

Clovis schools' Floyd 'Doc' Buchanan remembered as visionary, 'a remarkable soul'

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Floyd "Doc" Buchanan, who shepherded Clovis schools to the top academically and athletically over a 31-year career at the school district's helm, was mourned Tuesday by former students, teachers and elected officials.

Dr. Buchanan died Tuesday at his home in Fresno. He was 91. He was preceded in death by his wife, Myrlee "Molly" Buchanan, who died in 2006.

Called an education visionary, Dr. Buchanan's high standards for teachers and students and his demand for excellence catapulted Clovis Unified schools to the top-performing district and a sports powerhouse in the central San Joaquin Valley and created a stampede of development within the city and north Fresno to accommodate families clamoring to live within the school district's boundaries.

"Much of what we are today, we can trace back to him," said Lynne Ashbeck, a Clovis City Council member.

News of Dr. Buchanan's death "brought a tear to my eye," she said. "He was a remarkable soul."

Former Fresno County Schools Superintendent Larry Powell said Dr. Buchanan had a clear vision, hired the best people to implement it, and then got out of the way. At the same time, Powell said, those not on board with the vision usually had a choice: change their way of thinking or move on.

Powell said Dr. Buchanan's focus on mind, body and spirit changed the approach to education in the Valley. Spirit for the soul, body for athletics and mind for academics. It appealed to baby boomers looking to give their children the best chance at success.

"He knew what would impact people," Powell said. "You put those together, and you've got Doc Buchanan."

Fresno Unified Superintendent Michael Hanson said Dr. Buchanan "had a clear vision for what education should be for kids and worked tirelessly for that to become the community identity."

He was an individual with a vision, and he cared about the community and the kids.

Former Clovis Mayor Harry Armstrong

Dr. Buchanan's legacy includes being the namesake for the Buchanan Educational Center in Clovis, which includes Buchanan High School — the district's only high school named after a person and not a compass point. Construction of the center began in 1990 at the start of his final year as superintendent. In June 2012, a statue of Dr. Buchanan was unveiled at the high school.

At a Tuesday news conference in front of the statue, Clovis Unified Superintendent Janet Young said the late leader "established the core values of the district. He told me we were providing a private school education in a public school setting."

Clovis Unified's first leader

Born in Dale, Arkansas, Dr. Buchanan received his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Denver and his doctorate in education from the University of California at Berkeley. He was a teacher and principal in schools

in Colorado and elsewhere in California before coming to Clovis.

He became superintendent after small districts — including Jefferson Elementary, which he headed for three years — agreed to combine into Clovis Unified School District. He was elected on a 4-3 vote on May 13, 1960.

Dr. Buchanan's supporters on the school board survived a recall vote on Dec. 22, 1964. It was believed that he would have been fired had the recall been successful.

In June 1971, Dr. Buchanan was elected president of the Central California region of the newly formed Association of California School Administrators, an organization formed to provide united school leadership throughout the state.

In December 1976, Dr. Buchanan was accused of intimidation during the collective bargaining process. The State Educational Employment Relations Board cleared him of any wrongdoing.

Dr. Buchanan balked at teachers' unionizing, said Ginny Boris, a former Clovis Unified administrator and current Fresno State lecturer, because he thought teachers shouldn't feel they needed one. Instead, he said that "you need to serve your teachers and serve them so well that the trust is high, and they don't feel they need a union."

Clovis Unified spokeswoman Kelly Avants said the district has never had a teachers' union. It is one of the few districts in California and likely one of the largest not to have unionized.

Some of Dr. Buchanan's methods were controversial, such as intense competition in academics and athletics, but the public embraced them.

Dr. Buchanan kept a large board outside his office that charted which schools scored highest in traditional categories such as reading, mathematics and athletics. However, his board went into much greater specifics — like which school had the top performer in sit-ups or the best debate team.

Dr. Buchanan's stroke of genius, Powell said, was opening school campuses to the public. It was a move that gave Clovis Unified community support. Before, he said, "you had to beg" to get onto school grounds. But Clovis Unified opened fields to youth soccer and other sports, and opened the swimming pool at Clovis West High to clubs outside the district.

Dr. Buchanan recognized the need to balance academics with athletics and other activities, Bullard football coach Donnie Arax said.

"Doc was brilliant, but the essence of his message was simple: Build facilities, great activities, great athletics and people will come, you will keep your good kids," Arax said. "It was not that complicated of a formula. He didn't call it extra-curricular, he called it co-curricular because, to him, athletics and activities were not extra; they were part of the educational experience."

Clovis Unified's reputation for excellence went beyond the Valley.

Roger Blake, executive director of the Sacramento-based California Interscholastic Federation, the governing body of athletics in the state, said Dr. Buchanan didn't focus only on athletics. "Look at their theater and arts program and other facilities," Blake said. "With Doc, it was always about the complete child, the whole child and the whole student. And that's why Clovis Unified has excelled like none other."

His vision shaped growth

Clovis Council Member Jose Flores was a sixth-grade Clovis student when he first met Dr. Buchanan at a school board meeting that Flores attended with his parents.

He connected with Dr. Buchanan years later while serving on the City Council. "He would invite me to Clovis High

football games,” Flores said. Dr. Buchanan always sat in the same spot — one reserved for him at Lamonica Stadium. “He loved watching the game.”

Flores and former Clovis Mayor Harry Armstrong credited Dr. Buchanan with helping to shape the development of the city of Clovis as he guided the district’s growth.

“If you look around where they placed the schools, you could see he had a vision and pretty much had an idea where the growth was going to go,” Armstrong said.

5,037

Number of Clovis Unified students in 1960-61 school year

40,677

Number of Clovis Unified students today

Dr. Buchanan had a passion for every child before that was the mainstream thought in education, said former Clovis Unified administrator Boris, now co-director of the Central Valley Educational Leadership Institute, a nonprofit center that provides workshops and other resources to educators.

He held educators to high standards for educating every student, but gave them tools they needed and license to be creative in achieving the goal, she said.

Boris was hired as a Clovis math teacher in 1971 and would go on to become associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction before retiring in 2007.

She was interviewed for her first job by Dr. Buchanan, who made it his policy to personally interview every teacher individually.

“It really solidified a sense of team and commitment,” Boris said.

Above all, Boris said, Dr. Buchanan was a visible leader. “It was not unusual to see Doc at an elementary track meet, any day of the week, and at an open house, back-to-school night, football game, choir concert, mock trial event.”

District grounds supervisor Charles Henson, a third-generation district employee who first met Dr. Buchanan as a 5-year-old, choked up slightly as he spoke about the care the former superintendent gave every employee.

“My first full-time job with the district was on a grounds crew at 20,” Henson said. “I had almost finished edging the lawn — in 105-degree heat —when I saw Doc walking across the football field. I was the lowest person on the district totem pole, but he visited me.”

LisaMarie Slater, a teacher at Granite Ridge Intermediate School, said she was among the last group of teachers personally hired by Dr. Buchanan in 1990.

“I will never forget sitting in Doc’s office, hoping he’d give me the pen and offer me a job,” she said.

“When he did, my hand shook so badly I could hardly sign my name, and I started to cry. Doc looked bewildered, and Gary Giannoni (then principal of Jefferson Elementary) had to tell him ‘it’s OK, Doc, she cries when she’s happy.’”

But not everyone agreed with Dr. Buchanan’s educational vision. Some board members in the 1980s questioned the competition model and believed that students were tested excessively. The board election in 1987 marked the turning point, when three newcomers representing change defeated three longtime trustees. Three years later the board voted 5-2 not to renew his contract after the 1990-91 school year. In his final year as superintendent, Dr. Buchanan was named California superintendent of the year by the Association of California School Administrators.

After his retirement from the district, Dr. Buchanan became distinguished professor of exemplary practice for Fresno State's School of Education and Human Development.

He touched many lives

Perhaps his greatest legacy, said those who knew him best, was that every child counted. And those children, who grew up and sent their own children to Clovis Unified schools, knew whom to thank.

Doc Buchanan was an educational pioneer who made Clovis Unified what it is today. His dedication to leadership and achievement in the classroom shaped many lives and is a legacy that will be passed on for generations. My thoughts and prayers are with his family as they mourn his passing.

Assembly Member Jim Patterson

Danny Parra, 58, a financial adviser, first met Dr. Buchanan 48 years ago. He was a 10-year-old son of farmworkers and Dr. Buchanan was his Little League coach.

Over the years, the superintendent would see him walking to Clark Intermediate and then Clovis High, and would pick him up and take him to school or give him a ride home.

"He gave me significance in my life," Parra said. "He made me feel like I was worth something. Here I was — a nobody — and here's this guy, the head of the whole school district, and he's giving me rides to school. Why should he care? But he did."

The student and superintendent remained close. Dr. Buchanan was the first one outside family to hold his twins, a son and daughter, when they were born 22 years ago, Parra said.

As years rolled by, Parra said, he became the driver and Dr. Buchanan the passenger. The two never missed Clovis sporting events when Parra's twins were playing.

Parra said he and Dr. Buchanan would go out to dinner, and "every time a complete stranger would come up and sometimes, very emotional, say, 'Doc, we just want you to know we appreciate everything you did for our kids.'"

'Doc's Charge'

Some excerpts from "Doc's Charge," the letter given to all teachers who are hired in the district:

"Our philosophy is simple. A fair break for every kid."

"We believe in high standards in Clovis schools. We believe competition is an ingredient of high standards and an important motivational tool. We recognize three levels of competition. First, we want you to make sure that all of our students learn to compete against themselves; that's the toughest competition of all. Second, we want you to encourage our students to compete in specialty areas to help them build on their strengths and overcome their weaknesses, because that's the way they get jobs and that's the way they have to perform in life. Third, we want you to teach our students to work in groups and to compete in groups, because we think that students who can't work in groups are going to have trouble in tomorrow's world."

Quotable

Fresno Unified Superintendent Michael Hanson: "There are very few, in any field, in all of America who should be called a visionary leader, and in my mind he is one of those very few visionary folks."

Ginny Boris, co-director of the Central Valley Educational Leadership Institute: "He created really world-class schools for kids...Kids will know school is important when their schools look better than the shopping centers."

Michael Prandini, a former Clovis city clerk and finance director and now president and chief executive officer of the Building Industry Association of Fresno/Madera Counties: “He was the driving force in the formation of Clovis Unified and uniting all those school districts together into one unified school district. That’s a major accomplishment. ...“A big part of the growth of Clovis and north Fresno was a result of Doc Buchanan’s efforts to improve and make the schools improve and excel every year. That was a major factor in the growth of Clovis and north Fresno.”

Former Clovis Mayor Harry Armstrong: “He was an individual with a vision, and he cared about the community and the kids. He was very influential when it came to education in Clovis.”

Clovis Unified Deputy Superintendent Carlo Prandini: “Doc always talked about taking care of our kids. He asked me to do my very best to take care of our kids, and I promised him I would.”