



CHAPTER FIVE

April 12, 1999:
Best-in-Class

"I am easily satisfied with the very best."

Winston Churchill

Howard Bultinck student teaching in the early '70s.



"I like to think of myself as the CEO of kid's destinies," says District 29 Superintendent Howard Bultinck. From his earliest days in college, he says, "I respected kids. I liked them. I was determined to be a great teacher."

The *Pioneer Press* headlines in 1983 said it all: "Bultinck a Good Selection."

Today, those words still sit scotch-taped to the wall next to Howard Bultinck's desk.

His 15-year journey as superintendent of District 29 led him to the top of the charts in 1998 when the *Chicago Sun Times* ranked District 29 as "best suburban school" for the second year in a row.

It also led him to the White House in 1998, escorting Eagle Song, the popular Sunset Ridge singing group.

Northfield's approval rating of its public schools also hit 98% in 1998—a twenty-point jump from Bultinck's first community survey taken in 1984.

Not a bad jump, either, for a kid who had no mentors growing up in Chicago in the '50s.

Howard Bultinck shaped his destiny with his own formula for success: "You put in the time," he says, "and you have an absolute passion for what you do."

Along the way, he took District 29—its kids, parents, teachers and board members—with him.

Bultinck honed his intuitive skills with people early in life. "I practiced being 'doorman' in the apartment where I grew up," he says. "I knew everyone."

Starting at age 16, he was on his own financially. His toughest challenge was moving out of the dorm his sophomore year in college. "I ran out of money," he says. So he rented a room in the home of a widow living nearby for \$10 a week.

"Pull a dollar bill out of my wallet today and Washington blinks from the sunlight," Bultinck says. "People kid me about it. But those early years made me very sensitive to anyone who struggles financially."

That thinking also applies to District 29.

"I'm careful," he says, "that we get the best bang for the buck in our schools."

Bultinck discovered his passion for teaching about the same time he joined a service fraternity at Northern Illinois University, where he majored in psychology and elementary education.

He also found he was good at playing Santa Claus.

"I could show you hundreds of pictures

from my Santa Claus days," says Bultinck, whose spontaneous humor and warmth made him a popular draw at events his fraternity staged for less fortunate kids and parents.

"I didn't have any real motive in doing it," he says. "It's just that Santa was a good person."

Most of all, he loved kids.

"I respected them. I liked them," Bultinck says. "I was determined to be a great teacher."

A hard worker by nature, he also proved to be a good leader.

Rising to become president of his fraternity, he plunged into *Robert's Rules of Order*, learning it "inside out, forward and backward"—a skill that would prove critical as a young superintendent in District 29.

As college graduation loomed, Bultinck was offered a job with the Chicago Public Schools, but he had his eye on a more promising job in Lincolnwood.

There was a lot of concern in Lincolnwood, however, about finding the right candidate to fill the shoes of a fifth-grade teacher who had worked there—



"I'll tell you the secret of what makes District 29 great—it's finding great teachers," says Bultinck, with assistant principal, math teacher and 35-year veteran Dennis Morys (center); and school counselor John Ratajczak, who joined the district in 1967.

and been loved—for decades.

"I wanted that job," says Bultinck, who remembers the school superintendent asking him in an interview: "What do you know about Lincolnwood?"

"The fact is, I knew nothing," Bultinck recalls. But just in case, he'd gone to the library before the interview to read everything he could about the town.

Bultinck proceeded to give a fifteen-minute discourse on the city of Lincolnwood—and got the job.

"I learned something from that," Bultinck says. "I tell my students today: 'Be honest—but do your homework.'"

Bultinck thrived in that assignment for six years. He also discovered another talent when he represented the teachers at the bargaining table in their contract negotiations.

Just as he had with *Robert's Rules of Order*, Bultinck immersed himself in the details of school finance. At the negotiating table, he felt at ease. "I had the ability to listen," he says. "I could see all sides."

Working in Lincolnwood during the day, Bultinck went to school at night,

earning his master's degree in school administration at National Louis University. He also earned a post-master's degree in curriculum at Northwestern.

The lure of a substantial salary jump and a new challenge led him away from Lincolnwood in 1978 and into the business world. But he never really left academia.

Instructor Magazine needed an advertising manager. Howard filled the bill. He was good at it. He liked the financial rewards. But after two years of heavy travel—lots of work but no time for family—he knew there had to be a better way

What Bultinck *really* wanted to do was be a school superintendent. So he set a goal of going back to Northwestern to earn his doctorate in school administration.

To get the money to do that, he took a temporary job with a small school in Northfield. His title was administrative assistant.

Bultinck was told that District 29 was

struggling. Its superintendent was in poor health and needed a high-energy "front man" who could handle day-to-day interactions with teachers, parents and kids.

"It was only a two-year assignment—just right for me," Bultinck recalls. "I respected Rod Lewis' intelligence and knew I could learn a lot from him. But I never thought the job would amount to any more than that."

Bultinck's outgoing, "can-do" attitude—and his instant camaraderie with teachers and kids—was exactly what the little district needed.

"We were wounded," recalls Lyn Little. "We needed a strong 'people person' to get in front of problems. One of the best legacies Rod Lewis gave our district was finding Howard."

Bultinck's work ethic on the job was clear from the start.

"I remember Rod asking me who I'd recommend to handle the 'early shift'—making calls at 6 a.m. each day to find substitute teachers. I told him I would. I basically did anything anybody asked," he says.



The renaissance of District 29 spans every facet of the school, from music and the arts to a curriculum that's won Sunset Ridge and Middlefork top ranking as "best suburban school" by the *Chicago Sun Times*. Teachers Association president Barb Golomb describes the district as "a very nurturing place—for teachers and for kids. They're real believers here in letting teachers be exactly who they are."

While running a fast sprint at District 29—mastering every facet from curriculum planning to the boiler room—Bultinck started in 1981 to plug away at his doctorate at night.

In 1982, as his job expired, Lewis asked him to stay one more year.

"I remember him telling me, 'Howard, you're doing great. Stay with me one more year. You can finish your doctorate and then look for a job.'"

But Lewis resigned the following year, leaving Bultinck to step into his job while the board launched a nationwide search.

Just how much Bultinck wanted the superintendent's job, after several months of temporary duty, was clear at an Illinois School Board meeting he attended in the late fall of 1983.

Bultinck had his eye on a workshop that was right up his alley: "*How to Hire a Superintendent*."

As he strolled into the meeting room to find a seat, he spotted two District 29 board members sitting down at the same session.

"I quickly gathered up my things and dashed for the exit," Bultinck recalls. "On my way out I smiled and waved and said:

'You'll both take notes for me, won't you?'"

A few weeks later, Bultinck got the job.

His first official act as superintendent was to move his desk.

"I remember that so clearly," says Lynn Bodman Schnepfer, board president at the time. "The superintendent's desk had always been on the farthest wall. Howard moved his desk right in front of the door.

"He told me, 'I want to see people. I want to be accessible.' That was a big change."

Bultinck also put his own touch on the office, hanging kid art everywhere.

"I remember Lynn telling me, in a very diplomatic way, 'Howard, don't you think you should hang up your diploma?'" he recalls.

"I smiled kind of sheepishly and said, 'Oh, yeah.'"

Bultinck doesn't remember any momentous day when he walked into the office and said, "*This is a turning point in*

the school." It was more a step-by-step, inch-by-inch process.

If he were to sum up his key accomplishment in the '80s, it would be one word: trust.

"I tell my grad students today:

"That's the bottom line," he says. "Trust dictates everything else that happens in your district.

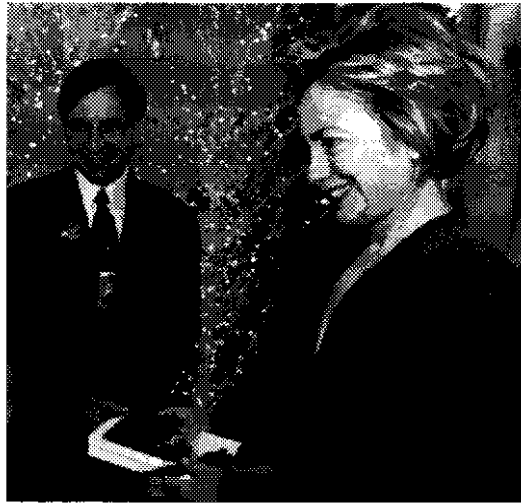
"I don't believe there was any one thing I did or one exact day when people said, 'Oh, wow—that's sensational!'" he reflects. "But slowly, over time, everybody in this district started trusting everybody else."

One tool Bultinck did find critical to running District 29 was systems analysis.

"Whenever I'm faced with a problem, I say, 'Okay, what system—not what person—is flawed here? I don't blame people. I look at systems. And 99% of the time, problems occur because something in your system—whether it's communications or the way the system is designed—is broken."

Every other improvement in the district, he says, has been incremental.

"I just kept doing the best I could for kids," he says. "I hired the best people I could find. And pretty soon, I had this



The Brown School graduating class of 1924 would no doubt approve of how far the district has come. First Lady Hillary Clinton welcomed Sunset Ridge 8th graders when Eagle Song entertained at the White House in December 1998.

great group of teachers—people without hidden agendas.

“You know, the pressure to get better never comes from a school administrator saying: ‘Here’s an improvement program,’” he says. “It comes from your colleagues. You want to do well because that’s the aura of the whole district.

“You make your faculty feel respected and free to try new ideas—and they’ll run from there.”

Barb Golomb, president of the Teacher’s Association and a parent who put her own children through Sunset Ridge, describes Bultinck’s influence this way:

“It’s a very nurturing place—for teachers and for kids,” she says. “They’re real believers here in letting teachers be exactly who they are. That makes it a great place to work. You feel like everybody’s loved and respected—and Howard sets that tone.”

Lynn Bodman Schnepfer remembers one discouraging day for Howard after he’d been running the district at full-steam for several years.

“I think it was a turning point.” she says, “Howard had weathered the storm

of change in the district. He had his own people and systems in place, now. Things were running smoothly.

“I think a sense of routine had set in. If you’re really good at what you do—and you get positive feedback—the novelty starts to wear off. You don’t get feedback as much. I think Howard was asking himself, ‘What’s next?’

“I remember telling him, ‘You’ve built this terrific brick wall for the district. Now do whatever it takes to keep it strong. When a brick needs replacing, do it. That’s what your job is going to be from now on.’”

Bultinck puts it this way: “This whole school revolves around one thing: What happens in the classroom the minute the teacher shuts the door.

“Everything we do as a district supports that moment. All the rest is just ‘stuff.’ I manage stuff.”

But it’s that “stuff,” he admits, that often makes the difference between a good or great school.

“I’ll tell you the secret of what makes

District 29 great: it’s finding great teachers,” he says. “It’s all in the hiring.”

An article in the *Illinois School Board Journal* in 1985—“Hiring teachers is hard work”—profiled Bultinck and his intensive eight-step hiring process.

“There are great teachers out there,” Bultinck told the *Journal*. “It’s our job to find them.

“Whatever we spend in hiring is still a lot less than we’d spend on teachers who don’t work out,” he said. “By emphasizing the hiring process, we save time and money in the long run.”

Adds former board member Gary Kline: “I think Howard’s greatest strength is his ability to hire terrific people. He takes the time and invests the energy to do it right.”

Take the case of Linda Vieth.

She was working as principal of a primary school in Lake Forest when she heard about an opening in 1991 to head Middlefork and also be assistant superintendent at Sunset Ridge.

“It was a very *different* kind of interview.” Vieth recalls of her first meeting with Bultinck. “Most of the time, Howard



was out of the room—talking to kids and dealing with whatever issue arose. I remember thinking, ‘That’s amazing!’ It was so different from anything I’d known. He was clearly a very hands-on, people-oriented kind of leader.”

Bultinck didn’t ask Vieth the typical interview questions, either.

“There was no ‘textbook’ kind of stuff,” she says. “Howard wanted to know things like, ‘What was your best moment in the classroom?’ He’s very intuitive. He wants to quickly get to the heart of who you really are.”

But Bultinck also did his homework. He spent a lot of time with Vieth at her school, watching and observing. He studied her writing samples. He had her meet and talk with the board. And he constantly probed with questions.

“I’ll tell you why I was so excited to get this job: I saw something special in this district—something you don’t see at a lot of other schools,” says Vieth.

“There’s this sense of community. It’s everywhere—between parents, teachers and children. I think that’s what Howard strives for most. He brings a very strong set of values to the district—not only with his work ethic, but in the way we care for

Bultinck’s charter to assistant superintendent and Middlefork principal Linda Vieth when she came in 1991 was clear. “The teachers want you to be the champion of early childhood practices,” he told her. “Carry that banner.”

each other as well.

“I could see that family spirit,” she says. “I wanted to be part of it.”

The stacks of resumes on Vieth’s desk indicate a lot of others do too.

“By the end of the summer, we’ll have hundreds,” she says. “Teachers view our district as an outstanding place to work because they see how we collaborate and strive to do what’s best for kids. There’s a lot of integrity in that.”

The faculty likes to kid Vieth that she’s the “left brain” complement to Bultinck’s collegial “desk-near-the-door” administration. He gave her a charter when she came: “You’re the champion of early childhood practices in the district. Carry that banner.” But she also excels at organization and has made her mark orchestrating the district’s approach to curriculum planning.

In addition to vitalizing that effort with parents, teachers and the board, Vieth has

condensed dozens of volumes of detailed curriculum material into a simple, easy-to-scan booklet that gives parents and teachers a clear overview of the entire district curriculum. “It’s a living document,” she says. “It’s always changing. And 99% of the new ideas we adopt come from teachers.”

That frees Bultinck to focus on his favorite title: “I’m the CEO of kid’s destinies.”

But sometimes, his extrovert nature—whether it’s organizing a faculty production of ‘Grease,’ or donning a Rubbermaid glove because it’s his week to clean the faculty lounge—can be misleading.

Behind the scenes, he’s ever-vigilant about district finances and enrollment projections.

“I’m always thinking three years ahead,” he says. “I never want what happened in the past to this district to happen again.”

Vieth sees Howard’s 60-hour week as part of his hands-on, “people-first” approach to the job.

“He couldn’t do it any other way,” she says. “Howard values the human touch—and that takes time. But it just radiates to



“Children are never told ‘no—you won’t succeed here.’” observes former school board president Susie Rieser. “Every child, whatever his or her interest, can take part in any activity they choose.”

students, teachers and parents.”

Bultinck remembers one parent desperate to talk who could only squeeze in a meeting at 9 p.m. “I said fine—meet me in my office. We didn’t leave until 12:30 a.m. That didn’t bother me. I know how passionate I am about my own three kids. If a parent has something on his mind—I’ll listen.”

Take the group of parents who in 1985 voiced their concerns that Middlefork’s half-day kindergarten program wasn’t all it could be. Susie Rieser, board president at the time, organized a committee of parents and teachers to study best practices for children of that age.

“A lot of districts would have told me, ‘Too bad—that’s not the way we do things.’ But Howard helped drive every new idea,” Rieser says.

The result? An innovative extended day program that’s now a statewide model.

“We have educators calling all the time to ask about it,” says Vieth. “It’s a great example of a program carefully researched and planned by parents and teachers to honor the developmental needs of children that age.”

Another problem area for the district

was student services. A community survey in 1991 revealed that parents felt lukewarm about special education programs for kids. So board members Ronda Franks and Peggy Beeman, with the help of several teachers, launched a yearlong study, interviewing 100 families to determine how the district might improve.

“I had other superintendents tell me: ‘Are you crazy? You’ve got your board members surveying parents? Who knows what they’ll find out?’” recalls Bultinck. “I told them, ‘I’ve got nothing to hide.’”

The result? A revamped student services program run by Georgia Bozeday that addresses almost every special need within the district.

“Eight years ago, we might have had 15 to 20 kids going to other schools for special help,” says Bultinck. “Today, virtually every child—whatever their need—stays here at no additional cost. It’s a brilliant program that puts kids first.”

An overcrowded gym was another problem that prompted the village, park district and school to start a serious dialogue several years ago about pooling

resources. Jerry Digani, board president at the time, orchestrated the effort.

The result? The new Northfield Community Center opened in 1998, combining land from the park district and school with financing from the village.

“We get calls all the time from other schools and communities wondering how we did it,” says Terrie Simmons, District 29 business and finance manager. “It’s rare. But the heart of the Community Center is the very special relationship between the village and the school.”

Bultinck says he feels good about how the district today honors the standards set by his predecessors, William Cray and Harry Collins. But the world, he adds, is a very different place.

Board minutes from 1938 show William Cray asking school board approval to buy a file cabinet to store school records.

Today?

“You’ve got state mandates and testing, tax caps and a policy manual that’s hundreds of pages thick,” says Bultinck. “So many parameters are pushing down on



The statewide acclaim District 29 is gaining was highlighted in 1996 when art teacher Mary Bortz (*center, with Vieth and Bultinck*) was honored as "Art Teacher of the Year" by the Illinois Art Education Association.

people. That's why it's more important than ever to have a collegial working environment."

Linda Vieth sees the future this way: "The millennium presents so many new challenges—all the high tech innovations that make our world, and our schools, much faster and less personal. I just want District 29 to be a place that can adapt new technologies, but also keep the human touch that's been so important to us all along."

So far, for the 75-year-old district, so good. "This place almost died in the '70s. But Howard brought it back. We're a family again," says assistant principal and math teacher Dennis Morys, who joined the

district in 1964 under Harry Collins and today is flourishing with Bultinck in his 35th year at Sunset Ridge.

Mary Osborne still remembers the day she retired in 1988 after 40 years. She got so choked up in the parking lot that Bultinck stood helplessly by her car as the tears streamed.

"He told me, 'Mary, you can't drive home like this!'" recalls Osborne. "I said, 'Howard, just go back inside. I'll be okay.'"

Today, when Osborne drives by Middlefork, she tells people, "That's my school!"

"There was a time in my life when I didn't like people saying: *my students or*

my school," says Bultinck. "Now I love it. There's passion in ownership."

Caroline Collins, Harry's widow, says she's watched the district come full circle in the half-century she's lived in Northfield. "I think things are back to the way Harry would have wanted," she says.

And Julia Cray Kennedy, daughter of William Cray observes, "I don't know if people can ever really appreciate teachers and all they give.

"But I think my father would look at how far you've come as a community and all you've accomplished and say: 'Well done.'"



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(...and Howard was our last...)



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