



## **BHEA on Leadership, Communication**

These are transcripts of BHEA speeches delivered at the Feb. 27, 2007 Board of Ed. meeting on the topics of leadership and communication:

### **Speech by BHEA High School Director Stewart Horowitz**

President Millan, members of the Board, Superintendent McVeigh, good evening. I remember a time when members of the Board of Education came to the high school and met with teachers and support staff during lunch. I remember a time when members of the Board of Education graciously made their homes available for staff parties, both at the beginning of the year and often at year end. Last year 5 veteran teachers and our head counselor at BHHS retired and not a single member of the Board of Education nor district administrator attended. I guess times have changed in Beverly Hills.

Do you remember as children, watching the old Westerns on TV as two steam locomotives raced towards each other on the same track ending in a horrific crash—unless the cowboy with the white hat saved the day at the last possible moment?

This image is an unfortunate analogy that describes our school district today. The Board of Education and administrators seemingly no longer trust the teaching staff that has for decades successfully served the children of Beverly Hills. Teachers have been criticized by some community members and one of the local papers for being lazy and the teacher-bashing that occurs now seems an acceptable method to express concerns.

On the other hand, teachers are bewildered by the reality that the district will have spent over \$200,000,000 for the modernization projects and still many aspects of our school facilities are substandard or simply do not work properly. Administrative turnover has been nothing less than catastrophic and veteran administrators, who usually had the trust of teachers, were literally chased away.

Our previous superintendent bears great responsibility for much of the strained relationships that currently exist in our schools. Many teachers have spoken with me about his erratic behavior, volatile temper, and questionable behavior. Yet he had the full public support of all board members to the very end of his tenure in BHUSD. Thus, for me at least, the train wreck imagery works.

But this train wreck serves no useful purpose; instead, it is enormously destructive. Certainly what has been happening in recent years does nothing to promote our common mission—the education of our children.

We have no choice. We have no more time to waste. We all need to relearn how to communicate and rebuild our relationships with one another. Openly. Honestly. Where problems exist, when mistakes are made, solutions must be found together. Here then, is my suggestion.

During the past two years much time and many tens of thousands of dollars have been spent on the concept of Professional Learning Community. The concept of a learning community is sound, though we are farther away from this reality than ever before. Creation of a professional learning community requires trust, cooperation, and a common purpose. This school community, all of us, must move beyond the rhetoric and anger of these past months. We must refocus our energy and talents on the challenges ahead. We must dust off and don those white cowboy hats. Thank you.

### **Speech by BHEA El Rodeo Representative Jean Nelson**

Last night I was reading the latest issue of *The International Educator*. It's fascinating to read about The Stanford Program on International and Cross-Culture Education, or an article on Why Finnish Education is #1 in the World or to learn that BILLIONS of dollars from American foundations are being donated to libraries in Africa and SE Asia. Then I read a rather disturbing article recapping the recent report from the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce. The high-powered group says the threat of competition from China and India is so serious, and the problems facing U.S. public education so dire, that the U.S. ought to effectively start over.

Depressed, I turned the page. Coincidentally, there was an article written by a middle school principal in Shanghai, China. I quote: "Every school administrator knows when staff morale is deteriorating. Administrators know when teachers not buying into goals that are supposedly shared. Left unattended, declining morale reinforces dysfunctional organizational culture, leading to fragmentation, focus on negative values, and prevalence of the spirit of pessimism.

"Given that, shouldn't improving and maintaining positive staff morale and a healthy organizational

culture be a primary objective for every administrator?

“There is a direct link between improving the morale and the culture of a school and improving teacher and student learning. The stark reality is that no initiatives undertaken in our schools will ever be as successful as they could be unless they are embedded in a healthy culture that sustains a positive sense of staff morale.”

I’ve taught in Beverly Hills for a long time. But my entire teaching career has not been limited to my years here. I’ve also taught in Minneapolis, Chicago, Boston, New Jersey, and as a Fulbright teacher in England. Upon reflection, I realize there is one glaring difference between my experience in Beverly Hills and those elsewhere - namely, that in my other positions, my time, talent, effort, energy, involvement, and mental energy were directed almost exclusively towards my students. But here, so much of my time and energy is siphoned off addressing the politics and questionable policies that affect the classrooms of our District.

I often think about the differences between those of us in the classrooms, directly responsible for students’ learning, and the other members of the school community who determine the direction of our efforts.

I’m charged with seeing that my pupils are taught the Content Standards set forth by the State of California. I must demonstrate my own teaching abilities as determined by the California Standards for the Teaching Profession. But, I did not, until recently, learn that there also exist standards by which educational leaders are measured. In brief, these nationally recognized Standards for School Leaders are:

- Implement a Vision of Learning that is shared and supported by the school community.
- Provide a Culture of Teaching and Learning that values students and staff.
- Make Operational Management decisions that ensure successful teaching and learning.
- Collaborate with all stakeholders.
- Demonstrate Integrity, Fairness, and a personal and professional Code of Ethics.

According to the Framework that links these Standards to practice, “Strong leadership should not be equated with ‘a strong man or woman who manipulates others’. Strength, they say, lies in the ability to generate a productive, collaborative community that is bound together in a democratic framework and process. ‘Leadership’ is a collective term.”

Effective schools are described as, “the antithesis of the kind of educational workplace where educators feel that they live in a torrent of change and mandates, while little changes. The common experience is one of many changes, yet not much changing. Teachers, they say, have been virtually shocked by the barrage of “semi-changes” that sap their energy but make few substantial differences. In effective schools, all members feel that they are making a difference.”

So, how do we move towards creating more effective schools in our District?

From the same document, an accomplished principal suggests, and I quote: “It takes time to build the bridges needed to assure that all stakeholders are part of the solutions needed to make our schools a safe place focused on teaching and learning. By investing time in understanding the rich history of the school, the new school leaders will grow into understanding who the stakeholders are and how to engage them in meaningful dialogue.”

It is my sincere hope, and that of many of my colleagues, that meaningful dialogue will come to BHUSD!

### **Speech by BHEA Certificated President Chris Bushée**

Since July of 2003, our district has seen an average of one administrative personnel shift every 45 days. Our district has seen 29 personnel changes in just 19 administrative positions, ranging from assistant principal to superintendent. Why has this occurred? One can only speculate. Whatever the reason, it has fragmented the leadership of our district. The students, parents, teachers, and support staff of Beverly Hills have played a large role in keeping us whole. We house the history of our district. Our determination has helped bring Blue Ribbon and California Distinguished school status to Beverly Hills.

It is inconsistent for our district administration to seek input from teachers and, at the same time, issue directives to teachers. To do so demonstrates a disregard and impatience with the arduous, yet rewarding process of consensus-building. It is difficult to have effective collaboration on important issues underneath the polarizing clouds of unilateral decision-making.

It is inconsistent to claim that students’ best interests are served and then allocate tens of thousands of dollars toward untested ideas like the ‘power standards’ initiative from last year. Teachers were ultimately able to show that power standards were originally created to help low-achieving districts and that such a model did not fit in Beverly Hills. The money spent on power standards could have been spent more effectively on students.

For two months, our district administration told teachers that ‘the trend’ is to eliminate remedial classes from our curriculum. Our administration specifically cited the Los Angeles Unified School District as an example that our district should follow. Last Friday’s edition of the L.A. Times cited a study from the federal Department of Education that provides “clear evidence” that such a trend has resulted in “course inflation—offering high-level courses that have the right names but dumbed-down curriculum.” For decades, teachers in Beverly Hills have successfully prepared our college-bound students for the rigors they face after graduation. Do we want to risk this success for untested ideas originating in education journals? When significant changes to curriculum are suggested, let’s use the expertise we have right here in our community, namely our professional teaching staff.

Teachers are more than willing to work with our district administration and support our Board of Education. This must be accomplished with stability and trust in all of our leaders.

A 2001 study published by the Educational Research Service concluded that ineffective Boards micromanage school affairs, concentrate on items of personal interest, and oversee a revolving door of school administrators. It also concluded that effective Boards of Education share leadership with their staff, foster a supportive workplace, and utilize data before making decisions.

BHEA is committed to open, honest, and productive communication with our administration where it is lacking. BHEA is committed to building trust where there is little. Will our leaders here tonight join us? The time for reconciliation has arrived. Let’s march hand in hand and put public education first.

We are here tonight to participate in the leadership of our district. We are here tonight because we fear that our input on important educational issues is being marginalized. Things have gotten out of hand, and we need to take a step back. Collectively, our common mission is to educate. Let’s not lose sight of this.

Thank you.