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**EDUCATOR, ADMINISTRATOR, INNOVATOR
AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. MICHAEL SLATTERY**

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**FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY
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CHAPTER II: INTERVIEW WITH DR. MICHAEL A. SLATTERY

Dr. Michael A. Slattery was interviewed and videotaped on Thursday, April 20, 1995 in a conference room at Fort Hays State University. The interview included topics covering his background, his professional experiences, and his opinions about education and how to improve education. The interview emphasized his experiences as a classroom teacher, as an administrator, and his experiences as a college professor.

Dr. Slattery was asked to give a brief description of his family background. Dr. Slattery considered Wright, Kansas, to be his hometown. His family was large; he was the second oldest of eight children which consisted of seven boys and one girl. His sister was the only sibling who selected education as a career. She is an art teacher at Neosho Rapids School District near Emporia. She has taught mostly the lower elementary grades, and her husband coached and has taught industrial technology.

Dr. Slattery knew which career he wanted to pursue when he was a freshman in high school. He wanted to be a social studies teacher and coach. Two individuals were influential in his decision to pursue education as a career. The first teacher to have a significant impact on his life was Coach Gene Flax; in addition, Coach Flax was his social studies teacher. Dr. Slattery liked Coach Flax's teaching methods and his interaction with students. Coach Frank Diskin, another social studies teacher, also influenced Dr. Slattery. The traits he admired in these teachers were how they treated their students and athletes. They treated each student as if he/she were special. Dr. Slattery did not view himself as an outstanding athlete, but those coaches treated him as a special person who still had something to offer to the team even as a

manager. Those coaches believed all students were important, and they were very personable with young people.

After graduating from high school, Dr. Slattery attended Dodge City Community College. Mr. Eldon Becker, the director of the intramural programs, influenced Michael in his career planning. After Slattery received his Associate of Arts Degree, Mr. Becker encouraged him to attend Fort Hays State University. Michael received his Bachelor of Arts Degree from Fort Hays State University in 1973.

Dr. Slattery's first teaching job took him to extreme northwest Kansas. His first teaching position in St. Francis, Kansas, consisted of junior high social studies with several coaching duties. Dr. Slattery was the victim of a reduction in force; consequently, he retooled in the summer of 1975 and this enabled him to teach elementary school at St. Francis the following school year.

Dr. Slattery was asked why he entered administration, and he responded that his initial goal was to become an athletic director. He returned to FHSU to pursue his Master's Degree. He was advised to obtain a Master's Degree in Secondary Administration with an emphasis in Health and Human Performance. After receiving his Master's Degree, he moved to Valley Falls where he served as the junior high social studies teacher and coach from 1977-1981.

In 1979 Dr. Slattery was awarded the Fulbright Award which allowed him to teach in England. Dr. Slattery was asked to share some thoughts about his experiences in England. He taught at Fort Luton Secondary Boys School. There were 750 boys in the schools between the ages of eleven and fifteen. Dr. Slattery described some of the differences between the United States and

England's education system. In England, at the age of eleven, all students take an exam which determines their education future. The top 25% are placed in an "upper class school system". Fort Luton consisted of the students that did not qualify for the upper class schools. Dr. Slattery saw students with little or no motivation, poor attendance patterns, and very low teacher-student expectations; in addition, many of the students came from low socioeconomic families. The students were placed in tracks. All eleven year old boys were split into five tracks: track 1-1 possessed the highest academic ability, track 1-5 displayed the lowest academic ability. Dr. Slattery's school had 25 slots which made it a very stratified school system. Often times students in the tracks 1-4 and 1-5 did not even attend school.

The English culture was very difficult to adapt to; for example, discipline was handled very differently in Fort Luton. For example, Dr. Slattery saw colleagues grab students and push them to the floor; in addition, he saw students with bloody lips. Since he was an exchange teacher and striking a student was against his philosophy, he tended to have more discipline problems. The morale of the English teachers was very low at that time. Dr. Slattery stated that they had not had any pay raises in over a year. The athletic coaches were not paid for coaching; consequently, they practiced rarely. For the most part, the teachers were very negative and cynical about their jobs.

After Dr. Slattery returned from England, he moved into the field of administration. The K-8 Principal at Valley Falls was promoted to the position of Superintendent. Due to Dr. Slattery's interest in athletics, he was asked to take the High School Principalship. Dr. Slattery preferred to take the K-8 Principalship because the high school was experiencing some

problems. Dr. Slattery served as Principal from 1981-1986. In 1986, he and his wife had the opportunity to teach overseas as exchange teachers for the second time. He was offered positions in Kuwait and Central America. They opted to travel full time instead. The following nine months they spent traveling around the world.

When asked to describe the events that brought him to FHSU, Dr. Slattery described the years he spent as a graduate assistant to Dr. Ed Stehno. Dr. Stehno was instrumental in convincing Dr. Slattery to switch from counseling to the Education Specialist program. Dr. Stehno was preparing a presentation on teacher evaluation, and Dr. Slattery had worked with teacher evaluation extensively as a Principal. Dr. Stehno asked Dr. Slattery if he had ever thought of teaching at the college level, and he described the collaborative doctoral program FHSU had with Kansas State. Dr. Slattery went to Kansas State to earn his Doctoral Degree.

Dr. Slattery was asked to describe the events that precipitated his employment at Fort Hays State University. Dr. Slattery stated that Dr. Stehno not only encouraged him to obtain his doctorate but also to apply at Fort Hays State University when an opening occurred. Dr. Stehno convinced Dr. Slattery that he could teach at the college level and still affect public school students by passing his knowledge to prospective teachers and administrators. Dr. Slattery described Dr. Stehno as "the major impetus for my doctorate and my employment at Fort Hays State University."

When asked to describe his philosophy of education, Dr. Slattery stated that he always has focused on providing students with a background in theory or research on topics relevant to education. Dr. Slattery viewed himself as a "teacher of teachers"; consequently, he presented research on

effective teaching or effective administration. However, he stated that the best way to teach is through concentration on the practical application of theory.

Throughout his career in education, his philosophy of discipline has changed considerably. Initially he believed that corporal punishment was acceptable, and, as a young administrator, he did spank students. Over time he realized that the students were not really learning; in addition, some preferred the spanking to other punishment because it was quick and easy. Dr. Slattery emphasized the importance of teachers and administrators discovering what the real causes of the misbehavior. Dr. Slattery believed that a climate or environment of open communication must be created in schools for schools to be truly effective.

As a young administrator, his discipline referral file was very extensive. Dr. Slattery believed teachers should take more responsibility for discipline, he held staff meetings and delineated what infractions should be handled by the administrator and what infractions should be handled by the teachers. In his staff meetings he also offered alternative steps for teachers to take rather than referring students to the Principal.

Dr. Slattery advised aspiring administrators to establish guidelines for discipline. Teachers should not be conditioned to utilize the Principal as the number one resort when discipline problems occurred. Dr. Slattery also advised teachers to take more responsibility when a child misbehaved. Teachers should communicate with the student to ascertain the cause of the misbehavior.

Dr. Slattery was asked to describe which teaching strategies are most effective for him. Dr. Slattery viewed himself as more of a hands-on type

learner. He did not learn best when he was limited to reading, interpreting books, and writing papers. He learned best when he was put into small groups, or when he participated in small group projects. Since that is how he enjoyed learning, he has tended to teach that way. Dr. Slattery has utilized a variety of techniques which include case scenarios, small group activities, group projects, and other practical application techniques. Throughout his years in education, he has been able to revise and adapt his teaching to what has proven to be the most effective techniques. Dr. Slattery has utilized feedback from his students as a way to evaluate his teaching techniques.

Since all educators make mistakes and educators learn from their mistakes, Dr. Slattery was asked which mistake in his career has had the greatest impact. Dr. Slattery related a story of an event that occurred when he was an administrator. He had promised a teacher that she could attend a particular training session. When he registered the teachers for the workshop, he forgot that teacher. After he had issued a memo to the teachers attending the workshop, the teacher he had overlooked came angrily into his office. With his office door wide open, she proceeded to tell him off and then slammed the door when she left. He then waited a few hours and apologized to her for his error. From this experience, Dr. Slattery has learned to carry 3 X 5 notecards in his pocket for notes. That experience has certainly caused him to improve his organizational skills.

Dr. Slattery shared his opinions about the challenges facing education today. He viewed two problems as critical to education. The first issue encompassed with education's inability to adjust to the changing demographics in the United States; in addition, the schools have not adjusted to the changing shape of the family in America. The United States no longer has the traditional

"Leave it to Beaver" family. The United States features blended families and single parents, as well as other changes in demographics. Schools will have to conduct business differently; for example, Valley Falls had to change how they scheduled their parent teacher conferences to accommodate more parents. Secondly, the theme of violence has pervaded American schools. There has been a general lack of respect for the value of human life. Children have been exposed to varying degrees of violence ranging from shooting, fighting, to verbal aggression. Dr. Slattery believed the media has been a primary contributing factor to the violence problem in the United States. The television programs, nintendo games, and movies constantly display violence to impressionable children. Dr. Slattery also emphasized the importance of community involvement in schools. The role the community plays in schools has had a direct impact on reducing problems in schools.

Since Dr. Slattery has worked with such diverse groups of people, he was asked how he established rapport with students. He emphasized the importance of trying to connect with students. Many of the before and after school programs in place at this time are helpful as they show the students that the school cares about them.

Dr. Slattery shared his opinions about current teacher education programs. He believed that Fort Hays State University is making strides in improving the teacher education program. He believed aspiring teachers should be involved with children in classrooms and other activities beginning with their freshman year in college. Teacher education programs should provide opportunities for perspective teachers to interact with students in small group settings, one-on-one activities, and large group settings. He also advised perspective teachers

to get involved in summer camps, coaching activities and other areas where they are allowed to interact with students.

Since the media and the public focus on the negative in education, Dr. Slattery was asked to share what part of education he viewed as positive. He stated that there are many innovative teachers doing innovative activities in the classrooms. He believed that schools have a responsibility to let the public know when the teachers are doing "neat things" in the classrooms. Dr. Slattery believed all departments should be highlighted so the public becomes aware of the innovative activities which occur in classrooms.

Dr. Slattery was asked to share some of the most powerful memories he has had from his education experiences. He smiled as he shared a story about his first teaching job in northwest Kansas. Then, his class was a little on the loud side, and his administrator would flip on the intercom during his class. The students would hear that intercom click on, and they were on their best behavior. Dr. Slattery also shared some of the experiences he had in the classroom that former students still comment about today. In St. Francis, he conducted a math unit on estimation. Throughout his room he had jars filled with rice, jelly beans, and other substances. The students were to estimate how many kernels of rice were in a jar. The students utilized many different schemes to derive at an answer. One other favorite teaching unit dealt with the Civil War. The students were all assigned a role to play on southern plantations. Some students were slaves, others were owners, and they studied many aspects of plantation life. Incorporated into the unit were many of the economic concepts as students were required to sign contracts and buy and sell slaves. Some of his former students have commented on those unique activities. Dr. Slattery also coached the girls' junior high volleyball and basketball teams in St.

Francis. The teams went undefeated, and it was a special event in his career. He said the young ladies were very dedicated athletes and a joy to work with. One of those players is now a math teacher that he still sees occasionally; furthermore, it is gratifying for him to have been a positive influence on his former student.

Some of his other memories were painful ones to share. He recalled some of his students that have died and how difficult it was to tell their classmates that they would not be coming back. As a Principal he had to inform a fifth grade class that their teacher had died; this was something that was difficult for him to do. One of the most painful memories Dr. Slattery shared concerned the death of a little boy in Valley Falls. The little boy's family was very active in the school; in addition, the boy's grandparents were school employees.

When asked if he has learned from his students, Dr. Slattery stated that students have a great deal to share with their teachers. He stated, "Students have a way to bring a teacher back to earth." Students show teachers the value of humor, and they can be very clever with their responses. Many times teachers may view a student as a smart aleck; instead, teachers have to be able to recognize that the students may possess hidden talents. Some students stimulate teachers to be better prepared because they challenge the teacher in the classroom. Teachers should learn to appreciate, not fear or dislike those students.

Dr. Slattery was awarded the prestigious Pilot Award in 1994. He stated that he was thrilled to be nominated for the award. Dr. Slattery said it was a "nice" award to receive because the students do the nominating. After the students nominate finalists, a committee interviewed the finalists on their philosophy of

teaching. The interviews are then placed on a rating scale. The Pilot Award has been special to Dr. Slattery because he has enjoyed teaching. He stated it was nice to be recognized as an outstanding teacher; however, he viewed himself as a representative of many outstanding educators at Fort Hays State University.

Dr. Slattery was asked to share some of experiences concerning his research on a one room school house in Ford County, Kansas. The school house has been important to Dr. Slattery because his grandfather, father, and aunts and uncles attended the school. His grandfather and great-grandfather served on the school board for the school. Dr. Slattery has possession of clerk records which date back into the 1800's. When the school closed in 1957, it had six students. Dr. Slattery has interviewed several of the former students and five of the six surviving teachers. Dr. Slattery gained possession of the records because they were passed down from his grandfather to his father. After his father died, he found the records and has spent eighteen months studying them. He has been able to utilize some of the information found in the records for his Foundations of Education course. He has included components of staff development and the life of teachers in that period of history.