

SHAKER LIFE

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A Great Ride

Shaker Schools
Superintendent
Mark Freeman
Reflects on
His Career and
Considers the
Road Ahead





Photo by Kevin Reeves



A Great Ride

An Interview with Superintendent Mark Freeman

By Jennifer Proe

When Mark Freeman retires in July, he will have spent 46 years of his career in service to the Shaker schools, 25 of those as superintendent. The Freeman era encompasses many of the milestones of the history of the schools and the community: voluntary racial integration, a major school reorganization, the birth of the Shaker Schools Foundation, and the International Baccalaureate program, to name only a few. Before riding off to his next adventure, whatever that may be, he sat still long enough to reflect on his career, and to give us some of his thoughts for the future of public education.

Tell us a little about your early days – what were you like as a student?

I was not a good student in grade school and high school. I was only engaged if I liked the teacher, kind of the classic thing you see in students all the time. I think because of this, perhaps I'm more empathetic about the struggles a student might have.

In college at Kent State University I had an incredibly spotty record – going from a 4.0 at one time to passing with a D at another. I got a little more serious when I became an upperclassman. I met my first wife [Linda, now deceased] in college. When we were dating she asked me when I planned to graduate, and I was sort of shocked by the question. I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to leave a college campus. I was a senior in college when Linda and I got married. She turned out to be an excellent influence on me academi-

cally. By graduate school I was a more serious student, first at the school of technology and then later in education.

What attracted you into the teaching profession?

In college, I worked at a whole variety of jobs – at a beverage store, at a bar, at a retail clothing store, and in a couple of factories. I remember operating a plastic injection molding machine and doing rubber denuding and realizing I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life. My first professional job was one of the most rewarding jobs I ever had, working as a care provider and then a recreational therapist at a children's psychiatric hospital. I left that job because there was no money in it.

My first teaching job was at Euclid High School. Initially I went into teaching because I realized I could teach industrial arts and make a living doing it. It seemed like a fun thing to do. It was one of the subjects in school I enjoyed. I don't like to sit still. I have always believed that if you teach anything that has a lot of student activity, where students wind up with some type of product, it is very rewarding. It gives you a lot of time to talk with your students on an informal basis. I found that very attractive.

Once I got into teaching I really loved it. I still like to teach. One of the drawbacks of my current job is that I don't get to teach as much.

How did you come to join the faculty of the Shaker schools in 1967?

I was teaching at Euclid High School

After 25 years in the superintendent seat, Mark Freeman reflects on his career and considers the road ahead.

and my wife was teaching at Cleveland Heights High School, and we decided we were ready to make a move. We researched the area and decided Shaker Heights was the best district.

“Mark Freeman came to Woodbury Junior High when I was in eighth grade. When Mark arrived, he made an impression on us. He had this dark beard. We had respect for him from the beginning. We interpreted him as being strict, but really he was just serious-minded. We had this dangerous equipment in our shop for working with both wood and metal, and you had to be focused. One of my classmates, who shall remain unnamed, brought some barbecue Fritos to class, thinking he would eat them in shop class that day. Mark saw the bulge in his shirt right away and pulled him over. He did not get to eat those Fritos. We knew right then that Mark was very observant and not to be messed with.”- Paul Mason, '74



As someone who “doesn’t like to sit still,” Freeman found an outlet for his energy in football. (Photo from the 1962 Eastlake North High School yearbook)

You were quite a political activist for teachers’ rights while you were on the teaching staff at Woodbury. What were some of the issues you advocated for?

General collective bargaining agreements or master contracts were not common in Ohio at that time, and I, along with some others, thought we ought to have a master contract, so we drafted one and worked at negotiating it. I also got involved in teacher grievances so I learned quite a bit about that. At that time I didn’t have any interest in school administration, and if I did I certainly thought it could never be in Shaker Heights because I had burned every conceivable bridge with these negotiations.

I totally underrated and misjudged the school administrators at that time. I thought they would hold grudges because of my union activities. Well, it turned out just the opposite. Apparently they had a different take on me and thought I had a good understanding of what was going on and that I might be a good candidate for something.

I occasionally joke about clauses in our collective bargaining agreement that are difficult to administer and people remind me that I may have written them. I continue to have tremendous respect for teachers

and teaching. Shaker has a fabulous faculty and I think the collective bargaining units in Shaker have been extremely professional and interested in how their work affects children. It’s not always wonderful, sometimes there is great disagreement – it’s usually over compensation or benefits, the obvious things.

“When I was president of the Shaker Heights Teachers’ Association, I knew that Mark would work with me to deal with concerns. For both of us, it was more important to make things work than to be confrontational or ‘right.’” - Rebecca Thomas, former Shaker schools librarian and head of the SHTA

What was your first role as an administrator?

The first job I applied for was assistant director of recreation. I didn’t get the job, but the Assistant Superintendent at that time, Fred David, told me not to be discouraged.

After I received my doctorate, I remember talking to some administrators about my interests, and I sort of got recruited for the job of Director of Educational Services, which covered all instructional media and equipment. One of the things I did in that job was to write a funding proposal – probably to buy some equipment – and it was successful. I became very interested in writing grant proposals and lobbying for them. The biggest one I wrote was for the Emergency School Aid Act that provided funds for school districts to desegregate. Some districts were under court order to do so, but Shaker was in a whole different ball game with this. We were interested in racial balance in the schools and doing it voluntarily, so we received hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Emergency School Aid Act and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.



Freeman joined the faculty of Woodbury Junior High in 1967 as an industrial arts teacher. He has seldom been seen since without his beard. (Photo from the 1970 Woodbury Tower yearbook)



“When Mark was appointed superintendent in 1988, our sense was that he had a good understanding of the system, was thoughtful, and intelligent,” says Earl Leiken, president of the School Board when Freeman was appointed and current mayor of Shaker Heights. (Photo from the School Review, 1988)

*“There is always unfinished business,
always more to do. It’s a work in
progress. It should be.”*

What was your role in implementing the Shaker Schools Plan? What was the community reaction to it at the time?

The Shaker Schools Plan began with voluntary busing in 1969. I was a teacher at the time, and I can remember going to large community meetings where there was a great deal of anger and hostility. I remember a guy just yelling and screaming about how awful this was, saying, “How could you do this?” I found this really surprising because this was not my experience with the parents of the students I worked with. I had a great deal of respect early on for how the school board and the administrative team dealt with this kind of behavior. I think that left quite an impression on me.

I spent a lot of time developing relationships in Columbus and Washington, D.C., trying to obtain funding for the plan. Much of the later work that I directed as an administrator included staff development to help the faculty adjust to challenges, intensive meetings with staff and parents – some of it was pretty gut-wrenching.

I’ll take credit for recruiting Beverly Mason, who was then working as a social worker in our schools, to direct the integration effort. She had great interpersonal skills and leadership. The school board was very solid in their leadership on this issue, in particular Bob Rawson, Sr., who showed incredible conviction for doing the right thing. And there was incredible leadership within the community, both white and black.

“I know that my mother considered Mark both a wonderful colleague and a tremendous supporter of the integration plan. It was risky and courageous. It was not a popular idea with a lot of people initially. There was some sense that people’s neighborhoods were being broken up. But when you think about the greater good, there was a lot of logic to it. - Paul Mason, '74 son of Shaker Schools Plan coordinator Beverly Mason (now deceased)

How did you progress as an administrator?

I worked for a while as director of research and evaluation, and then director of curriculum and instruction. My boss at the time suggested I attend a meeting that was sponsored by the Institute for Educational Leadership, a think tank in Washington D. C. They later invited me to join their Educational Policy Fellowship program, which I did.

A few years later, I was asked if I wanted to become the local coordinator of the program. We had guest speakers who talked about leadership style, and we took trips to other states to study what was going on in other parts of the country. I made some great professional contacts and learned a lot.

It helped equip me for the superintendency in an area that you would never think about in formal training – learning about how policy is developed, the politics of education, group dynamics. It was great training.

School funding has been a major part of your job for years. Why does Shaker have such a strong track record of success in passing our levies?

I have worked on about 15 or more levy campaigns in my time here. There have only been two levies that did not pass on the first try. We have a highly educated community and there is a pretty strong correlation between education level and the rate of levy passage. I’m very sympathetic about the tax rate residents are asked to pay here and grateful for their support. Hopefully there will be some reforms in state funding to ease that burden.

Another reason our levies usually pass is that we have a good product. If a school district is stable and has the trust of the people, and prizes that trust, then the chance of levy success goes way up. In times when I’ve told the public when we’ll be on the ballot, or where the trouble spots are, I’ve been very direct and open. I also think stability of leadership helps a great deal. We have had



Freeman has signed the diplomas of close to 9,000 Shaker Heights High School graduates. (Photo by Kevin Reeves)

“It’s very common for kids to say thank you at commencement. It can’t get much better than that.”

very stable and dedicated school boards here. Our school board members have been very smart, and diverse, and they don’t do the job for political gain, but rather as a public service. They don’t take a salary, which is rare. In most districts, they take the salary.

“Working with Mark on a levy campaign was like taking a graduate course in school finance. He was an excellent teacher. The most traumatic time for me as school board president was in 1994 when the levy failed. The community felt that the school board was not listening to them. With Mark’s input and support, we developed a state of the schools meeting and hundreds of people came. We had a phone bank every night for a month, with school board members answering questions, and ultimately the levy passed.”
- Judy Stenta, former Board president

What was the state of the Schools when you first became Superintendent in 1988?

We had just gone through a major school reorganization, where we had to close several schools due to population decline. At the time of the K-4 closings,

we had schools that were just on the edge of having only one class section per grade. Most folks understood the need to close schools, but nobody wanted their school to be closed. It took a long time to evolve and became very emotional. Strong leadership on the Board, led by Earl Leiken, helped us get through it.

We were at a low of about 4,800 students at that time. Gradually, our enrollment did grow, and has been very stable for the past 16 or 17 years. Because of that growth, we needed to expand Onaway and Boulevard schools. From a financial standpoint, adding a wing to a building versus adding a whole building, there was no comparison.

We also needed a larger gym at the High School, which we were later able to add because of some back tax collections and other sources. We changed the front entrance of the High School so that it would be more accessible to disabled students and have a true front door. We expanded the cafeteria at the High School, which helped change the whole tone of the place – before that, the kids had nowhere to go. And of course the Shaker Schools Foundation was active in renovating the Large and Small Auditoriums.

“Mark was always a strong advocate for maintaining a high quality standard, whether it was hiring the best teachers, providing whatever was needed in terms of technology, or maintenance of the physical facilities. Some of the board members might have pushed him on the financial side, but his priority was always education.” - Earl M. Leiken, former Board president and current mayor of Shaker Heights

You were instrumental in forming the Shaker Schools Foundation in 1981. Why was it needed?

I thought there were problems with Ohio's funding formula for schools and we needed to think about building some type of endowment just like private schools and universities do. Certainly there was some concern about how this might affect school levies. The danger was that people might think they did not have to vote for the school levy, because private donations were coming into the schools. In fact, it's the opposite. If someone invests in the schools, whether it's \$100,000 or \$10, they feel they have an equity interest in it.

I was on the School Board when they were first talking about having the Night for the Red & White (an annual benefit now in its 21st year). Mark was supportive and gave it the go-ahead. Now, a lot of school districts have foundations, but we were pioneers." - Judy Stenta

Minority achievement has been a critical issue throughout your time as superintendent. What can be done to address the achievement gap?

This is not a new item. As a District, we started addressing it in the early 1960s. A superintendent can be effective through basic leadership, by paying attention to it, setting goals, providing readings about it, and being aware of what behaviors are modeled by you that affect others.

Much of what we do has been effective – that's why people come from other districts around the country and look at what we're doing. In saying that, more needs to be done. Right here in Shaker Heights there is a dramatic difference in wealth between European Americans and African Americans. This is certainly linked to school achievement.

One of the issues is that schools can't skip what's going on in a child's home. This isn't an excuse, it doesn't mean that the school shouldn't continue to do more. In fact, we probably need the resources to do more to intervene in a child's life. That's the reality.

You also have to look at how we are doing compared to similar districts.

Several years ago, a group of superintendents got together and formed the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN). We wanted to look at school districts with a common thread – middle-class or upper-class school districts with an achievement gap. That gap is there for a whole variety of reasons. There is an over-riding issue of subconscious racism that often gets overlooked, but is very real and detrimental. Also, we were concerned with how to deal with negative peer pressure and how to develop faculty to counteract this achievement gap. This work continues in Shaker and other MSAN districts.

On your watch, Shaker instituted the Asian Studies program, expanded international travel opportunities for students, and adopted the International Baccalaureate program. Why is the global focus of our curriculum so important to you?

The expression is kind of trite, but it's true: The world is getting smaller. We now have a much larger number of students who come to us from other countries. It's paramount for our graduates to have a grasp of not only the

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A high point was President Obama's visit to Shaker Heights High School in 2009. The President returned in 2012. (Photo courtesy of Mark Freeman)





A 1992 trip to Senegal led Freeman to greater understanding of the brutality and legacy of slavery. (Photo courtesy of Mark Freeman)

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Rebecca Freeman ('91), boards the bus to Moreland Elementary School as part of the voluntary integration effort known as the Shaker Schools Plan. All three of Freeman's children are graduates of the Shaker Schools. (Photo courtesy of Mark Freeman)

U.S. but the world, as we are moving very much to a world economy. If we're interested in diversity and living with others, experiencing their cultures will provide a better perspective for our students and our faculty.

I've always been interested in the International Baccalaureate program. When you look at international education and talk to other school administrators, they often talk about IB. I also felt that IB would be very helpful in supporting collaboration among teachers to plan and develop lessons.

We knew that if we wanted to implement IB we had to beef up our language program, especially in the elementary schools. We became aware of a program in which teachers from China come to the U.S. as guest teachers. We thought that looked like an ideal program for Shaker. So the two things – IB and the Mandarin language program – came into being almost simultaneously, one with an eye towards the other.

I have always felt that travel is very enriching. It can open your eyes to how others see things. On a trip to Senegal in the 1990s with a group of other educators, we visited Goree Island and saw the place where many slave ships departed, also called the Door of No Return. It kind of takes your breath away to see the reality of it. Some of the leg irons are still there. It leads one to a whole new level of understanding of the brutality and legacy of slavery.

"In the 1980s, the world was changing dramatically. Japan and China were becoming powerhouses, and India was just coming on the scene. Mark understood that we needed to bring non-European history into the curriculum, such as the Asian Studies program. We became a school without walls." - Terry Pollack, High School social studies teacher

What were some of the best moments or memories you have from your time in this job?

It's always the kids, and always the unexpected stuff. It's great when kids earn honors and awards, but sometimes just the feedback from students is very rewarding.

I love to see adults who come back and say what a great education they had here and to say thank you. People come up to me at Heinen's and say things are going well. I love that. It's very common for kids to say thank you at commencement. It can't get much better than that.

We've also had lots of interesting guests here – educators from other parts of the country, from other countries, visiting academics – it's a steady flow. We've had two visits from President Obama. Walter Mondale. Al Gore. I had a chance to meet Bill Clinton when he talked to a small group of superintendents before he was president. I've enjoyed meeting accomplished people from our alumni hall of fame. Shaker Heights has connections to all sorts of folks.

**What are you proudest of?
What makes you feel good about the work you've done?**

I think what makes me feel good is that the District is really in good shape at the moment. We have a great faculty, supportive community, our labor contracts are settled, we have been able to delay a levy again. We've got some great new programs going, some fabulous new staff people, so the District's in very good shape. There is always unfinished business, always more to do. It's a work in progress. It should be.

What are your plans for retirement?

I don't know yet. Relax, reflect, and then decide. I think my wife, Gina, is very anxious that I won't have enough to do and I'll bother her. I'll probably ride my bike and travel more often. And I look forward to seeing more of my family. I have two grandchildren who live in France – Rebecca's children. She works for Doctors Without Borders. My son Matthew lives in the state of Washington and runs the university health services for Pacific Lutheran University. My stepdaughter Deborah is finishing a doctorate in political science and is joining the faculty at Yale. All three of my kids are Shaker grads, which makes me very proud.

"The role of superintendent is not easily filled. There are a lot of people who have the academic ability, but they don't have the social skills to interact with parents. Or they may have the social skills, but not the political skills, such as how to communicate with legislators, how to advocate for public education. What we had in Mark was the whole package. It didn't come all in one lump. All those years, in all of that time, those skill sets were being perfected. I'm not sure we always appreciated what we had, but we will soon." - Rev. Marvin McMickle, former Board president

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hat Lies Ahead:

Freeman on the future of public education

I think the educational experience will be more personalized in the future. We know that one size does not fit all. Yet American schools continue to be divided into grade levels and classroom units that have limited flexibility. We need to find ways to create a dynamic personal learning plan for each student. In this, we have much to learn from our colleagues in special education, whose work is tailored to the specific needs of each student.

I hope state and federal policymakers will finally reverse the trend toward more and more mandates. Almost all are unfunded or at best underfunded. We spend an inordinate amount of time on compliance activities that have little to do with the improvement of teaching and learning. It is costly and, more important, it diverts educators' time from what really makes a difference.

T echnology presents great opportunities and great challenges. Online learning is getting better; just look at Coursera, which offers online courses from top universities like Stanford and Brown. This is a powerful tool if used well and equitably. We need to make sure

that all students have access to online resources and that students and faculty members are comfortable using them.

A spects of the teaching profession must be reformed. There are too many schools of education, they are not sufficiently selective, and they do not provide students with enough authentic classroom experience during their training. Once they are on the job, American teachers have too little time for planning and collaboration. Visiting educators from other nations are shocked by the typical teaching load here. In countries like Finland and Singapore that have highly respected schools, teacher training is far better, and practitioners have considerably more time to refine their lessons and exchange ideas with colleagues. These things make a big difference.

W e talk about educating "the whole child," but we fall short. There simply aren't enough resources and time. I would like to see schools become the hub of a broader focus on the well-being of children and families, including wellness, mental health, parenting support, and constructive

out-of-school activities – almost like the settlement house model. This would go a long way toward mitigating the effects on children of poverty and family stresses.

I t has never been more important to educate students for responsible citizenship. By this I don't just mean civics lessons – although those are very important – but also development of empathy and interpersonal skills. To be contributing members of society, people need to be able to work in teams, using technology as a tool rather than as a barrier.

I t is beyond dispute that high-quality early childhood education lays a foundation for greater success in school and in life. I am encouraged by the President's call for universal preschool. I think it is one of the best investments our country could make.

I remain a firm believer in the ideal of the common school, a public institution serving children of many backgrounds. The common school has made our democracy great. It is an ideal worth continuing to fight for. 🐼

A Farewell Reception

All residents are invited to a retirement reception in honor of Mark Freeman on Tuesday, May 28, 2013, from 5-7 pm in the Upper Cafeteria at Shaker Heights High School.

The reception is sponsored by the School District, the City of Shaker Heights, the Shaker Schools Foundation, PTO Council, the Shaker Heights Teachers' Association, Ohio Association of Public School Employees, and Local 200.