

Interview of Howard Fuller

Summer 2019 | Interviewed by Nina Rees

- Nina Rees: [00:06](#) Dr. Fuller, you and I met each other in the mid-'90s when you were running the Milwaukee Public School system, so we've been in the trenches for a very long time. It's a real honor for me to be doing this today.
- Howard Fuller: [00:19](#) Why are you calling me Dr. Fuller?
- Nina Rees: [00:21](#) You are a Doctor.
- Howard Fuller: [00:24](#) I'm like, "Who's that guy?"
- Nina Rees: [00:25](#) I truly believe that I know everything I know and the reason I was motivated to join this movement is because of you and Polly Williams, and the leadership you guys took in Milwaukee to offer options to families. Even though I'm focused on charter schools, the driving force for me has certainly been parental empowerment. Tell me a little bit about what got you into this movement, and those early days of fighting for Parental Choice.
- Howard Fuller: [00:52](#) Yeah, first of all Nina, I really appreciate you bringing up Polly, because one of the things that I really am sorry about is that so few young people today know anything at all about Polly Williams. To be honest about it, Polly is the reason why a lot of things have happened today, because of her courage back in 1987, '88, '89.
- Howard Fuller: [01:16](#) What's really interesting is that, the trip or the pathway or the journey to Parent Choice for me really had to do with social justice. I have to say that because I do respect Milton Friedman and all that. It wasn't like I was down in my basement reading capitalism and freedom, oh, parents need choice. Actually it was through a series of community struggles that brought me into this movement.
- Howard Fuller: [01:45](#) What happened is that, after I got back to Milwaukee, a decision was made like in 1976 I think, to close the high school that Polly and I graduated from. They had built a brand new school, and what they decided to do for purposes of "integration" was to kick all of the neighborhood kids out and turn the school into a specialty school. It was a beautiful new school.

Howard Fuller: [02:14](#) I led a group called the "Coalition to Save North Division" and our purpose was to say, "We wanted the neighborhood kids to be able to go to the school. Now that it is a beautiful new school, all of the things that would really help the neighborhood, why are you not allowing these kids to go?" And so, we were able to get the school board to change its opinion, which had never happened before on issues pertaining to "desegregation."

Howard Fuller: [02:41](#) As a part of that whole battle, one of the things that we discovered was that, in every single school in the city of Milwaukee, there was a racial gap. Way before No Child Left Behind, we had done testing of every single child in the entire school district and the suburbs. And at every one of these schools, black kids, there was this gap as I was saying. At high school level, there was only one school in the city where black kids had a grade point of average over a D. This led us, led me to get involved in this whole thing, how can we change education? I'm working at Marquette University bringing kids into the EOP program, which was a Trio program. Trio was special services, upward bound and college services. We were taking young people who probably could not have gotten into Marquette had it not been for our program. Many of those young people were coming from the Milwaukee Public School system, not able to read, not having taken the courses that they needed to take. All of those things came together to put me into the battle around elementary and secondary education, specifically in Milwaukee.

Howard Fuller: [03:54](#) As we tried to figure out what are we going to do, we went to the school district and asked the school district once we got all of this data, "How come you never told us how bad black children were doing?" Everybody thought everything had been taken care of because of the out-of-court settlement on integration. I'll never forget, the superintendent told me, "The reason why we couldn't tell you this is because black parents could not stand to know how bad their children were doing. Number two, it would give racists the fodder that they needed to say that black children couldn't learn." This man actually said that to our face.

Howard Fuller: [04:32](#) We began then a struggle to say, "We've got to change that." Since the district wouldn't change it, our first effort was to create a school, a new school district, a separate school district. We were going to take our high school, Polly and I, our high school, two middle schools that were in the cluster and 10 elementary schools and create our own district. We actually got a vote through the Assembly. Polly came up with a bill and we got a vote through the Assembly, but it was defeated in the

Senate. I think the reason why we got it through the Assembly is because they knew it was going to be defeated in the Senate.

Nina Rees: [05:09](#)

That happens.

Howard Fuller: [05:10](#)

You know how those games are played.

Nina Rees: [05:11](#)

Yeah.

Howard Fuller: [05:12](#)

We were in a situation where we said, "Okay, you're not going to do it in the school district. You won't let us create our own district, give us a way out of here." That's how we came to vouchers. It wasn't Sugarman and Coons, I didn't know any of these people until after we began to talk about choice. The whole reason that we were talking about this, was to give us an opportunity to try to educate our kids since as I said, the district couldn't do it. You would not let us create our own district. Logically for us it was give us the way out of here, so that we could create our own school. That was as quickly as I can talk about it, the genesis and the synopsis of what got us there.

Nina Rees: [06:01](#)

Let's move forward to where we are today in the charter school movement. Tell us what we have done wrong. If there is one thing you could point to that we could have done better in order not to be in the predicament that we're in today, what would it be?

Howard Fuller: [06:20](#)

You know Nina, I guess it depends on which predicament.

Nina Rees: [06:23](#)

Well to the extent, let me rephrase the question then. To the extent we have proven that our schools are successful, that there is demand for the schools. That we are able to graduate students, send them to college, to a career. We now have a good group of alumni. We've been around for over 25 years, we have 3.2 million students in charter schools, so 7,000 charter schools around the country. At this point the movement shouldn't be plateauing, it should be on the rise and expanding.

Nina Rees: [06:53](#)

Let's tackle maybe that question, and what could we have done differently to continue to grow at a rapid clip enough to meet the demand of the families who want to attend these schools?

Howard Fuller: [07:04](#)

As you know, I'm the founding board chair of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, right? I was back there when people couldn't come together and they asked me, "Would you try to corral these folks?" You know the charter school tent is an interesting one, because we got people who came to charters

because they hated vouchers. We got people who came to charters because they wanted for-profits. We got people who came to charters because they hated for-profits. We got people who came to charters because they wanted to create schools for teachers. We got people who came to charters because they wanted to create schools for parents and not for teachers.

- Howard Fuller: [07:43](#) Back trying to pull all of these folks together was like an interesting experience.
- Nina Rees: [07:46](#) It still is.
- Howard Fuller: [07:49](#) Yeah, but I think that the fundamental error that I think we've made that is hurting us, and I'm not even saying we didn't have to do it, is by trying to prove that we're public. We've taken on stuff that makes us look more and more like the system that we were trying to escape from. I think that that has been a fundamental error that we've made, because now we've put ourself in a box.
- Howard Fuller: [08:22](#) For example, it is important that kids learn, it's important that we have test scores. But that should not be the defining essence of a school. Test scores ought to be one part of what we look at, but there's so many more things that ought to define what makes for a high-quality school.
- Howard Fuller: [08:41](#) I think because of these accountability measures, that we've allowed to be foisted upon us or that we even ask for to prove that we're public. It has also kept us from expanding the types of schools that could be in the charter world. As you know, because I've brought some of those people for you to meet with, but when I gave a speech at the alternative accountability network I think, there was over 600 people out there. I remember sitting in a session for a woman who had started a school for young women who were coming out of prostitution. That could never be a charter school, but it ought to be a charter school. We've got people out there who are serving young people, who nobody else wants to serve. But because of the accountability framework and all of these other definitions that we've allowed to be assumed or that we've put on ourselves, we're not able to have some of those schools be in our umbrella of charters.
- Howard Fuller: [09:44](#) I understand why we are where we are in a certain extent, but as we think about it, I do think that that was a mistake. For example, I fought the idea and lost, of having to call ourselves public charter schools. I know why we did it, but my thing was, it's redundant. We're a charter school, charter schools are

public, but because we were getting hit with, "Oh you know you all are nothing but private schools," because we paid all this money for these message people to tell us how to message. We took on all these messages, it didn't change jack. It wasn't the message per se, it was that we didn't understand that it was about our very existence.

Howard Fuller: [10:35](#) I mean I say that because that's an error, but I don't want that to overshadow the fact that we've done phenomenal things. We've put the lie, this notion that poor kids can't learn. We've put the lie, this notion that you can't create great schools. Tyack wrote this book, *One Best System*. Forever this country's been struggling to create the one best system. There is no one best system, and charters have been a part of trying to make that argument. To show that there is a difference between public education and a system that delivers it.

Howard Fuller: [11:19](#) Public education is an idea, it's the notion that we want the public to learn. The system, so the Milwaukee Public School system is not public education, it's a delivery system. Since it wasn't created by God, we can actually change it. When Ember and Joe and Ted and all of those people in Minnesota came up with the idea of chartering, it was a step to say, "We want to create a different type of public delivery system." We don't think that the only people who can authorize these new types of public schools should be a school board.

Howard Fuller: [12:02](#) What it represented was the effort to support public education, but with a different delivery system. That's a very important thing for us to take a stand on, that we many times allow our opponents to take that central argument away from us. We're so trying to prove that we're public.

Nina Rees: [12:28](#) Talk a little bit about the NAACP and their position on charter schools. As you know, last year, about a year and a half ago they called for a moratorium on the growth of charter schools. What do you believe about their position, why they took it, and what we need to do to make sure that the true voices of those who are in the system who all happen to be black and brown students is part? Who are the groups that are representing those communities right now?

Howard Fuller: [13:00](#) First of, I'm a card carrying member of the NAACP, okay?

Nina Rees: [13:04](#) Yeah.

- Howard Fuller: [13:05](#) I will continue to be, because I believe the NAACP has been significant for black people. I don't have to agree with every decision that they make and every decision that they make is not necessarily from my perspective the best decision. The reality is that, black people are no more of a monolith than white people. Different black people have different views. The constituency that the NAACP represents are not necessarily the families who are in charter schools.
- Howard Fuller: [13:42](#) It's just like people ask me, "How comes these ministers, these black ministers are not out there demanding this and this?" I'm saying to them, "Do you know who's on the deacon board of these churches?" School districts are as much economic enterprises as they are educational enterprises. For a lot of black people, the entrée to the middle class has been the school district. Many of the people who are in that school district are in the NAACP, and make up the leadership of the NAACP.
- Howard Fuller: [14:17](#) What we have to understand is that, the NAACP has taken a position in part because of that constituency. The second thing we have to understand is that, the unions, the teachers unions and others have been with the NAACP when some of the people who support us were against what was being fought for at that point in time. That there have been these alliances that have existed for a long period of time. We are interlopers in a certain sense.
- Howard Fuller: [14:50](#) When I look at the positions that they're taking, I don't get all crazy about it. I mean I write about it because you all ask me, "Oh you write articles," I'll write the article. The NAACP has a right to take whatever position they want. We on the other hand also have a right and a responsibility to react to that, to resist that and to put forth our position to the communities that we believe that we truly represent.
- Howard Fuller: [15:24](#) The other thing the school here is that, there are NAACP chapters and NAACP people like me who don't agree with the NAACP on this issue. You know that in some communities where they thought they were just going to roll in there, and everybody was going to be for these moratoriums, no it didn't happen exactly that way. We were able to organize our people, mobilize our people to resist some of this, but it's not going to stop.
- Howard Fuller: [15:53](#) I remember Nina, I don't know if you knew this, but one of the founders of BAEO was a man named Willie Brazil. Willie Brazil was in Colorado, he was put out of the NAACP for standing up for Parent Choice. Those kind of things are going to happen,

people have different interests, we've got to understand it. We can't allow it to get us into a dither, we've got to stay focused. We've got to figure out when to fight, when not to fight. How to resist, how not to resist. When shall we use the limited resources that we have, and when shouldn't we. Sometimes we give organizations like the NAACP more actual play than, empower in a certain sense than, what they actually have.

Nina Rees: [16:48](#)

Right. Talk a little bit about, I mean you know so much about the civil rights movement. If Dr. King were alive today or Malcolm X were alive today, would they be on our side?

Howard Fuller: [17:00](#)

Maybe. You know it's always difficult to talk about where people would be, but you can go back and look at certain signs. I'm clear that Malcolm would be with us. King, kind of. I mean when you look at his book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, there's some things that he says in there that would make me think he might be with us. I can go find some stuff that he says that would say maybe he wouldn't be with us. I don't really know that we can say that Cesar Chavez would be with us, I think he would, but maybe not, because of his support for labor.

Howard Fuller: [17:41](#)

We just don't know, but what we do need to be clear about is, we can learn from all of these folks who've engaged in struggle. Whether they would be with us or not, what is with us is the work that they did, their words. Just as the opponents tried to use their words against us, it's somewhat like the Bible in a sense. That, if you read the Bible long enough, you could find something there that would support almost anything you want to do, right? That's what I do with Martin Luther King. NAACP they're not the only people who can quote Martin Luther King. I can quote Martin Luther King too. You've got a quote, I've got a quote.

Nina Rees: [18:32](#)

Talk a little bit about the Black Alliance for Educational Options. You were a founder, when I think about another organization other than the NAACP that represented the movement, BAEO was the group that I pointed to. Tell me a little bit about BAEO, why you founded it, why you ended it, and who is the new BAEO now?

Howard Fuller: [18:54](#)

Okay, so those are three interesting questions, I'm going to try and deal with each one of them hopefully. If I don't push myself. Okay, so here's how BAEO started and I try to talk about this in my book, because clearly the further you get away from something, the more people revise the history of it. You've got to try to claim your part of the story, knowing that people are

going to do whatever they want to do with it. The idea for BAEO came like this.

Nina Rees: [19:22](#)

BAEO is the Black Alliance...

Howard Fuller: [19:23](#)

Black Alliance for Educational Options, right, so back in, it was like 1997 I think, we were getting all this resistance to vouchers in Milwaukee. The history of vouchers in Milwaukee was, the bill got passed in 1989. The first year of the program was school year '90-'91. When I came in as school superintendent in the school year of '91-'92, it was the second year of the program. The program started and we were sued in court when it started. Then in 1995, we expanded the program to include religious schools. We were sued again by the NAACP, the ACLU and the unions.

Howard Fuller: [20:17](#)

The court made a decision, the Wisconsin Supreme Court made a decision in 1998 that the program was constitutional for a number of reasons. I'm sitting around watching all of this resistance to this idea of Parent Choice. I decided that we should convene a meeting of black people to talk about these options. What is a voucher? What is a tax credit? What is a charter school? Instead of just having this knee jerk reaction like, "We're opposed, we're opposed," I'm like, "If we're going to be opposed, let's at least understand what we're opposed to."

Howard Fuller: [20:57](#)

I decided to have a meeting in 1999 I think it was in Milwaukee, and 150 black people came to the meeting. We defined these options, this is what a charter school is, this is what a tax credit is, this is what a voucher is, this is what a traditional public school is. We had all these workshops and all this. People came out of that meeting much more educated about what this is. I kept getting people saying, "Howard, you need to do more than just have a symposium or a meeting. We need to create an organization."

Howard Fuller: [21:41](#)

December third to fifth in 1999, 50 black people. . .often whenever let's say the NAACP comes after me, I'm like, "Hey man, I don't know white people that created BAEO. More white people is at the founding of the NAACP than black people. Did you all think that I didn't know that?" Anyway, so I digress.

Howard Fuller: [22:06](#)

December third through the fifth we got together in the Mayflower Hotel, and we spent a weekend and we came up with the name. There was a debate about the name, we came up with Black Alliance for Educational Options. We came up

with a mission statement. We came up with a vision. It was a phenomenal meeting of these 50 people.

Howard Fuller: [22:35](#) Then in February of 2000, we had the second symposium and 300 people came, 350 actually. After that meeting, 90 people stayed to organize BAEO. That's when they selected me as the, they called it the president, we changed it as the chair of the board. They gave me the authority to put together the board, because we don't have a board. We did more organizing work like the bylaws and all that stuff.

Howard Fuller: [23:13](#) I remember I was on my way home after they had told me, "Hey man, you can create this board." I called John Walton, I was like, "John, I want to create this organization of black people who are going to support Parent Choice." John was like, "Howard you know, I believe in you, whatever you want to do, you just let me know. I'll support it." I was like, "I'll get back to you on that."

Howard Fuller: [23:41](#) I put together a board of I think it was 27 people. I actually like large boards, but I know I'm an outlier on that. I was trying to get geography, women, men, young, old and you couldn't do that with three people, so 27 people was the board. We got the board together and Armstrong Williams interestingly enough wrote a document that was going to be our planning document. I love Armstrong, but I had to rewrite it because, because.

Nina Rees: [24:29](#) We're all familiar with Armstrong.

Howard Fuller: [24:30](#) I love Armstrong, he's my man, he's my brother, but I had to rewrite it. Rewrote the planning document and put together a proposal, submitted it to Walton. Walton gave us the first grant, it was like \$895,000, \$400,000 the first year and the second year. Then what happened was in July of that year, we did a press conference at the DC Press Club or National Press Club. It so happened that CSPAN picked it up. We did an analysis, we introduced the board and all of that stuff. Then in December of that year, we hired our first executive director. Then in July that year we moved to DC.

Howard Fuller: [25:22](#) Then the symposium became our annual meeting. For 18 years, this organization fought for Parent Choice. I think it's accurate to say that we were responsible for a number of laws getting passed. Like the opportunity scholarship bill in Louisiana doesn't happen without us. Frankly the charter bill in Mississippi doesn't happen without us. What we were able to do was to get black Democrats to either vote for things that they would not historically vote for or go to the bathroom when the vote took

place. Whichever one of those work to get the bill passed, like that's what actually happened in Mississippi.

- Howard Fuller: [26:10](#) We built this organization over 18 years. We fought to both get laws passed, to protect laws, to expand laws. We brought voices of people who wouldn't normally be at the table to the table. I just felt like after 18 years we were no longer able to get the funding that we needed. I just believe organizations shouldn't exist just because you started. Plus I didn't want to just whimper out. We defined our coming into being, and we defined our leaving.
- Howard Fuller: [26:52](#) We made a decision after 18 years that we were going to stop. We tried an experiment, like we put a social challenge out there to a new generation. Like we got a half a million dollars, come forward with something that's revolutionary and we'll give you this money. We had people send in, we had a process, we had them send in a video. You got three to five minutes. They send in these videos and then we selected X numbers of people, I think 15 teams or individuals from that to submit a statement of intent. Then out of that we selected a certain number to get proposals. Then out of that we brought in five people to do face to face presentations.
- Howard Fuller: [27:48](#) At the end of the day nothing was, I was disappointed. I thought these young people were going to come in here man with revolutionary ideas and blah, blah, blah. To me there were some nice ideas, but it wasn't worth a half a million dollars. Plus we told people, "Just because you have a contest like this or whatever you call it, it doesn't mean that there has to be a winner. We're not just going to give somebody half a million dollars because you're better than these others if you didn't meet what we wanted."
- Howard Fuller: [28:22](#) They didn't meet that so we didn't give out the money. We used the money to support some existing organizations. We shut our doors and we moved on. What we hope is going to happen is, that somebody will pick up whatever parts of this that we were able to bring for those 18 years.
- Nina Rees: [28:42](#) Let's talk about race. You took on a lot of individuals in New Orleans for the way New Orleans came about. Just to be provocative, I'm going to ask this question.
- Howard Fuller: [28:55](#) Oh you can be provocative.

Nina Rees: [28:58](#) The way I like to think about this work sometimes is, if you have a group of kids who are on a raft in the ocean and they need to be saved. It just so happens in the case of New Orleans a lot of white people were out there to save "these kids." How do you talk about this issue in a way that keeps the white community engaged, but also really creates a greater sense of urgency for black leaders in the black community to be engaged?

Nina Rees: [29:31](#) At the end of the day if you don't have enough black and brown leaders who are willing to step into the fray and fight, you're basically leaving those students on that raft.

Howard Fuller: [29:45](#) Okay, so you want the short answer or the long answer to the raft question.

Nina Rees: [29:55](#) How long do we have?

Howard Fuller: [29:56](#) I've got a short answer to the raft question and a long. Okay, all right, here we go. Okay, so Nina this is the way I look at it. The first thing you need to understand about New Orleans and I've had this discussion with Paul and other people, they made certain decisions that I would argue could have been different.

Nina Rees: [30:12](#) Describe what happened in New Orleans.

Howard Fuller: [30:13](#) Okay, so what we're talking about is, after Katrina hit, the decision was made to use an existing law, I need to be clear about that. That law was already on the books, the Recovery, they use an existing law to take over the "public schools" in New Orleans. What's very important to understand is, and Paul can deny this if he wants. There were three people that made that decision, Leslie Jacobs, Blanco, the governor and Picard, the state superintendent who died in February.

Howard Fuller: [31:01](#) Three white people sat in a room and made that decision. A decision was also made that because there's no schools, there's no tax base, we have to fire 7800 people. 4300 of whom were teachers, 78% of whom were black. I may be off on some of those numbers, but I'm pretty close to those numbers. Paul would argue that they had to make that decision. Then when the kids start coming back, they had to do something quickly to get teachers for those kids. There are people in New Orleans who would say, "We couldn't use the teachers that we had lost because they were everywhere." Some people even told me we couldn't use the teachers that we have because they were broken. Broken people couldn't teach kids, so Paul and what's the dude that they brought?

Nina Rees: [32:02](#) Paul Valice?

Howard Fuller: [32:02](#) Valice.

Howard Fuller: [32:04](#) Yeah, that they said, "We've got to go talk to Wendy." Now, you know that I love Wendy and all that and TFA (Teach for America) and this and that. Think of the optics of this thing, here's the optics. We fire 7800 people, 4300 teachers, 78%, 75% whom are black and we bring in all these young white people. Explain to me how that was like cool.

Howard Fuller: [32:43](#) What I'm saying is and I've said it to Paul's face and I'll say it wherever, "You all could have made a different decision. That was not the only option. You could have said, "We're going to hire back as many of these black teachers as we can find. We know that we don't have a tax base, but you know what we're going to do, because we've got millions of dollars coming in here from FEMA and everywhere else. We're going to pay these people for some period of time until they can get their lives back together." I'm saying and I will go to my grave saying, that the decisions that were made were not the only decisions that could have been made. The decisions that were made, were made because of who was in the room and equally important, who wasn't in the room. You can't convince me that what we did was the only way to do it.

Howard Fuller: [33:36](#) Now, having said that, my study of social movements tell me that no social movement that is successful for people is not led by them. It's led by them with support from their allies, we have done the opposite and we're paying the price for how we have done this.

Howard Fuller: [34:04](#) When I look at this, I'm grateful for whoever came into New Orleans to help, because New Orleans needed a tremendous amount of help. Think about this Nina, who went into Mississippi for the Freedom summer? They were white, young, white people who went into Mississippi but a lot of the leadership when they came in there was from folks from Mississippi.

Howard Fuller: [34:38](#) What I'm saying is, there were other models that could have been used, that would have allowed black and white people and brown people to in fact work together. For the black community in New Orleans to feel that this had been done with them, instead of for them or on them. As you know, no matter how we try to smooth it over, that was and is still a prevalent view-point for significant number of people, black people in New

Orleans. Who would even argue that a lot of kids are better off, but they would not argue that their community is better off.

Nina Rees: [35:25](#) Howard, tell us a little bit about your time in the Milwaukee Public School system when you were in the belly of the beast. You were a change agent, the fact that you went in and stayed there for as long as you did is quite impressive. Tell us a little bit about what that was like, and to some extent explain to us how choice ended up potentially improving the overall public school system in Milwaukee.

Howard Fuller: [35:49](#) Okay, so the first thing is, and this is not a negative, but I don't want us to use the terminology the belly of the beast because it's a negative connotation. Although I get it, but what I would simply say is that, it was actually a privilege and an honor to be the superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools. It was without question the most difficult job that I've had, but it was also in some ways one of the more important jobs that I've ever had. By being the superintendent, I had a bully pulpit to talk about kids that nobody else in the community had. I tried to use that bully pulpit every day that I was superintendent.

Howard Fuller: [36:42](#) I think the lesson that I learned was that, I went into the district with a lot of attitude about the bureaucracy and all of this. One of the things that I really struggled to do was not to be captured by that bureaucracy. Once you get in there, it's not a bureaucracy, it's Mrs. Jones, it's Mr. Johnson. It's people who've given their lives to try to do something good, because there's a lot of people in a traditional public school system who are phenomenal people. Who are working in a system that doesn't allow them to reach their highest potential and more importantly to give the kids what they need to reach their highest potential.

Howard Fuller: [37:35](#) What I had to do while I was in there was to learn to be respectful of the work of the people. While at the same time saying, "Yeah, but you know what, the system that we have is failing large numbers of our children. We have to radically change it." Every day that I went in there, I went in there and I honestly did ask myself, every time I made a crucial decision, how does this decision affect kids?

Howard Fuller: [38:07](#) I remember a decision that I made that all ninth graders had to take algebra. I had listened for two years the department chairs talk to me about, "Oh my God the earth will move, it'll crumble if you put all these kids in algebra." I mean I was in so many meetings and I would be sitting there like, "What I'm doing in here?" I listened but in the final analysis, I said, "You know

what, I don't care what you all say, all ninth graders are taking algebra. To help you all, I'm going to eliminate all the other math courses that I know you all would slip them into if I let them stay there."

- Howard Fuller: [38:41](#) By the time I left being a superintendent, we had more black children passing algebra than had ever taken algebra. I knew algebra was like a gatekeeping course for who got into college. I'm saying that to say that, I discovered one thing, one big thing when I was a superintendent. That was that I was in charge, but I wasn't in control of jack. Once I clearly understood that, I could try to make certain decisions to move the needle, but it took everything to just move the needle a little bit. It just reinforced my notion that, large systems do not change just from their own internal dynamic. There has to be pressure from the outside in order to force the system to make adjustments and change.
- Howard Fuller: [39:36](#) What I will say though Nina is that I also learned that this idea that people had, that if we just have charters or we have choice, that it's going to make the system change. With all due respect, that is not true. It may be true in some places, it's certainly not true in other places. In many places what people do is circle the wagons and say, "We're going to fight rather than change. That we can outlive you because we got more power than you. We will be here when your funders decide to go fund something else, because this is what we're all about."
- Howard Fuller: [40:11](#) I don't think we can keep talking about, because we did this it created an environment to improve the whole system. I don't necessarily agree with that, nor do I believe that that is why we exist. I don't think it's on us to do something to improve the entire system. It's on us to educate as many kids as we can to improve their lives, and that is the change that we should be fighting for.
- Nina Rees: [40:42](#) Yeah. Talk a little bit about the importance of having leaders of color run charter schools, our movement has made some mid-course corrections in both paying more attention to our leaders of color or giving them hopefully more resources if they want to replicate their schools, attracting them and then convening quite a bit about this issue. How much progress have we made? What else needs to be done in order for us to take this to the finish line?
- Howard Fuller: [41:08](#) I think some Nina, but we dug such a huge hole for ourselves by not paying attention to this in the very beginning. I think I'll have to say that some of us were talking about this in the

beginning. The fact that we have to do a mid-course correction is a testament to an error that we made.

- Howard Fuller: [41:36](#) The issue for me is having schools that are both governed and led by black and brown people and other diverse people. It's not just the principal, but it's the board, it's the policymaking entities. A part of that is that we cannot, we cannot, we must not only have this be about networks. The types of schools that I'm talking about like even ours, we don't want to have 50 schools. We don't want to have 10 schools. We just want to create one really good high school to serve the children of our community, but the way that this movement has gone, it has not been as supportive of those types of entities. It's those types of entities that for the most part are led by people of color. By us not building a movement that saw them as foundational and as critical, we're now in the predicament that we're in.
- Howard Fuller: [42:53](#) Let me just end by saying this, people often ask me, "Do you think that white people can teach black and brown children?" My answer is, can you teach? What I want in my school is a great teacher. I frankly don't care what color they are. I want more black people in my school, in our school because of who the population is of our kids. What it's about though, it's about something a little bit larger than that.
- Howard Fuller: [43:26](#) I used to talk a lot about the importance of a people defining their own struggle to be liberated or to be free. I realized that I was talking to people and they were like, "What is he talking about?" I wanted to talk about it in this way and sort of wrap this up. A number of people believe that black and brown people are a drag on America. My argument is, that if you want us to be not a drag, and you believe that, to be dynamic part, the key is developing strong institutions in our community. One of those institutions would be education. We need to invest, because it's the moral thing to do, the right thing to do, but we need to make those investments because it is also the political thing to do in the long run.
- Nina Rees: [44:20](#) One last question, you also founded a school, a charter school in Milwaukee that Michelle Obama recently visited.
- Howard Fuller: [44:27](#) Yes, she did.
- Nina Rees: [44:28](#) Tell us very quickly what is your vision with that school and how is it doing?

Howard Fuller: [44:32](#) We're struggling, but they just decided to name the school after me, I don't know if you know that. As of today, Milwaukee Collegiate Academy is now Dr. Howard Fuller Collegiate Academy.

Nina Rees: [44:42](#) That's great.

Howard Fuller: [44:44](#) It's like really an honor. If you go on Twitter because our kids are doing videos about it. Yeah, so Michelle Obama visited our school and the union went crazy. They were like, "You went to whose school? You did what? You were at that Fuller School? Oh my God." Yes, so I got a lot of pictures.

Nina Rees: [45:05](#) That's great.

Howard Fuller: [45:07](#) To prove that she was there, but it was a great experience. It wasn't just for our kids, there were kids that came from other schools, she just did the event at our school.

Nina Rees: [45:17](#) Yeah, that's great. Well thank you very much-

Howard Fuller: [45:18](#) Oh it's fantastic.

Nina Rees: [45:19](#) ... For this interview, it was an honor to do this.

Howard Fuller: [45:21](#) It was an honor to be with you.

Nina Rees: [45:22](#) Thank you for being at the conference, and I know we have a lot more this afternoon.

Howard Fuller: [45:27](#) We do.

Nina Rees: [45:27](#) All right, thank you sir.

Howard Fuller: [45:28](#) Thank you.