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"Setting the Standards" or Education with Mrs. Betsy Graham

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Riley Roberts

History of American Education Interview Project

1. February 23, 2016, 1:00pm-2:15pm, Prince of Peace Christian School
2. Mrs. Betsy Graham, acting middle school principal of Prince of Peace Christian School
3. Guiding questions:

Talk about your general experiences in elementary, middle, and high school, and what changed.

What kind of schools did you attend?

Remembering teachers, what you liked/disliked

Why go into education? Why teaching? Why administration?

What is it about Prince of Peace that is different from other schools?

How have you seen Prince of Peace change/evolve in the past few years?

What do you anticipate for the future of education?

1. BG: I am a product of all private schools. From daycare at a Presbyterian church to Lutheran
2. schooling--all private. Except for Montessori. My mom credits why I was in first grade when
3. I was five and in college when 17. I was in Lutheran schools 1-8th grade, same school. I had
4. great teachers. Lutheran communities are very unique in that its faith-based, talk about God
5. every day, a lot like Prince of Peace. I learned that in the Lutheran school system. In West
6. Palm Beach, there was no Lutheran high school, so I went to a Christian school called King's
7. Academy, which is very prestigious. Like a Hockaday here. I chose Concordia University for
8. my undergrad because my parents said they would pay every penny of it because they would
9. rather spend more money on a Christian education. Now, I have no student loans! Concordia
10. in Wisconsin was fantastic. I have connections there both professors and friends that I'll
11. always have. You meet so many people and hold onto those friendships in a small school.
12. My first job out of college was here teaching 4th grade. I learned primarily from two teachers
13. that I worked with. One was Harrison's mom--how *not* to teach. She was a terrible teacher.

14. RR: What do you mean? How was she bad?

15. BG: Yeah, she would make fun of them, she didn't like them. I was so naive. One great
16. teachers who is now a middle school teacher, Michelle Grant, was my biggest influence. Mrs.
17. Grant, Mrs. Owen, and I all taught fourth grade. I remember one day was so appalling--we
18. would sit outside and watch the kids during recess. The girls all had this jump-rope song,
19. little Sally Walker? Do you know it?

20. RR: Yeah, I do.

21. BG: Well, she had this kid in her class named Tommy and she would sing (to the tune of
22. Little Sally Walker) and make fun of her student! She laughed like it was the funniest thing,
23. and I just thought it was so terrible.

24. RR: So why do you think she did that?

25. BG: She just didn't like her job, she was a really unhappy person. And I was so naive, and I
26. remember thinking that it was a horrible way to conduct yourself as a teacher. Then I learned
27. from Michelle how to be a *real* teacher--she is very Godly, very prayer-filled, lives for her
28. students kind of teacher. Even now, she is married but doesn't have kids of her own, which is
29. really hard for her, but she treats each kid as if they were her own. She is an incredibly
30. forgiving and loving teacher--that is what a kid needs. It's not about the content, but they will
31. remember that a teacher loved them. And that Tommy kid? He could feel that his teacher
32. hated him, and I could see it in his demeanor. It makes me really sad that each bad teacher
33. has an unfortunate student like that. That first year of teaching taught me a lot. And then I
34. taught fourth grade for eleven years. I got my Master's in 2008--I had a really challenging
35. year and I needed to have other things to do besides be in the classroom. I met my husband,

36. bought a house, started grad school, and realized I wanted to have a leadership role. I just
37. love helping people and I don't want to see a teacher like that (referencing Mrs. Owen) ever
38. again if I can help it. So, if I could have a role where I could change that, I wanted to do it. In
39. every great group of teachers there's going to be one low one; I mean, someone is the worst
40. teacher. So I started taking on other tasks in the Elementary school on a basic level, I pushed
41. several times to come up to the middle school several times, and I was told no each time.

42. RR: For any particular reason? Did they just want you in fourth grade?

43. BG: It wasn't the right time and that was hard for me to accept. I got so mad at Mr. Carlove
44. thinking 'What do you mean? I have a Master's degree, I've been teaching here for a decade,
45. what's the problem?' I tried to be the assistant principal and twice he said 'No, it's not the
46. right time.' Come to find out when he finally said yes, that same teacher (Mrs. Owen) who I
47. became very close to, she went up to the Middle School because she was basically kicked out
48. of teaching fourth grade, and I wanted to go with her. Patrick (Carlove) knew at the time that
49. it wouldn't be good. 'You don't need to be hanging out with her.' I didn't realize it at the
50. time--I was 25, 26. He was looking out for me the whole time, and now I see clearly now that
51. it was the right choice. Later she was fired and I would've been fired with her. So I'm thrilled
52. to look back and see that it was a good thing. So then I took responsibilities at the lower-
53. school level but never had an opportunity for leadership because the elementary principal
54. (Laura Cleland) is a nice lady, but she didn't like change. When the timing was right, I came
55. up here and was the assistant principal for two years. Then, one day, Mr. Carlove told me
56. that he was retiring and told me to take his job. I said 'No, don't want to do that!' I wasn't
57. ready, I liked my job and responsibilities. He said 'Well, if you don't, there's a huge risk in
58. bringing in someone new with a tight-knit community like this. The new guy could change

59. everything or not fit with the personality of the school. You could take this job and keep this
 60. group together or you brought the new guy in.' It was kind of a guilt trip *laughs* and when
 61. it's on me, I'm gonna have to do his job anyway because he won't know for a couple months
 62. how to run things, so I'll be the new guy!
 63. So I prayed about it a lot, and that's how I'm doing what I'm doing! I didn't think I'd be
 64. doing this job in a million years *laughs* but I love it.

65. RR: What was it that convicted your decision to go into education, or were there other careers in mind?

66. BG: I considered nursing for a while when I was in high school because I really did just want
 67. to help people, I'm a caregiver. I took a class my Junior and Senior year in high school, I
 68. took "intro to education" and helped in an elementary classroom and absolutely loved it. It
 69. was grading papers, it was recess, but the teacher would ask 'Do you want to teach a lesson?'
 70. I loved that side of it, to be with the kids and having fun. Both years, the teacher at the time
 71. told me 'This is your gift, this is what you should do,' and I loved having that reinforcement
 72. to be that. I still briefly looked at nursing--my mom was a nurse and a teacher, so I wanted to
 73. follow in her footsteps. My dad was also a teacher; he taught college until he was 75.

74. RR: What did he teach?

75. BG: Journalism and English. Yeah, his story is a crazy one. My parents were a very strong
 76. influence in my choice. My dad came from South America when he was 35 into America,
 77. and he did not have any formal education. He came and took the GED test four times until he
 78. finally passed it, and went to college when he was 36 years old. So that's the short of it. But
 79. knowing that he came from poverty--he still has family that works on a sugar cane plantation
 80. in South America--and he chopped sugar cane all day until he was in his 30's and had saved

81. enough money to go away. So that does drive a lot of it. I mean, that's *the* American dream
 82. right there. He got a PhD and taught at the college level for thirty years. So that, I would say,
 83. is the driving influence.

84. **RR: Going back to your time at the Lutheran school, how would you describe your
 85. teachers, the facilities..did you have any extracurriculars?**

86. BG: Teachers I would say, were nice, but not super memorable. There are some things that I
 87. did in my fourth grade classrooms that I remember having in my class because they were
 88. good things. I did learn how to be a teacher, but I would say it was pretty typical in
 89. curriculum to most. Lutheran schools are typically small, not a lot of extracurriculars, but
 90. they did have some. You would have a lot of teachers who do everything. They teach in the
 91. classroom but are also your P.E. coach, they also run the computer lab, serve the hot
 92. lunch...They usually do it all. That's one way that POP is very unique as a Lutheran school in
 93. that we have other kids and you have one job. We have so many teachers and teaching
 94. assistants that everyone; this is not a normal situation.

95. **RR: What is it about POP that distinguishes it from the school you attended? How are
 you running things differently, optimally?**

96. BG: The middle school culture is a priority, establishing both positive classroom culture and
 97. team culture. Going to POP for high school, you've got great teachers and a great principal,
 98. but sometimes not everyone comes together as we do in the middle school. Tension between
 99. teachers can really drive a wedge into things, and you cannot have that when you're teaching
 100. together. The middle school here, I believe, is a very tight-knit group. We'll do a 5k
 101. together...The core group is 14 teachers and it really builds a community. And that spills
 102. over to create a positive classroom culture for the kids. That's something unique to POP.

103. **RR: How have you seen changes in the way that the students are dealt with
(disciplinary issues, academic)?**

104. BG: Well, there's a constantly changing pendulum in education, especially in public
105. schools. When I was getting my Master's, I worked very closely with teachers from PISD
106. (Plano Independent School District). They had a deal that PISD would cover their
107. Master's, but I had to pay for mine. But I did learn a lot about public schools--I learned
108. that there is constantly changing trends in education. There's always a new acronym you
109. have to learn, a new government mandate, a state standard...so that effects the patterns
110. you see over time. Although we aren't held to those new standards, it is important to the
111. administration that we know the new expectations with STAAR testing and things like
112. that. We like to think that we're setting our standards higher than the public schools,
113. because we want to see our students succeed as much as possible and give them an
114. exceptional education that we want to see.

115. **RR: How has Prince of Peace evolved in terms of administration? Particularly, how
has the administration dealt with the introduction of the iPads? ***

116. BG: That's another part of the pendulum and, you know, making some years very reliant
117. on the iPads, all about technology, and then we look at the curriculum again and decide
118. it could perhaps not be the best for kids. We do let it evolve. I remember when I first
119. came in in 2002, we were required to have a classroom website, and at the time, not
120. everyone even had email! I had literally just gotten my first cell phone. But we had to
121. have these sites, and post the spelling words and the "weekly update" and then two years
122. later, the pendulum swings, and that is no longer required. Then it swings back, and

123. we're introducing iPads. At the beginning of that, they started in the fifth grade classes
124. with the intent of preparing them so they could use them in middle school, and within one
125. year, we saw that they weren't able to handle it. Both the students and the teachers had
126. trouble incorporating that into their coursework. It was a hard transition to make, so we
127. took it out. Now, six years later, we're back with the iPads in the fifth grade classroom.
128. We're all trying to not just keep up, but to set the standard. We're setting the bar. I went
129. to a lunch yesterday with middle school principals from all over the metroplex--the
130. higher end schools--Hockaday, St. Marks, Jesuit, Parish...the really high ones. It was very
131. interesting to hear them talk. I felt that a lot of them have found that their schools are
132. only popular and prestigious because of tradition. You know, when people say 'I went to
133. St. Marks' you know what that means. It's a family tradition, and they're clinging to that
134. with everything they've got. The middle school principal from Hockaday said that they
135. don't have open grade books. There's no way to know how their kids are doing.

136. **RR: So do you think that the closed gradebook is at all beneficial?**

137. BG: No, I can't say I support that. They are holding onto an attitude that says 'I have the
138. information, and I won't tell you unless I think you should know.' And people buy it!

139. **RR: That's surprising because I would think that the people who would pay so**
140. **much money for an education would be incredibly preoccupied with their student's**
141. **grades.**

142. BG: But at that school, that's the standard the administration has set, and they have no
143. choice but to deal with it. Whereas here, I kind of laughed when she said it, because—
144. could you *imagine* if I did that here? Parents would have a fit! They would never buy
145. that. So I think it's always best to have open communication, I always do. I'm listening to

146. this lady talk, and someone asked if we'd consider changing it. Out of the eight schools
147. represented, four had closed grade books--I didn't know that was still a thing! She kept
148. talking about these "comments" and I didn't know what she was talking about...She was
149. referring to comments at the bottom of a report card. They are still doing pre-computer,
150. handwritten notes, and the parents have no choice but to flock to these notes. I feel like
151. we have an open door, open book policy. If a parent wants to talk to a teacher, you don't
152. have to wait for "comments," you can send them an email!

153. **RR: As a teacher and as an administrator, has that "open policy" given you more**
154. **problems with parents? As a tutor and as a student, I know that there are a**
155. **tremendous amount of helicopter parents who will berate the teachers for the**
156. **grades. Do you think that outweighs the closed gradebook?**

157. BG: I think that there is certainly a fine line. I think that people go back to "why did we
158. choose Prince of Peace?" And it is because we do things a certain way. I would say there
159. are 10% of parents who are just over the top, who go after the teacher, the 10% who
160. don't care, and the 80% in the middle who use it as it is meant to be used. As long as you
161. accept those odds, it's fine. And honestly, it's not the top 10% that concerns us, it's the
162. bottom 10% of parents who don't care--those are the parents who need to care about their
163. child's behavior and grades. Our goal is to always keep the parents at a middle ground,
164. which doesn't always happen, but I don't think it's a bad thing to have an open book
165. policy and it comes with its challenges. I just had a mom come in today, actually,
166. inquiring about her son's grades. Our community is so close that we heard the mom out,
167. and then we can all talk about the student: 'Has Johnny been turning his homework in for
168. your class? Has he been acting out?' Our closeness allows us to coordinate and help the

169. students along with the open door policy. I think, improvements wise, we need to better
170. prepare our eighth graders for high school to jump into something like an intense pre-AP
171. class.

172. **RR: Do you have any predictions for the future of POP or education in general?**

What are anticipating for this next class of middle schoolers?

173. BG: That's a great question. I would say right now, I'm learning a lot through the high
174. school principal interview process because Mr. Swanson (the principal of Prince of
175. Peace high school) is moving back to California and I'm in the panel that interviews
176. candidates for his job. It's going to be a new person with a new dynamic which involves
177. me because everything that happens in the high school trickles down to the middle school
178. because we share teachers, classrooms...so next year is going to be learning curve. And
179. based on what I've heard (we've interviewed five people so far) everyone is very
180. talented, knowledgeable about the current practices in education, and they come to the
181. interview with a heart for ministry that we hold to at Prince of Peace. Everything we
182. do—whether it's about academics or discipline, it's about the mission of ministry here. I
183. see great things for our school--we're about to reach our capacity! We're not that far
184. from hitting a maximum amount, and we're looking into a new building project too, to
185. adapt for more students.

186. **RR: Thank you so much for your time, Mrs. Graham**

187. BG: And thank you! It was a pleasure.