

# The Unfortunate Resurrection of Barbara Byrd-Bennett

Contributed by

With almost stealth-like invisibility, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, the former Cleveland Schools' CEO, has slithered back into Cleveland from her new home in Solon, Ohio to become an executive-assistant in the College of Education at Cleveland State University.

According to the dean of the college and the university's president, Byrd-Bennett's role is to "assist the University in engaging in...discussions concerning urban education, leadership and reform and [will help the University become] a national resource..." Byrd-Bennett's association with the university's vision to become a "nationally recognized institution in the preparation and advance professional development of urban teachers and educational leaders" sadly reduces the entire effort to a joke and underscores the type of contemptuous political behavior that is peculiar to contemporary, post-segregation urban politics.

Byrd-Bennett spent nearly seven years as the superintendent of Cleveland schools and recently resigned amid a number of controversies and scandals from the position that paid her nearly \$400,000 dollars a year in salary and benefits. I have pointed out during her dreadful reign on numerous radio appearances, in op-ed pieces, and in my columns that she never quite lived up to the hype and pageantry that surrounded her ridiculously poor administrative talents, near fanatical corporate and political support, and her god-like pronouncements issued, generally, from one of Cleveland's public citadels. Now, Byrd-Bennett takes her comedic spectacle and incompetence to a university that is struggling to develop its own academic reputation and community bona fides.

President Michael Schwartz, who took over leadership of the Cleveland State University in 2002, acknowledged in his Convocation Address in 2003 that it is pointless for the university to continue to recruit students who were not prepared for academic success.

"It may even be dishonest," said the president. "Some students borrow money to get an education for which they are unprepared, and they leave without a degree, owing money nevertheless. And they will have nothing good to tell their friends and neighbors who are thinking about a university experience at Cleveland State University... [W]e have the will to change our policies and practices and become somewhat more selective." Ironically, so many of those "unprepared" students whom the president speaks of have come from the district that Byrd-Bennett once guided.

Byrd-Bennett has always been expensive to her employers. Cleveland State University may think she's a bargain at \$88,000 a year—certainly not chump-change for persons in the community trying to develop academic careers or finance their education. (In fact, that salary amazingly places her compensation on par with senior level professors! And, according to one estimate, more than 2/3 of all university instructors are part-time, getting paid per course they teach, which is nowhere near what Byrd is getting!)

If CSU's administration thinks she is a good buy, as the press release that announced her appointment last year goes out of the way to trumpet, they're a lot dumber than most imagine. In perhaps the most dreadful of paradoxes, the fact that many of the children of Cleveland's public schools, who toiled fruitlessly under her academic direction, won't be able get into CSU to continue their education, if the university increases its admissions standards.

The move to CSU, however disgusting, does make sense for Byrd-Bennett. It gives her an opportunity to repair her severely tarnished reputation, along with the prospect to make some money and add to her state retirement. I know this doesn't explain, on the other hand, CSU's exact motivations for such a risky gambit? Why would an institution, at the crossroads of its most ambitious building and academic excellence push, choose to rub-up against the avatar of a failure?

I truly hope Dean McLoughlin and President Schwartz have done their homework. I am not familiar with the scholarship or reputation of McLoughlin, but I know that Schwartz is a well-respected scholar and technocrat with a number of important scholarly works and a very ambitious vision for the university. He, nevertheless, should have known that the numbers on Byrd-Bennett tenure with the schools don't lie, and, as it has turned out, they are even worse than her most ardent critics could ever have imagined, while she was at the schools.

Byrd-Bennett was not much of an administrator; she posed as one. She amassed the trappings of success and was able to fake the East Coast arrogance in ways that always intimidates Clevelanders. She feigned her role publicly, but not much more. Those who embraced her draped themselves around her like royal kinte cloth — vicariously, at least, it brought some of them, who believed in her, hope and made others feel good about her failures with the schools. Nevertheless, it suggested absolutely nothing about the factual state of Cleveland school polity, except that in times of

desperation, people are still prone to false prophets and that anyone can wear royal kinte. In this situation, people strain to find something, anything to celebrate&mdash;even an apparent apostate.

A closer look at Byrd-Bennett&rsquo;s tenure at Cleveland&rsquo;s schools exposes her debilitating limitations as an educator and most, importantly, as a person. John Taylor Gatto, in the Exhausted School, a book on education edited by the former New York State and City teacher of the year, could have been talking about Byrd-Bennett when he said: &ldquo;Experts have consistently misdiagnosed and misdefined the problem of schooling to serve their own pocketbooks.&rdquo;

Initially, I tried to ignore the cheap seduction of the Barbara Byrd-Bennett phenomenon. I consciously choose not to get hung up in the savior-mania that gripped the city in 1998 when she arrived under the tutelage of then Cleveland Mayor Michael R. White. White had been given control of the schools by legislative fiat after the media blanketed the community with tropes of how, mainly, black people in the city were not capable of electing school board members! The assault on the voting rights of Clevelanders, at the time, was so very swift and caustic that liberals and progressives had little time to organize against the blitzkrieg.

Was CSU bamboozled by her press clippings or were they blinded by her battery-operated, plastic halogen halo? The case against Byrd-Bennett is clear-cut and very public &mdash; and obvious and available to anyone who doesn&rsquo;t have a hatred of hard facts and undiluted reality. One could only miss her failings if one didn&rsquo;t wish to see them?