

Interview of Bob Mills

Mon, 12/7 5:57PM 35:17

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

charter schools, charter, schools, jim, people, michigan, president, university, board, cmu, central, office, director, central michigan university, diamonds, support, students, leonard, bob, public school

SPEAKERS

Dr. Jim Goenner, Dr. Robert C. Mills

- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 00:05
We're here with Dr. Robert C. Mills, the man that got Central Michigan University on the map with charter schools. Bob, thank you for being with us today.
- D** Dr. Robert C. Mills 00:16
Glad to be here.
- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 00:18
We want to hear your story.
- D** Dr. Robert C. Mills 00:19
Well, I was a professor at Central in Ed. leadership. I taught law. I taught personnel. I had been there about 24, (twenty) five years and in November, the President, Leonard Plachta, called me into his office. He said, 'Bob, we want to be the leader, nationally in charter schools. And we'd like you to direct this effort.' At that time, Jim, I couldn't spell charter schools. I knew nothing about it. But I liked the president. He was sincere, he was genuine and I believed what he said. I said, 'Leonard, let me think about it for a few days.' I called some of my former students that were superintendents, I said, 'What do you think of

charter schools?' This was 1994 when the law was passed, they said, 'They're here to stay'. I said, 'I don't want to get on a horse that's going to be short lived'. Nope, it's it, 'we think they're here to stay'. The Governor Engler, at that time really supported them and they're here to stay. So I thought about, should I try this? I'd been at the university a number of years, I was tenured. I wanted to keep my position. But if the President would assure me, I could keep my position, keep tenured. I said, 'Dr. Plachta, I'll give it my best shot', not knowing what I was getting involved in. And we were truly the pioneers back then, because there was no guidebooks. There was no trails, there was very little referrals all out of state. Michigan had chartered, Central Michigan chartered two charter schools when the law went into effect in 94'. It was declared illegal, so they had to revamp the law. And the director that was there for that six months, eight month period left. So in 95', they passed the new law and that's when the President said, 'We want you to charter'. So I took the job and the assignment and literally, with a bunch of great people, we had to write the manual, because there was nothing to go by. So we made a lot of mistakes. We, I was the only person and then we needed a secretary so I hired a secretary Amy, most that time we had a little closet office. We quickly outgrew that, the President was extremely supportive. I reported only to the President, and he was a great person to work with. We got bigger offices as we started chartering schools. We hired more and more people. And we were, we had a board of directors that was committed to become the national leader. It was a rocket ride. Immediately the unions opposed charter schools. I often told people it's like strapping yourself to a rocket with duct tape and blasting off. You quickly found out who your friends were, and who your supporters were. The unions opposed charter schools and so we had to, had to deal with the MEA and the teachers unions, Federation of Teachers, but we got through it. We were bloodied and battered, but the president stood fast. The governor stood fast and we chartered schools. And we kind of wrote the rulebook, if you will, to get it started. I served as director from 95' until I think it was 99', somewhere in there when I asked to go back, and by that time we had chartered, I believe it was 47 schools, and they were operating some better than others you know. We were, we were finding our way. Our biggest challenge was the uh, meeting all the regulations of the fire departments, the State Fire Marshal, finding a building. You couldn't bond, you couldn't vote millage. Never a problem finding students, the parents wanted choice. I believed in choice, I believe in competition. And the charter school movement was based on choice, competition and change. I had been in the public school sector, I was president of the Union. They would say, 'Bob, don't you? Don't you like the unions?' I said, 'I love the unions but we need change. It's the same old, same old,' and that's what launched charter schools. I very much appreciated a President, Jim, that stood fast. Because I could have been undercut and it could have imploded. It didn't. I was very thankful and blessed to hire good people. We had a number, I won't mention their names, you probably know them 25 years ago, but they were steadfast and they were committed to choice, change, and competition. And we were off and running. We used to laugh in the office, how many

times did we make the newspaper this morning? Needless to say, we got a lot of negative press but it didn't deter us. We kept moving forward. If you're committed to children, and change, and choice, parents wanted a choice. And so they were standing in line to enroll in charter schools. Now the movement is nationwide, just about every person likes charter schools. The politics has changed. Now, both Democrats and Republicans like charter schools, the union even, in some ways, I think, likes charter schools. So I can set back in retirement and say 'I was a pioneer'. But now we have people that have fine tuned the whole program and I'm very proud of that.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 07:10

Well, I was one of those people that had the privilege of working for you in those early days and I'll never forget, I was working on an MBA I believe and you said, 'Jim, I'm getting involved in this charter school thing, and I'm going to need some help. Do you want to take a look at it?' And I was like you I said, 'Well, let me think about it.' But you took me to a board meeting before I hired on and I remember it was that the alumni house. And it was when Central's board chartered I believe 28-30 schools, April of 1995. Do you remember that?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 07:43

I do very well, and we recommend to the board, maybe 27 or 28 charters, they approved all of them. We had done our homework. And we had our facts in line. And at the time that we chartered those schools the law then was a 3% oversight fee. So the charters got paid the same amount as the traditional schools in their, in their area. But the university for processing the money went to, the money flowed from the state to the university to the charters. For handling the finances, the charter institution, in this case Central, but any charter institution had a 3% over, oversight fee. I said to Jim, I said to you when we walked out, 'You have just witnessed history because if they don't change the oversight fee, the 3%, we have put charter schools on the map forever'. And I really believe that happened at that meeting. Well, since then, I still believe they have the 3% oversight fee. Is that correct?

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Dr. Jim Goenner 09:11

Yes, and I remember walking out with you and you said, 'Do you know what happened in there?' And I said, 'Well, they chartered a buncha schools,' and you said, 'No, they just made charter schools here to stay if we do our job.'

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 09:23

Yeah, exactly and it's grown and, you know, we continue to make mistakes. Not intentionally, but there's no reverse in life. You can't back up and say, 'Well, now I got a chance to, you can fix it maybe but you can't back up'. The President was supportive and we continued to charter schools. I think when I left, as director, we had chartered like 47 maybe somewhere in the 40s and it, we made a lot of improvements from the from the first day.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 09:58

So you were in on the ground floor and by the time you left there were probably 20,000 plus students going to the charters that CMU authorized, which is almost as many students as attend the University. Did you ever imagined that it was going to become that significant?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 10:13

Never, you know, I thought charter schools would, you know, serve a niche population? I'd never thought it would grow. I, I don't know how many students are in charter schools 25 years later, maybe 100,000, maybe 90,000?

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Dr. Jim Goenner 10:32

150,000 in Michigan and nearly 5 million nationally.

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 10:36

Wow, well, its, its just exploded from what I envisioned it to be. It's just amazing and what really amazes me is how many, the feedback from the teachers that work in charter schools, and the feedback from the administrators. Many of the teachers that were in public schools, moved to the charter school, and I got to know them well. And the feedback was amazing, you know, these kids are fired up, they're, they want to learn, the parents are excited. It was a perfect, perfect scenario. And if I had any success as director of charter schools, it was a belief system that we had in the office. We believe in choice, change, competition, we believe in the movement. But what really was the key was having good people around you, Jim, you you were a super assistant director. I think of the other people, the staff members, they were, it was a team. And you know how we used to sit in the office round table. You know, troubleshoot, brainstorm, you know, what do we do? How do we do this, etc, etc. But we, you know, I tried to listen. Ultimately, you got to make

a decision. But thank God, we made some pretty good decisions, because the movement is pretty active.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 12:15

Absolutely. So it wasn't always easy and you had this history of working in public education as an administrator, as a professor. What was the personal cost on you to take this mantle and drive it?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 12:31

Well, that's really a good question because I think I probably aged a great deal, because it was a very stressful job. You know, you, you know, people would call you that I thought were my friends, former students, and they were upset that I was directing the charter school movement. I was willing to take on the challenge of stress, you know, if I believe in something, you've got to stand up and be counted. In retrospect, you know, when you look back and say, I probably wasn't paid enough for all the abuse, you know, you had, it was hard on your family. Our children were pretty well grown, you know, at that point. I viewed it as a challenge that we could do it, we can win this game, it was kind of like, look, going for the Olympic gold. We can, we can get the gold, if we're persistent. The team I had behind me or with me, or in front of me, were great people. And they gave me a lot of support. My true friends, even though they didn't like charter schools at the time, were still my true friend and that made a huge difference, you know. So we got through it, you know, I, I can't go back and say, you know, I can say what I should have done differently. But at the time, we tried to make the right decision. Nobody tries to make the wrong decision. It worked.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 14:13

You had many sayings and you left such an impression on so many people as you mentored them along but two that I think have lasted in, in so many significant ways is you used to call them the diamonds, that charter schools were the diamonds and sometimes you'd say there were the diamonds in the rough. And I remember there actually was a bumper sticker made, 'Charter Schools: Diamonds In The Rough', 'Charter Schools: The Diamonds Are Shining'. Can you talk about what, why, why did you come up with that and what did it mean to you?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 14:45

Well, you know, diamonds are, you know, everyone likes diamond. Diamonds are coal in

disguise. The charter schools I think were diamonds, because they shine brightly, they they kind of overshadowed some of the negatives that you hear about traditional education. And, and my whole career was traditional so it's not like I wasn't in the classroom, I taught, principaled and so forth. We just had many superstars that I called diamonds. Charter schools are diamonds in the rough. They're, people that disliked charter schools at the time were those that didn't get in there and see what they were doing for kids and how enthusiastic parents were, how fired up the, the teachers were. I was always excited when I visited charter schools, Renaissance, a great school. And that's why I think diamonds in the rough, it still, is apropos.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 15:57

You also had another saying and that had to do with board meetings. You call them the Super Bowl. Can you talk about why you call those Super Bowls? And why has that lasted till today?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 16:09

Well, the Super Bowl, as you well know is kind of the ultimate in the National Football League, American Football League. It's, it's the culmination of everything that's happened before it. The board meetings, the Board of Directors and the school board meetings, the charter school boards is the final event. When they make a decision they could terminate personnel, they could reduce the budget or enhance the budget. They could expand the facility. They, the board has the ultimate authority to make the decision. That's why I think every board meeting is kind of the Super Bowl. And that's, if you're prepared for the Super Bowl, you come out a champion.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 17:01

That's great. There were so many firsts that you did, but one that I want to talk about is what we now know as the Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers, started with you meeting with your counterparts from Saginaw Valley and Eastern and Grand Valley. Can you share how that started? And how that evolved?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 17:23

Well, to the best of my knowledge, Jim, when, when I became director of charter schools, various other universities were looking at us with a, with a microscope, you know, how's Central doing, how are they doing it? Is it going to work etc? Well, once they saw us chartering schools, you know, the alumni house and board of directors, they said we'd

better get on board. Remember the governor, very supportive of charter schools. So you had Saginaw Valley as one of the first. You had Grand Valley State University one of the first. Northern Michigan University, Lake Superior State College, and of course, Michigan and Michigan State, were kind of in the background. They have recently come, or they came aboard. So we made contact, they were our, you know, our colleagues at the university level. So we said, let's meet once a month or let's get together and we'll share ideas. And when the initial meetings were, how are you doing this Central? What are you doing? How do you do this? Do you have any drafts, anything we can share, exchange, which we did.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 18:41

You were, not only did you lead CMU's programs, but in so many ways you helped build the infrastructure for Michigan's charter movement. One of those even was the support of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies and its founding and in my memory you even kind of donated me to them in the sense that you gave me a leave of absence to go try and start that organization. Can you talk about why you did that?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 19:08

Well, Jim, you know that I was extremely pleased that you joined our operation in the beginning, you were a pioneer also. But you became so knowledgeable about charter schools and continued the tradition after I left, you were a natural for the Michigan Association of Public School Academies. And I said, if anybody can make it happen, Jim Goenner can. Now Dr. Jim Goenner, that's great. So anyway, I was delighted to be supported. You never as an administrator, hold your, your quality people back. You always want to encourage them to go higher or try something new. I knew you'd make it from the beginning.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 19:57

In those early days, we also had support out of the governor's office and he hired a lady named Mary Kay Shields to be his eyes and ears, if you will. Can you share what was it like to work with Mary Kay and the governor's office?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 20:12

Mary Kay Shields was extremely supportive. I mean, she, she reported directly to John Engler. Two or three things that we had in charter schools in the beginning that, was Leonard Wolfe. I can't remember the name of the other attorney.

D Dr. Jim Goenner 20:33
Richard McClellan.

D Dr. Robert C. Mills 20:34
Yeah, Richard McLellan and Leonard Wolfe. They were so helpful with the legal side of our questions. Mary Kay Shields was from the governor's office and she reported directly to John Engler. She was excellent to work with. If I had an issue, I could call her and she would get an answer back to me. Sometimes I didn't like the answer, but she was excellent to work with and represented the governor's office. She was a diamond. Richard McLellan, Leonard Wolfe, they were diamonds in my opinion, and I couldn't have done it without them. And our staff.

D Dr. Jim Goenner 21:17
You were involved in some of the early charter school expos and early charter conferences. What was it like to go and see what I call people that come with the application, you know, their dreams and their ideas, and then actually see them start a school and parents enroll their kids?

D Dr. Robert C. Mills 21:36
Jim, it was, first of all, amazing. The first charter school Expo probably was 96', 96'-97', somewhere in there, in Lansing. Just amazing to see the representatives from the charter schools at that conference, they were all excited. They were willing to share. They believed in change. They believed in helping kids. It was upscale, upbeat, positive. The governor's office also would send a speaker, was very supportive. And it was just like, I felt very, very good and honored that we were part of the initial movement. It was wonderful.

D Dr. Jim Goenner 22:25
So you, also were leading, you know, the lightning rod, right? I remember people that weren't our fans calling it Charter Mill University. We underwent a performance audit from the State of Michigan, many would say it was politically motivated. But they spent I believe over a year in the office going through every piece of paper there was. Can you recall some of those and what, what's your takeaway looking back?

D Dr. Robert C. Mills 22:57

Well, it's kind of like an IRS audit of your personal finance. We were audited and I said, you know that we have nothing to hide, you're welcome to everything. And we probably have made mistakes, which I'm sure we did because we had no guidance, no blueprints, etc. It took a lot of time. It cost us a lot of personnel, personnel time because people were meeting and sharing information, so forth. But I kind of felt good that we were the pioneers that developed the forms, the policies, the directives, even though they weren't, quote, 'perfect', but they were the best that was available. I think it was politically motivated but what can I say, you know, we had our enemies that didn't like charter schools. So you go with the flow Jim.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 24:04

Yeah. Does it, does it bring you a smile to know that Central Michigan University is looked to as the gold standard in charter school authorizing and, and that, in the Michigan Department of Ed. spokesperson, referred to CMU as the gold standard? What, what does that mean to you as being the person that kind of helped launch this thing?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 24:28

Well, it's very personally satisfying. You know, it's kind of like, maybe I did something right and the movement got started and I feel great about it. I've been retired 20 years and, you know, I don't go to the university. I'm not into micromanaging. I have so many good friends in charter schools. But you know, 20 years is a long span. I feel good inside. I feel very proud when I see the President, or Betsy DeVos, or anyone say some positive thing about charter schools. I think maybe we had a tiny accomplishment in getting it started. I'm very proud, you know, I liked charter schools to this day.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 25:19

As you look back on, on your career and your work with charter schools. What are some of your favorite memories?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 25:29

I have so many good memories. I think some of my favorite memories was support I had from the board of directors. We had wonderful board members and they were supportive. We did our homework. The President was unwaveringly supportive. Leonard Plachta, he took a lot of flack for wanting to be on the cutting edge in the nation. You know, we're not talking cutting edge in a county or a state. We're talking national. That makes me very proud. That's, that's a good memory. Another good memory, a great memory is, these

charter school expos when the principals and the board, board members would come up and say, 'Bob, we're so appreciative, we thank Central so much that dah dah dah,' I just feel good about that. Those are, those are good memories, and I still feel good about it.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 26:26

When you think about Central Michigan University as a normal college, a teacher's college in its early days, did it make sense for CMU to lead the nation, and the state of Michigan in chartering schools?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 26:41

Absolutely, you know, Central Michigan University started Central Michigan Normal as a teacher college. I graduated from Central as a biology teacher, chemistry teacher, taught in the public schools. It seemed like a natural fit for a well established teacher college in Michigan, to get involved in the charter school movement. I think the fit was good. And the President wanted to put the University on the map. And I think, through his efforts and support, we are on the map, you know. Central Michigan University's a great school and long established tradition for teacher college in a department of education. I love it. I wish, I wish it another 150 years success, you know.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 27:46

You lived the history. But if you're a new president, a new board member, a new provost or Dean coming into Central Michigan University, and you say, 'Well, why are we involved in K-12? Why are we doing this charter thing? What would your answer be to them?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 28:03

Well, excuse me, my answer, Jim would be charters are K-12. They're, they're as, they're no different than a traditional school. They're a public school. We should be involved in anything that deals with public schools, or any private school. We are a university of scholars that work with students. Why not charter schools? They're not private schools. Why not traditional schools? What can we do as a university to change the fabric of education to make it better? I taught in a public school for eight and a half years. It was the same thing year after year, no change, students come 30 in a classroom, 25. You know, ect ect, every year. We have to come up with a better paradigm to do things differently. I think charter schools tried and accomplished doing things differently. We were just regulated too much. The charter schools, they're regulated, but at least they have the liberty to focus on certain things.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 29:25

All right. Last question from me, and then anything you want to say, Bob. You're retired now. You kind of look back at this from the balcony. If you were advising somebody just getting into charter schools now, what advice would you have for them?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 29:45

I would say go for it if you're committed to kids. Charter schools are great institutions, and they serve the needs of students. They're not for everyone. But they're for parents that want choice, that want change, that like competition. I've never been to a charter school, that Central chartered, that I couldn't say, this is got outstanding things happening. There were a few as you know, Jim, that we needed to make some improvements on. The board was fighting, mismanagement, so forth. But that's true with the traditional schools and K-12. I would say go for it, you know, be enthusiastic, you know, behaviors contagious. You know, if you believe in something, you can't hide it very much. And you're gonna get divots, you're gonna get scars, you're gonna get wounds, you're not going to get 100% support, but you don't need it. All you need is people that believe it will happen. And you go for it.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 31:01

So Bob, you used those words of charters, choice, change, competition, do you believe that you've created choice and change and has competition made everybody better?

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Dr. Robert C. Mills 31:13

I think competition has made our traditional system, our education system better. Many of the things my crystal ball said are now coming true. You're seeing schools of choice. You know, that was something we only talked about with, you're seeing people that say, you know, my child goes to a charter school, my other child goes, you know, here, I think that's wonderful that we can have diversity in education. One size doesn't fit all. And my wife and I have four sons. They're all different. They might look exactly alike, but they're different. Different attitudes, different interests, different motivation. Well charter schools focuses on a certain niche, a certain segment. I believe in as strongly today in choice, competition, and change as I did in 94' 95'. Has competition made all schools better? Absolutely. I don't think there's any doubt in my mind that charter schools haven't been a catalyst for positive change in all of education.



Dr. Jim Goenner 32:30

All right. Anything you want to add?



Dr. Robert C. Mills 32:34

I enjoyed being a pioneer. I'm enjoying retirement. I'm very proud of our team that we had, like, you know, you've been involved in charter schools for probably 25 years. I was only involved Jim, in five, but you have grown from the state to the national. Now you're like a legend. I wasn't a legend. I was a pioneer. And I got out. You're still with it. So keep up the good work.



Dr. Jim Goenner 33:09

We will, final question, Bob. Your crystal ball, what's it say about the future now?



Dr. Robert C. Mills 33:17

Whoa. That's a you know, that's a great question. I won't take very long. My crystal ball Jim says, We're moving to a borderless school system, where we do a lot of technology, and a lot of mentoring small groups. I see the schools of the future, like a cruise ship, where they go out for a period of time, they do certain activities, then they come back to port. Technology without question is there. I kiddingly used to say years ago, many years ago, we ought to install a computer chip in every child so when they walk through the school door, we take attendance. I think technology is going to change the whole way we do business. I think the future is very bright, but it's not going to be classroom, 30 students, little boxes. It's going to be different. And we have grandchildren and we have a great grandchild on the way, his world and it's going to be a boy, his world will be totally different. I'm excited. You know, I wish I could live another 40 years and go back in the classroom.



Dr. Jim Goenner 34:35

That's a big bold vision, borderless schools. I mean 25 years ago, you were the pioneer with providing choice. And actually a charter school had an enrollment district of the state, which was kind of a borderless school if you could get there. But physically, it didn't work that way. But with technology, you're laying out a vision for borderless schools. We'll invite you back in 25 years to see how that goes.

 Dr. Robert C. Mills 35:02
I'll be here, hopefully.

 Dr. Jim Goenner 35:04
All right. Thank you.

 Dr. Robert C. Mills 35:06
Thank you.