high schools on an arbitrary geographical boundary-line basis.

RM: And what year was this?

WD: I think it was probably about 1971 or '72.

RM: I've had the opportunity of interviewing other persons, and some of them were really upset because Anderson High was the school that was closed.

WD: Exactly.

RM: And many of them thought, why didn't you close other schools and make some of the white students come to Anderson High. Were there any discussions during that time about that?

WD: Yes. As a matter of fact, the initial order of the court was to have the students who lived in what should have been the geographical boundaries of Anderson attend Anderson.

Basically, that is what we would now characterize as the Maplewood area. That area was solidly white, and those students were permitted to go primarily to Austin High [School].

Well, the court ruled, I think something like on a Monday--no, on a Friday--that those students now were in the Anderson district and would have to go to Anderson High School.

It was very interesting, because over that weekend the students in the Anderson community and AISD [Austin Independent School District], for that matter, practically remade Anderson High School. They were in there with tons of paint, putting in equipment, making it acceptable and attractive to these non-African-American students. The students, the Anderson students, revised--it was the beginning of the school year--they revised their offices so that they made all of these non-African-American students coming in eligible for all of the offices, for participation in all of the school organizations. In other words, if they had been cheerleaders at their sending institution, they would become cheerleaders. If they had been band members or choir members or whatever, they were very welcoming. They bent over backwards accommodating those students. They even named buddies for the incoming students. Obviously, some of the students chose to move out or to pretend like they moved out and give different addresses. Some of them just flat refused to go. But there was a significant number of the students who chose to come to Anderson.

Well, Judge [Jack] Roberts, who was a presiding district judge here in Austin, called the board back into session that Thursday and simply announced that desegregation wasn't working in Austin. Now, that was less than a week's time for that to be in effect. He simply announced that it wasn't working in Austin and ordered that Anderson be closed. It was devastating to the community, to the people who felt like that should have been given more time, with even people in the other communities that felt like it was worthy as an effort and as a process.

My own personal feeling as a member of the board, I thought that it was horrible to do

that, because to me it implied that the judiciary system had already made up its mind and they went through the motions of giving this a trial, but had no intention to give it the length of time that I think it should have warranted. There was absolutely no justifiable reason, in my mind, to arbitrarily in less than a week say it wasn't working.

RM: And we now know that there is an Anderson High. When did this new Anderson High open, and why was it decided to give it this name without its mascot and all those other things?

WD: When we on the board had to vote to close Anderson, the commitment that the board made to those parents was that the very next high school built in Austin would be named L.C. Anderson High School, because it was a legitimate name. Those people had class rings and yearbooks. There was no reason why their identity to a high school in Austin should not be continued.

William Charles Akins was named the first principal of that high school, and we felt like that was an indication that the system was going to act in good faith. It was very difficult to get the name changed. It came down to making a motion at the board and forcing the board to publicly vote on it. Pleasantly enough, when we forced the board to publicly vote on it, they did vote to retain the name, but they argued that it should be left up to students and the community to determine the colors and the mascot. Well, since Austin hadn't named a new school or opened a new school in a long time, we had no basis to argue or refute that. But we named the school. That was the responsibility of the board. But it was left to that school community to determine its school colors and its mascot.

Well, in changing the colors from black and gold to blue and gold, and the mascot from the yellowjacket to the bulldog or whatever the mascot is--no, the Trojans, because I think they were emulating UCLA or some such--anyway, when they decided to do that,

for all intents and purposes, the trophies at Anderson had been abandoned, so much so that people had simply walked across the street to the school or in the community and just picked up what they wanted.

Well, there was a concerted effort made by people in the community with Mr. [H. L.] Gaines [phonetic], who was the acting principal at the time that it closed, to just go literally from door to door and ask people to return them. We were able to get the Parks and Recreation Department in Austin to dedicate a newly added wing to the Doris Miller Auditorium as an Anderson wing. I think it is still there. We were able to get the trophies and get them in there, and we had a dedication, to me, with glorious, glorious twenty hindsight, we should have insisted that there be set aside money for maintenance, because I don't think that the Parks and Recreation Department has ever considered that a real part of the Doris Miller Auditorium or the Rosewood Park system in the sense that there were efforts made to exhibit, efforts made to encourage people to come, and efforts made to update and keep current and all of the things that you would do to a treasured facility. So I would imagine that there are people now, even from that era, that might not know that that facility is there, and I don't know in what shape it's in. But the intent was to preserve what had been a very honored tradition of that school.

I am not an Austinite, so I did not go to Anderson, but my understanding is that it excelled in so many of the activities that are identified with high schools, not just academically, but socially and athletically and in terms of community organizations and community services. It had a very strong PTA and a very strong, involved community, and those things were kind of lost in the desegregation effort, because people were not only uncomfortable going into the communities where their children were now students, but I honestly don't believe they were very well received in those communities. So they were not just uncomfortable in terms of finding their way there, they were very uncomfortable with the reception they received once they got there.

RM: Let's talk about that reception. While you were on the school board, did violence occur?

WD: Yes. We had at least one major incident of violence at Reagan High School. I was on the school board, and I remember it very well because I was at home, and I'm not a person that listens to the radio all day long. So it was not quite noon, and my telephone just started ringing, and they were parents calling me. They had heard on the news that there was trouble at Reagan High School that was characterized as a riot, and they asked me to please go over and check and see what was going on.

Well, I went over, and, indeed, there was a lot of trouble, but by the time I got there, it had calmed down some. The police had even been called, and they had taken the African-American students to jail.

Now, the reason that happened was because when the principal knew that it was a problem that was beyond the scope of the school, what he did was call the police. Most of the non-African-American students lived within walking distance or had access to transportation. The African-American kids had all come on the buses. He had not called the buses. So that when the police got there, literally the only students that were there were the African-American students. So they were all hauled off to jail.

Ultimately, of course, the charges were dropped, but the whole experience was traumatic. It created an awful sense of bitterness that they had been picked on, that they had been unjustly accused, and I don't disagree with that.

There was another incident when the kids first went to McCallum [High School]. Remember I said that when they first decided to keep Anderson open and the students who lived in that community and attended that school got wind of the fact that they were going to have new students coming to their school, they bent over backwards to welcome them. It was exactly the opposite. When those students went, particularly the first wave went to McCallum, when they got there, there were all the racial slurs and epithets on the sidewalk and on the walls. There was no welcoming. It was jeering and booing and all

sorts of things, and the whole sense that these were aliens from outer space invading our turf. That basically was the whole perception, that this was something that we have to endure until the courts come to their senses and reverse this.

We on the board level passed a ruling, a policy, that if those students had been cheerleaders--the same essential thing that had been done at the old Anderson voluntarily we now imposed as policy by the school board, that these students had to be--they had to expand their cheerleading teams, they had to expand their bands, they had become co-officers if they'd been officers on the Student Council or other student organizations. But it was a tenuous situation because there was no real sense of invitation or welcome. It was imposed externally, and each and every semester until finally they felt like it was no longer required, it was painful for those kids to participate.

The expenses were extraordinary. For example, one of the students who was to be a cheerleader found that everybody brought ponytail wigs so they wore pieces or whatever, because everybody, no matter how long or short their hair was, they all wore the same hairstyle. They all bought two or three outfits because there was one for school pep rallies, there was another one for home games in the fall, there was another one for when it got colder. Of course, this was an extraordinary, unexpected expense for these students, and thanks to the community, a lot of people came forward and just volunteered so the girls would be able to participate. Same thing with the majorettes, I think. They had to buy certain boot colors and, oh, just all sorts of things that these kids were not accustomed to doing, and certainly they were not anticipated expenses. So it was extraordinarily expensive for them to participate.

RM: Let's talk about the parents and the community during this time. How did they assist with this crossover? What did they say to you?

WD: For my part, I think they just said, "Do what you can." I'm not sure that there was that



communication. There was a small cadre of very involved, very concerned parents who came to every school board meeting, who raised issues all the time, and who literally stayed on top of the situation. But I think, for the most part, parents just kind of gave up.

You have to realize this is a strong community of working parents who not only work a full eight-hour day, but a lot of them, single and both parents, work two and three jobs. So the time to just sit around and go to meetings and make telephone calls literally wasn't available. That didn't mean they weren't interested in their kids. It just meant they had to delegate that interest to someone else.

It became very difficult because it kind of fell into a pattern of the parents putting the kids on the bus and hoping for the best. Kids, being kids, learned quickly how to exploit the situation. If they didn't go class or they didn't get good grades, it was all racism. It was, "We're at that white school. They don't like us. We don't like them. When can I come home? They're not treating us right." Parents accepted that. So that the strong bond that had existed at the old Anderson between parents and students and community, the whole concept that we used to refer to as *in loco parentis*, which meant that if I couldn't come as a parent, somebody else went or somebody from the church went or somebody else, a neighbor or friend, somebody always was there to see about kids, that was completely lost because it was no longer a cohesive sense of community, not just because the kids were getting on the bus, but they were getting on different buses.

Somebody on this side of the street could be going to McCallum. On the other side of the street they could have been going to Lanier [High School]. They younger kids were going to not feeder junior highs, but arbitrarily drawn junior high districts that were drawn more on what percentage they wanted of African-American students rather than whether or not this was a natural feed-in community. That evolved later on. But at that point it was more willy-nilly, helter-skelter. So there wasn't any sense of continuity, there was not any sense of community, there was not any sense of involvement or even communication.

Parents who did try to go had to find their own transportation. In Austin, we've never had a good transportation system, which meant that if you didn't have a car, you had to find a ride with somebody who did, and here you are wandering around a hostile community at night looking for the school. It just wasn't a very welcoming situation, and I suspect that was a great deal of the reason a lot of parents really did not follow through with the desegregation end as they had when it was a community school.

RM: You mentioned involvement of the churches. Were there ministers who were active in this?

WD: Not many. As a matter of fact, that was one of my real criticisms. I alluded earlier to the fact that when the principal at Anderson [misstatement, she means Reagan] called the police, to me it was an indictment of our religious community, that within walking distance of every single high school in Austin, including Reagan High School, there are churches of every denomination, and not one of those African-American children felt comfortable walking into a church. They were just stuck at the school. Whereas the other kids could go to neighbors, I assume some of them could have gone to the church, they could have walked home, these kids were literally stranded there, and there was no welcoming hand to say to them--maybe even from people who heard it on the radio, that a minister got in his car or walked down the street and said, "Come with me and stay at my church."

That was one of my big indictments. I even went to the Council of Churches and told them that I thought it was disgraceful.

RM: As you're looking back at that experience right now, are there any things that the school board could have done differently to make that transition smoother?

WD: I think, you know, that's nothing better than twenty-twenty hindsight.

RM: Right.

WD: My sense is that if I had it to do over again, I would, as a school board member and as that community, insisted that they give that initial effort a longer trial period. When the order was made to integrate Anderson High School, I just felt like if they had said, "We'll do this at least a semester and see how it works out," carefully monitor it, follow through on these people who said they'd move out of the neighborhood. Some of those people are still in those neighborhoods, so obviously they did not move out.

It was very discouraging that the opportunity to sustain an African-American school where it was, as it was, with all of the obvious needed improvements--for example, the labs were disgraceful. That was one of the first things they tried to enhance when they thought that there were going to be non-African-American students there. To me, if they had followed through and visited with parents and encouraged them, I think there would have been enough receiving parents in the non-African-American community to sustain the old Anderson as a high school with much needed improvement and support services. But that, to me, was a major mistake.

That, and then to just put those kids on that bus with no opportunity--I would have hoped that if they had the PTA, since we had a strong tradition in our community of parental involvement, then it should have been mandated that the PTA meetings would be one month at that community and one month in our community. We had churches where they could have met, and it would have fostered some sense of connection. There was not any of that.

So looking back on that, I also think that we literally put our kids out there and left them, and there should have been, to me, more attempts. There was a small group of people who tried to follow the kids, who tried to stay involved, but they were almost

characterized as agitators and people who were troublemakers. I never characterized them as troublemakers. I felt that they were concerned parents. Every single one of them had kids in those schools that they were concerned about.

If, to me, we had done, as a board and as a community, the follow-through on both ends, the situation might have been different.

RM: You said that you were the first African-American elected to the board. At that time do you think the board really had the black community and Anderson High at its best interest? Were they concerned?

WD: No. No. As a matter of fact, I used to say that for the board to cross I-35, which was the dividing line between East and West Austin, it was like Moses crossing the Red Sea. It took an act of God and took an act of the courts. When we went over to Anderson and Kealing [Junior High School] as a board to look at the facilities, I would venture that's the first time the majority of the board had ever crossed I-35. So they didn't know what was going on over there.

It was worse than that. Of the seven members of the board, I think at least five of them lived within five blocks of each other. So they could have met accidentally at the 7-11 and had a quorum for a board meeting. Matter of fact, that was the platform on which I ran: broader education, broader communication, and broader community service.

Because we just felt that it was like a clique. And I don't think it was intentional. I think it was just the mentality of people who ran for the board. They were more or less upper-middle-class professional people who felt like this was something their children were in or had been in, and it was a way for them to give back to the community. They were very, very aware of what was going on.

Austin High School and Casis [phonetic] Elementary School could compare favorably with schools anywhere in this state because they were encouraged to involve parents. It

was a university community. Parents would leave and leave their encyclopedias, so that Casis probably had one of the biggest and best libraries.

Even more than that, when faculty members would come to the university, their spouses, a lot of whom were professional people, didn't work there, but they would go volunteer at the school. So they would teach languages, they would teach music, they would volunteer in the library, they would volunteer to take the kids on field trips. The people in public office, the governor, would go and visit the classes. The quality of extra-school activity was absolutely superior.

None of that translated over when our kids were in those schools. Instead of the whole school being called to the assembly, the class where the person's child was had the assembly. I think that was something that the school board was responsible for.

One instance. We had an effort when I was on the board to create a Casis Foundation. It was to say that now that the school board had all of these expenses, that it could no longer do the kinds of things that the parents in that community wanted for their kids. So they had gotten somebody to volunteer to set up a 501--I think it's C3 or whatever--tax exempt nonprofit foundation so that they could contribute money, get tax credit for it, that would go strictly to their kids. We killed that on the school board, but I suspect that as I look at Austin now, there are probably a lot of those little closet organizations going on. It's an attempt to have a private school within a public school setting.

RM: Do you think integration helped our kids?

WD: In some senses it did. There was no question that our kids were more and more narrowly confined to less and less. There was a great deal of enthusiasm, and to give teachers and parents in the community their credit, they were the most creative people on the planet. I mean, teachers went into their pockets, parents went into their pockets, and they made up a lot. The sense of community and the sense of "We're all in this together" was

important.

It was also important that the children of the professional middle-class parents were right in there with some of the poorest school children, which said that these students got a chance to see those role models. They got a chance to interact, and you can see that as pervasive in the community now. All the people that went to the old Anderson together, that was lost.

I wish that could be returned. I don't know how, because we as a people are now widely dispersed. We're not in that tight-knit community anymore. That was lost, and part of it was lost because, as I said, when they went into the community involvement, there was no effort to include these sending parents into a welcoming atmosphere that would have implied that "We will come to your community to meet with you if you come to our community to meet with us," very much the way some churches are doing now, adopting each other and going across. That was not done at that point.

If I had to do it over again, I would clearly have more thought given to what we can do to provide, as those Anderson students tried to provide, a welcoming atmosphere, but make it work both ways. There's no such thing as equity when the bus ride is a one-way bus ride. There's no such thing as equity when we are sending our best teachers and we're receiving the newest, untried teachers. Not to say they're not good teachers. I'm not saying that.

But clearly, if you look at, say, high school, where you have three algebra classes, and two of the teachers have taught algebra forever, they catch up on all the literature, they go to all the workshops, this is their whole life, and then you have somebody who came in with a minor in math and a major in English, and they needed another algebra teacher and they said to you, "We need for you to teach two sections of algebra and you've got the hours to do it," okay, you're one step ahead of the kids in the textbook. There's no way that those kids are getting equal treatment in terms of their exposure to that subject matter as the kids right next door.

And that's what I compare what our kids are getting in East Austin schools with what kids are getting in other schools. They're getting what is on paper described as the same curriculum, but when you look at the depth and the breadth and the commitment of the people who are teaching, then it's not very often they are.

One terrible example was when non-African-American teachers were first forced to come into African-American schools, we had an administrator who would tell them, "Well, you have to go over there this year, but if you'll stick it out this year, we'll get you to a better school next year."

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

WD: fostering in that teacher. I'll tell you. When that teacher wanted to take a day off or something came up and they needed some extra advice, the principal's office is right there and the telephone is in the principal's office, they would go to that telephone, pick up the phone, looking at the principal, call the administration and say, "I've got to be off tomorrow," ignoring the principal completely. What kind of atmosphere is that? The principal had absolutely no authority in a lot of instances over these so-called teachers in their school.

RM: How have things changed over the years? We're now in the year 2001. I want you to just think about education now and how has it changed.

WD: Well, in some cases dramatically, and in some cases very little. Dramatically, when you look at our kids' test scores and you look at the sense of hopelessness and helplessness that so many of our young people feel, we had education as a top priority because we felt we could point to the actual results, the fruits if you will, of a good education. Kids don't sense that now. They don't see where going to school for sixteen years is going to result

in this wonderful quality of life. So there's not the value attached.

We have younger parents who work harder, or not at all, but their commitment to their children might be there and might not, but their commitment to the institutions is not there. I think that makes a tremendous difference in the response of the system to those concerns, because they respond if the room is full of screaming parents. They don't respond if the parents don't come. They assume the parents aren't interested. I don't make the assumption that parents aren't interested.

I was the first African-American elected official. Most people congratulated me, but truth to tell, they didn't have a clue as to what I did. Some of them thought I was in Congress. Some of them thought I was the new superintendent. I mean, most of our folks didn't even know where the school board met or what it did.

Now parents are aware, but they're not convinced that their participation is going to make any difference. We have got to find a way to not only make our parents in our community involved, but make that involvement rewarding. The way you make it rewarding is to give them positive results. Just saying "parental involvement" doesn't mean a lot if you've got parents who go and they're not greeted positively, they're either assigned meaningless or demeaning things, but they don't have any sense that they're making any real contribution. They don't have any sense that their kids are coming out with anything that will be important to them later on in life. Maybe our children, since we had the benefit of education, can see that as a long term, but when you realize a large number of younger parents, of single parents, of parents who did not graduate in good educational systems themselves, they don't have the model that we have, so they don't have the confidence that we have, so they don't give the support that we did. Until we can turn that around, the situation's not going to get any better.

RM: What do you suggest we do to turn it around?



WD: I think that one of the things we need to do is to try to center more of the activities of the schools in the schools. Instead of the people going to the school boards, the school boards ought to be coming out to the people, not just one or two members, but the policy of the board. It's not enough to just give lip service and talk down to people. It's important to involve people. I'm not sure that's taking place.

My youngest child now has four children, so I'm not what you call abreast of what's going on in the schools. Maybe it isn't even appropriate for me to say it, but my youngest daughter has taken her kids out of public school and put them in what she considers a very excellent private charter school, the Texas Academy of Excellence, where parental involvement is not just encouraged, it is required, where children wear uniforms and there is a level of discipline. But you have to do that with the support of the parents who feel that they have some input into the process. And you have to have a school system that is caring and concerned, not just people who are there to collect a salary.

I don't begrudge people collecting a salary, but schoolteaching is a commitment, and if you have people who are just collecting a salary, it doesn't take long before the lack of commitment becomes apparent and exploited.

RM: Our schools often have students who are scoring low on standardized exams. Why do you think that's happening?

WD: Because they've been told that they don't test well. We keep telling our kids that all the tests are biased and that we're not good test-takers, and the way you prepare for a test is to get a good night's sleep, it's just simply to recall what you know. That's nonsense. I served three years on the Board of Directors of the Educational Testing Service [ETS] in Princeton. I chaired that board for a year. And ETS will tell you that there's no such thing as a test that will be the final determinate of anything.

Some people are excellent test-takers. Their finest hour is when they sit there with that

test, because they recall, they're calm, they're very good. Other people have all the material mastered and their hands just start shaking, and the minute that clock starts ticking on that time, their minds go blank. There have got to be alternatives.

But we've got to have the same kind of support services in place for our kids that other communities have, like the test-taking skills. For example, one of the things that we aren't particularly aware of is timing. You ask a kid to answer 100 questions and tell them they have five minutes. Either that's an enormous amount of time or not enough time to get past the first question. We have no perception of the time. We have no perception of the skills and the techniques.

For example, instead of just stopping at the first question until you can figure out the answer, most test-taking mechanisms will tell you to go down the questions, answer the ones you are positive, go back and answer the ones you almost know. Therefore, you maximize your correct answers. We have kids that don't get past the first ten questions because they're stymied by the first one. By the second one, they're honestly discouraged. By the time you get down to that tenth one, they're convinced they're not going to do any better.

So a lot of it is the skill, is the confidence you place in the kids, it's telling them that this is something they can do, not something they can't do. We don't do that, and until we do, until we have confidence in the fact that the test is important, the kids don't.

When I went to college, and my kids say it was probably before the earth cooled, but when I went to college, we all had to take tests. I went to an historically black college. We all took tests, but the tests were for diagnosis; they were not for punishment. There's a world of difference in the two concepts. When you have a diagnostic test, it's to take you from where you are to where you ought to be with help and positive attitude. When it's for punishment, it's, "If you don't do this, this is what's going to happen to you." So the whole attitude in terms of approaching the test needs to be changed.

RM: As a legislator, you chaired the Education Committee.

WD: Higher Education, for twelve years. I was on Public Ed for two, and I served as vice chair of Public Ed my first two terms in the legislature.

RM: When you were with public schools, chairing that committee, on that committee, did you have something to do with mandating the new tests?

WD: No. I was involved as a member of the legislature when Mark White was governor and mandated the test for teachers and passed the TAAS [Texas Assessment of Academic Skills] test, and I always felt that tests were important because they were important, as I said, for diagnosis. They were not, in my opinion, ever intended to punish, but they do now. I mean, I hasten to say that they absolutely do punish now.

RM: Do you think they punish certain groups over others?

WD: Well, from the standpoint of how you approach the test. If you're in a school where there's a high premium on everybody passing that test and they give rewards and they give incentives and they really encourage students to do their best and they show you sample questions and do the drills and all that, then that's a positive response. When it's, "If you don't do this, this bad will happen to you," or, "We know you can't do that," or, "We might as well not take the test," or in some extreme cases try to get the kids to stay home the day of the test. So I think, yes, there are schools and, yes, there are groups that do better, but I think it is the approach of the test-givers that determines the response that the students who take the test have.

RM: I only have a couple more questions. First I want to thank you for being here. If you

would just give us some more information about your involvement in education over the years, briefly.

WD: I've been involved, of course, all my life. My mother always felt that education was very important. Even as a single parent, all five of us got college degrees from inner-city Chicago, so that we all have a very high premium in terms of getting an education. All of us worked our way through school or earned scholarships to go to school. So it was important. When I married and decided to become involved, education and activities centered around my children were my priorities, and that's how I got to be a member of the school board. I'd actually been a Girl Scout leader, and every time we wanted to do anything for the kids, the school board said we couldn't do it. So I decided that's where I needed to be, and that was my motivation for running for the school board as a PTA president.

Then, of course, when I was on the school board those six years we had all these problems which I felt were important for us to address, but when it became the *Rodriguez* case in the federal courts, and the federal court said that the problem of funding public schools was a state responsibility, not a federal responsibility, that's when I decided to run for the school board.

People would ask me, "How do you think that as one person you can make a difference?" and in every single one of those instances I was, unfortunately, even in the late sixties, the first one of us to do those kinds of things, and I always felt, my philosophy was, I couldn't really change anybody, but the one thing I could do was keep them honest. I could deny people the ability to say, "Oh, I didn't know that." Well, they knew, because I saw my responsibility as making sure they knew. Now, I could not overpower them. I could not make them vote. I could not change their vote. But I could empower them with what the true situation was and then force them to live with whatever decision they made. That was what I felt was my job and I did my best to do what I

could to make a difference.

RM: Any final words of advice?

WD: I think one of the things that I would say is, particularly to people who are looking at the difference between what used to be and what is now, that there's a role that we have to play. I think probably Reverend [Jesse] Jackson characterized it very well when he said nobody can help us but us. The tendency when we put our kids on that bus to say, "Well, now they're going to the good schools with the good teachers and the good neighborhoods and I can go on about my life, all is well," the lesson we've learned from that is that if we don't participate, if we don't give our kids the values that our parents gave us, if we don't hang in there and follow the concept of *in loco parentis*, that even though in some cases we may be half afraid of kids, we've still got to have the responsibility of knowing that not only are these our kids, but for those of us who have children and grandchildren, they've got to have somebody to marry and to grow up with.

So I think we've really got to return the empowerment to ourselves, support those of us who are in public office, because most of the time they are completely isolated up there, just winging it. I think that if we do that, we can at least have some sense of involvement and hopefully make a difference. We've got to do it. Nobody can save our kids but us, and we are losing them.

RM: What is your involvement with Huston-Tillotson College?

WD: I am currently serving as vice chair of the Board of Trustees. I've been involved with Huston-Tillotson College since before I left the legislature. I graduated from a historically black college and was very strongly in support of historically black colleges in the legislature. But I believe it's very important for us to preserve our institutions,

because I believe in the concept of different strokes for different folks. Some folks do very well in the big environment of UT [University of Texas]. Some do well in the exclusive environments of the St. Edwardses [University] and the Eastern and Western universities, but there's a place for institutions like Huston-Tillotson, and it, like the public schools, will vanish if we don't support it.

So I made a commitment to support Huston-Tillotson College. I am very proud of the fact that I served as chair of the search committee for what I think is an excellent president of our institution now. So we're looking forward to moving on. I assume I'll still be on the board. I haven't heard of being voted off. I assume I'll be on the board, and we have a great future.

Incidentally, in that same vein, Huston-Tillotson is reaching out to support more of the broader community and more of the public school and other educational arenas. I think that's appropriate and good.

RM: Thank you so much.

WD: You're welcome.

RM: I really appreciate the interview.

WD: No problem.

RM: Anything else you thought we should ask you that should be included?

WD: No. No. I can always rant and rave. It doesn't mean that it's any better.

RM: I really appreciate your doing this, because you're giving a whole different perspective.

[Tape interruption]

WD: but we talk to people.

RM: To the kids.

WD: Oh, yes. And we talk to the parents because there were some parents, and I'll give you two specific names, parents who were very involved, Delores Duffy was always very involved. Velma Roberts was always very involved. Virginia Gregg was always very involved. Virginia Gregg was my predecessor as president of the PTA at Sims [Elementary School], and we would sit up and put together a scrapbook for Sims in my living room before we went to the State Convention of the Colored Parents and Teachers.

RM: We didn't mention that. Do you want to talk about that?

WD: I was Central Texas president of the Colored Parents and Teachers, and was president of that Central Texas organization when we desegregated the council PTA here in Austin. If I had twenty-twenty hindsight, I would have encouraged my parents to stay organized and involved. We dismantled once the schools desegregated. We always said we were going to do something, but, you know, once one responsibility is lifted, you assume others that aren't necessarily related to the same area.

We had very active parents. Because we couldn't stay at hotels or places, we would carpool and ride to conventions all across the state. I remember riding to a convention in Midland and going to a convention in East Texas. I run into people periodically even today that remember those good old Colored PTA days. We would raise the money. We'd sit up all night and work on our school scrapbooks and enter them in the exhibits. We were very proud of the activities we, as PTAs, had in our schools and in our

communities.

That's how I got involved on the school board, because I was president of the PTA at Sims and at Allan [Elementary School]. Every time we wanted to expand activities, we thought we ought to be able to have them in school. I was a Girl Scout troop leader, and they told us we couldn't have troop meetings in schools. They told us we couldn't have our bazaars and fundraisers unless we were able to pay the custodians. Well, we didn't make a lot of money, and that was a lot to ask us to do. So that was one of the reasons I ran for the school board, because I said, "If they are the ones making the decision, we need to be there to participate in that decision-making process."

But we were very active in PTAs and very active in community services. Our kids were participating in everything that it was possible to participate with, and parents were there to support them with pride. When our kids went out to school, people would raise the money to help them get nice clothes to take to school or send them care packages at school. So there wasn't the sense that this was something we'd never done. When we kind of turned our kids over to other folks, we left it up to them to do what we probably should have continued doing.

But I had the opportunity to participate from a lot of angles, and I will never concede that we didn't do it or we couldn't do it then or couldn't do it again. It's just the will and the overwhelming sense that this has got to become a priority. It's got to supersede the [television program] "Millionaire" and the [television show] "Survivors" and all those other things that kind of pull us away that we rationalize. Nobody's going to save us but us.

RM: That's true.

I have a little form you need to sign to give us permission to do this.

WD: Sure.



[End of interview]