

## Interview with Calvin Jackson

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Interview # 1: June 1, 2010

Interviewer: Philip Pogue

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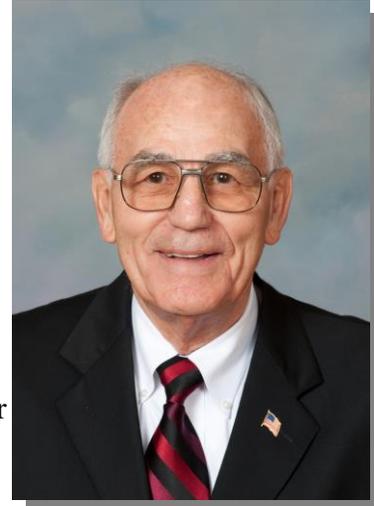
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Pogue: Today is June 1, 2010. My name is Philip Pogue, and we're here at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library talking on school reorganization issues. Today I will be interviewing Dr. Calvin Jackson. Dr. Jackson has had extensive experience with reorganization throughout his career. At this time, Dr. Jackson, would you like to give us a little background about yourself and your experiences with reorganization?

Jackson: Sure. I grew up in the little town of Virden, just south of here about twenty-four miles, and left Virden not too long after graduating from high school. Actually, I ended up eventually going into the military, in the Army, and then came off of active duty, went to school at Eastern [Illinois University], completed a bachelor's degree at Eastern, completed a master's degree at University of Illinois, and then, sometime later, did advanced work at SIU-Edwardsville [Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, IL], and then went to SIU-Carbondale [Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL] to finish a doctorate. I've had a lot of fun doing those kinds of things like that.

I have had an opportunity, of course, during that period of time to... Like many of us, Phil, [I] taught at the high school level. I was a teacher, a coach, a counselor, and did a number of those things. I really have been a elementary superintendent and principal, been a junior-senior high principal, been assistant superintendent, and then a school district superintendent. So I've had an opportunity to work at all of those levels.



*Dr. Calvin Jackson*

Pogue: Specifically, in what parts of the state was your work experience?

Jackson: Well, actually, I started teaching at Northwestern High School in Palmyra and then went up to Annawan, then went to Prophetstown. That's where I was the elementary superintendent-principal, both of a small K-8 [kindergarten-eighth grade] district. This was a really good experience because, in that school district at that time, we had a three member board of directors, as opposed to seven member board of education, which you and I have both worked with over a number of years.

I left there and came down to Girard as the junior-senior high school principal, and that was in 1966, and was there for six years as the junior-senior high principal in Girard. At that time, to complete a doctorate, you had to go on campus and do that year of residence. I don't know if you had to do that or not, but...

So I went to SIU-Carbondale for a year, and then, following that year on campus, I went over to the Carterville School District as the assistant superintendent of Carterville School District. In 1976, moved to Fairbury as the superintendent. I was there nine years as superintendent, and then, as you know, we voted on consolidation with...it was Fairbury, Cropsey, Forrest, Strawn, Wing and Chatsworth, and formed the Prairie Central School District. Then I stayed another nine years as superintendent there, at Prairie Central

Pogue: After your retirement at Prairie Central, you stayed active with educational organizations. Could you explain a little bit about that work?

Jackson: Sure. I worked with regional superintendents, did staff development work, administrator academy work with them, and then I was asked by... I was a long-time member of the Illinois Association of School Business Officials, [ASBO], so I was asked if I would consider taking on a responsibility as their legislative liaison. After thinking about it for a while, I did agree to do that. So I am the legislative liaison and professional development consultant for the Illinois Association of School Business Officials. I've been doing that for about twelve years now.

What that really means is that when the legislature's in session, I spend my time in the capital, hopefully helping legislators understand how school children are impacted with legislation that they are considering. The other part of the responsibility is to do workshops for school business managers and school superintendents across the state. I probably do maybe forty of those day-long workshops a year for school administrators.

Pogue: You mentioned the term, administrator's academy. What specifically is that function?

Jackson: The law requires that superintendents and school business managers, principals, that they have to do a day-long workshop every year in a topic. In some cases, of course, it would be teacher evaluation, and then to some extent it's open. I write a number of those courses, and then we teach a number of those throughout the State of Illinois. Other organizations do that too. Regional superintendents in the state provide those opportunities, as well as organizations such as Illinois ASBO. It's a requirement that every school administrator has to take at least one of those courses a year.

Pogue: Tied to the issue of school reorganization, you've been involved with many workshops, served as a consultant. What got you involved in doing a lot of those presentations?

Jackson: Well, my initial involvement was the time at Girard. When I was the principal at Girard, we had—and this was 1968, by the way, so this goes back a number of years—at that time, we voted on school district consolidation, and the total vote of that was “yes.” In other words, the “yes” vote, I think it was about 260 some votes, “yes,” over the “no” votes. But at that time, for a reorganization issue to pass, it had to pass both in the incorporated area and the unincorporated area. And this election, the vote lost by twenty-one votes in the unincorporated areas, so it did not pass.

Now, Lyle Knott—who was the superintendent at Girard at the time—and I went to what was a committee at that time actually, called the School Problems Commission. We presented legislation to change the law so that the total vote would carry, the will of the people would carry. That was accepted, and eventually the School Problems Commission presented that, and that did... The law had changed at that time, and of course, there had been many changes in legislation since that period of time.

But the boards did not put that issue back on the ballot after that 1968 vote, so nothing ever happened. I will tell you that, for me, that was forty years of unfinished business. And over those years, I would get calls from people—probably more in Virden than Girard—asking me, “Do you still have information on that?” I'd say, “Oh, yeah, I have a file on it.” So I would provide them with some information about that and, in fact, I went down on a couple of occasions and even talked with people in more detail about that issue. But that's really how I really got started in working on consolidation.

Pogue: Before we go into more specifics related to the Girard-Virden situation or even your experience at Prairie Central, it might help our listeners to understand the various types of school reorganizations. The State Board of Education provided me with a listing, from 1983 to 2010, of various ways of school consolidation. When I totaled them up, they showed sixty-six being annexation and fifty-five being consolidation, as the two largest ways of schools to reorganize. Could you describe how each of these functions work and how they're different? First, annexation.

Jackson: Okay. Annexation is where a district... Actually they just make a decision to take their district... In school districts, people just annex a part of their territory. It may be just their home and an acre of land because they want to join the school district. I think you've probably been involved in that. I have a number of times where there is a petition filed, and there's a hearing in front of the Regional Board of Trustees, and the Regional Board of Trustees will grant those small areas.

In other cases, there is a referendum (clears throat), when it's annexation of an entire school district. That would be... It would go through all of those steps. So that would be the process of annexation. It can be complicated. There's a lot of detail involved in any of these issues today.

Pogue: And then how would consolidation work? And how is that different from annexation?

Jackson: Well, a consolidation is an example of where two or more districts decide to create a new district, such as... A good example is the new North Macoupin County District, which Virden and Girard came together, and the vote was successful to form this new school district. Or it would be like our example of Prairie Central, when we consolidated the Fairbury-Cropsey District, the Forrest-Strawn-Wing District and the Chatsworth District. Those three districts came together to form what is now the Prairie Central School District. (clears throat)

I might tell you that recent legislation made some changes in that area. We talk about two or more districts coming together. In the past, what would happen is that there would be a consolidation vote between a high school district and like four or five or six of the underlying elementary districts that feed into that high school district. Of course the law required... For that to be successful, it had to pass in all of those districts that were voting. So one very small district, with 100 students, could vote "no," and once they voted "no," they could cancel out that from happening.

So, a number of years ago, like maybe three or four years ago, legislation was passed that permitted those districts that voted "yes" to form the consolidated district and then allow that one district, in this example, to vote "no," and they could... The other three or four or five districts could form that district, and that one district that opted out then could continue to send their students to the high school.

You can imagine some complications, working out tax rates and some of those things. But the law permitted that, and that has happened. As a matter of fact, Phil, up in the area where we live, you had Flanagan, and then you had Cornell. You had the Cornell Elementary District, which is an operating district, and then you had the high school district, which deactivated—I know that's a term we'll explain a little bit later—they had deactivated, and they were sending most of their high school kids to Flanagan.

Once the law changed, then Flanagan and Cornell High School passed a consolidation issue, so the high school really is now part of Flanagan, and the Cornell Elementary district was not involved in that vote. The elementary district now, the high school's part of it. The elementary district is not, but again, they send their kids to the Flanagan High School. So there are all kinds of options that are available today.

Pogue: During that time period, from '83 to 2010, there were listed as thirteen deactivations. What is a deactivation?

Jackson: Well, Cornell High School is an example. In fact, when you get to deactivation, it, in fact, even... There are some examples around the state where not only schools like Cornell High School deactivated, but you have some elementary districts who deactivated. They send their students to another elementary district. It could be an elementary, K-8, or it could be 9-12.

Of course, it takes a board resolution to deactivate, and then it takes a vote, a successful vote, on the part of the people in that district, to deactivate. Then all it takes is a resolution, I think, maybe by boards of the districts, that they're going to send their students to... They don't have to all go to the same district; they can actually go to more than one. So there's a tuition agreement that exists between the receiving districts and the district that is deactivating. Again, it's another option that people in school districts can consider.

Pogue: And a couple of the newer, creative types of reorganizations have taken place. One is over in the Carthage area, with Illini West. Did you have any involvement with that?

Jackson: As a matter of fact I... I don't remember how many years ago, I went over there on Saturday morning. I recall, the regional superintendent asked me to come over and see. I think there were representatives from about seven boards of education at the time. I'd been over there a couple of times, talking, exactly what we're talking about here, all the options for reorganization, the possibilities that were in effect, and talked about the benefits that accrue to children when boards and people make the decisions to try to put those children in a situation where much greater educational opportunities are going to be available to them.

Pogue: Another kind of version is the one that Paris did with Paris High School and Paris Community School District and Paris Union. Did you have any involvement with that one?

Jackson: No, I didn't have any. Years ago I did go over to that area and made a presentation about the options that were available at that time. But that's been a number of years ago.

Pogue: You talked about the legislature and the various laws and some of the changes that have taken place. From your perspective, has the legislation been encouraging reorganization, or has it been creating obstacles?

Jackson: Well, I would say both. I've served on a number of committees—as well as a number of other people have—various committees here in the state, where we've talked about school district consolidation. In fact, I would say probably, in this last year or two, we've heard more discussion on the part of, like the governor; the state superintendent, Chris Koch; other members of the General Assembly, about the need for more school district consolidation. Chris Koch will tell you, when he goes and meets with his counterparts from the other fifty states, they will express their surprise at the number of school districts that we have in Illinois, particularly the number of very small school districts that we have. It is a somewhat difficult issue.

Maybe it has something to do with the financial difficulties that we have in the state, but you do hear much more discussion the last year or two than I've heard in the past. So there is a lot of interest, and you see it being mentioned in various reports that are done, about the need for more consolidation. One of the things that I've always felt was important, that is the financial incentives that are necessary, I think, to get school districts to follow through.

One of the other issues that has come up recently is the issue of test scores. You know how the test scores [have] become very important to school districts today. So really working through that to decide how you're going to blend those test scores together, because we have a number of issues that those test scores are a part of it.

If you have a district where they have very low test scores, and you have a district next door to them, and you want those two to consolidate, the district next door might not want to consolidate with a district. So they look more... They don't only look at incentives, but they look at the test scores. It's very much a part of their concern today. I don't know, do you want to talk about those incentives?

Pogue: Sure, why don't we...

Jackson: These have been developed probably over the last twenty years, maybe a little bit longer. The state incentives are one where they'll take a look at the general state aid of the districts before consolidation and after, and they'll make sure

they give the state aid, based on...so the district doesn't lose anything. They look at teacher salaries, and they look at the differences between salaries, and they will provide an incentive, based on those salaries for three years.

They look at the current deficit. For instance, as of June 30—you're a long-time superintendent, you know we complete an annual financial report or an audit of the school district—and that, as of June 30 of any given year... So there is a formula, where they look at the deficits, and if there is a deficit, they will provide an incentive to make up that deficit difference. Then there's another incentive, which is \$4,000 per certified employee. There's a formula for computing that, and the district can get that incentive for one, two or three years, based upon the characteristics of the district. So there are those incentives.

I've worked on school consolidation, as I've said, across the state. In fact, the EFAB, Education Funding Advisory Board, a number of years ago, when Bob Leininger chaired that, in that subcommittee, one of the issues that I felt like that we needed to tackle, across the state, is that when we get into school consolidation, two of the major areas for me (clears throat), that I thought we ought to be looking at, is underground tanks—you've had some experience in that area—the other one is abandoned school buildings.

I thought one of the detrimental things for consolidation could be the fact of abandoned school buildings in nice, small communities, that are just deteriorating. A lot of times it's very hard for a Board of Education, who's going through this process, to resist the opportunity to sell that building or auction it off for \$5,000 or \$10,000. You see, what happens a lot of times is that somebody buys that building with some idea, and then the idea doesn't work out. And the building just sits in the middle of a small community and deteriorates. I think things like that are detrimental to school consolidation.

As we talked about that, I talked about having some kind of state incentive to deal with old school buildings like that, to make sure that they aren't an eyesore in the middle of a community. In most cases, when we go through these kinds of things, particularly the underground tanks, most people know about them, and they'll deal with those. But sometimes some things happen, and people forget where those are and the fact that they're even there. Then years later, they can provide a problem, as you know (both laugh), in a school district.

So, I think an incentive to make sure that we deal with...we remove underground tanks. They're probably out there a lot of places that maybe decisions were made, and people just forgot they were there, which could happen over a period of time.

Pogue: Going to those incentives for a district like North Mac, which just consolidated with Girard and Virden, what specifically would be the incentives that they would be entitled to for this upcoming year?

Jackson: I haven't looked at that in great detail. I think, the last time I looked at it, I think that the district's incentives (clears throat) for North Mac would maybe be some \$280,000 for this next year. It's very important, even in the current budget situation. I've said to some person in the state board, and I've said to some legislators that, "I know you're interested in consolidation, and we need to make sure that those incentives are there and that they are paid." You know, it's in the state budget, and not only is it in the state budget, but that it's also paid out to those school districts. I think that's really critical to school district consolidation. But I think North Mac is about \$280,000 this year.

Pogue: When we looked at the history of school reorganization from '83 to 2010, it appeared that there was a big boom between 1987 and 1995, then kind of a lull, a pick up again, but not as high, between 2003 and 2008. What seemed to be the big push that led to a lot of school reorganizations in that '87 to '95 period?

Jackson: I think a lot of it was the interest on the part of some of our leaders in our state, back during that period of time. We went through a period of time where there were some significant studies that was done. In fact, maybe some of that was the result of those studies that were done in the 1970s. I know the state superintendent at that time had a study.

You know, we had a finance center at Illinois State University that was led, initially, by Alan Hickrod and Ben Hubbard, two really outstanding educators that just did a tremendous amount of work in all school finance issues, as well as school consolidation. Ben Hubbard was eventually the research director for that School Problems Commission, when it existed a few years ago. And they just did a... That finance center did a tremendous amount of work, particularly, as I said, in the school finance area. They did a lot of studies; they chaired a number of dissertations at Illinois State University, where they studied a lot of these reorganization school finance areas.

I think it was back during that period of time when a number of these incentives were put in place to begin to encourage more school districts to consolidate. You had leadership, back during that period of time, that provided that. We need to get back to some of that leadership again (laughs).

Pogue: Does that finance group that you talked about at Illinois State University exist today?

Jackson: There's an office that does that kind of work, but not to the extent that it was when you had a Ben Hubbard and an Alan Hickrod. You know, you're talking about two men that didn't only have a reputation in the State of Illinois, their reputations were nationwide, and they were just very effective in what they did and the leadership that they provided.

Pogue: Were there any other legislators or state board members who you would consider to be spearheads for school reorganization over the last thirty to forty years?

Jackson: I thought Governor [James R.] Thompson was a person who worked on those efforts and supported... I think Governor [Jim] Edgar did. And there were various people, as you think about that, that really worked very hard. Well, Bob Leininger, I think, when he was state superintendent, again, had a lot of interest. He was a former school superintendent before he accepted various responsibilities at the state board level. Governor [George H.] Ryan appointed him to chair the Educational Funding Advisory Board, and under his leadership they developed a number of committees to look at various issues around the state.

School consolidation was one of those issues that they looked at and developed a pretty extensive report. Not much was done about that report that was developed. In fact, they even set out some pretty strong recommendations for foundation levels to support school districts through general state aid. I would say that the General Assembly never measured up (laughs) to the recommendations of that [advisory] board.

Pogue: In 2009, 2010, the state board lists that there's roughly 870 school districts. They list 378 as elementary districts, 101 as high school districts, 389 as unit districts, and then there's that one cooperative high school, and there's the Department of Corrections, which is a different group. Why does Illinois have basically three types of districts, elementary, high school and unit?

Jackson: That's a good question. I don't know if you could say that it's just the politics of the state or how you would explain that, because in fact, if you go back to consolidation a number of years ago, there was a discussion at that time that the only district we should have is a K-12 district. Even as you develop a funding mechanism for the state, it's been somewhat complicated to try to make sure that how you treated the K-12 district, the K-8 district, and the 9-12 district... We've always had some complications in dealing with that, that other states have not had to deal with. I think these things just got started that way a number of years ago.

If you look at the reputation, we have some very good elementary districts. We have some outstanding high school districts. And then we have some outstanding K-12 districts. And to cause people in some of those districts to consolidate the underlying elementary and the high school districts... I think a lot of them have gained prestige. They've done quite well, in terms of providing academic opportunities for students. To go back now and to try to put them together, all in a K-12 district, would be not exactly "mission impossible," but pretty close, I would think.

Pogue: You've been, as we talked earlier, active in a lot of workshops, presentations on school reorganizations. What are some of the key questions you get when you're on a panel or you come in as a consultant, tied to reorganization?

Jackson: A number of questions that people will ask...the real important questions, like, "What's going to happen to our mascot?" (both laugh) Of course, people will...you know, all of the traditions that they have built up. I would say

probably a successful athletic program makes it difficult to convince people that they ought to consolidate sometimes. There are a number of those issues that don't get at quality of educational opportunities for kids. There's all those other kinds of extraneous issues, and sometimes we drain our energy off.

The question that always comes up, "Is the district big enough? Are these two districts, or should we be thinking about something larger, with maybe three or four districts around us?" So you get into discussions like that. When we get our energy drawn away from doing the kinds of things that we really need to be thinking about; that's educational opportunity for children and the benefits that are going to accrue to children as a result of adults making these kinds of decisions like that. Those are, "What's the mascot going to be?" "What's the name of the school district going to be?" Those are... You know; you've been there. You know how those things become questions for people sometimes.

Pogue: When you talk about educational opportunities, what are you specifically suggesting that school reorganization can do, tied to that particular topic?

Jackson: If we went back to our Prairie Central School District and the underlying districts in Fairbury, we go back to 1984, which was when we voted on consolidation. But we were seeing at that time, declining enrollment; we were seeing at that time, a loss of EAV; that's equalized assessed value, because at that time, we were seeing a loss in farmland values, and that was affecting us. So we really needed to have a tax increase.

Because of declining enrollment, we saw teachers teaching out of their major field. In other words, we had teachers teaching in their minor field. That was a concern. So, as we put a tax increase on the ballot, and we asked people to consider that tax increase. People were saying to us, at the time, "We don't need to be voting on this tax increase. We need to be voting on consolidation." And we would say, "Sure. We know that, but we need to pass this tax increase now, and then we need to get on and talk about consolidation. If you want that done, then we need the help of all of you to involve us in that discussion."

That was a seventy-five cent increase in the tax rate. That passed in, I think it was March of 1984. That meant \$400,000 to us as a school district. So we essentially had solved our financial problems, but we still had this other problem, educationally, of losing some classes and having declining enrollment and having people teaching out of their major fields. So after the election, successful referendum in 1984, we began to get more deeply involved in the discussion of consolidation. It was following that and the work that we did, in fact, Fairbury and Forrest got together.

We invited Chatsworth to become involved with us. They did become involved with us. In fact, we voted on the tax increase in March of 1984 and then came around to November 1984 and voted on consolidation. Sometimes people say, "We need to study this and study it longer." Well, from March of 1984 to November of 1984, which was when people voted, when they voted,

as I recall, 66 percent of the registered voters voted in favor of consolidating those three K-12 districts, eventually, which became the Prairie Central School District. You can study issues to death, and sometimes...

If I really thought about it, I could probably list five or six of the reasons that people give for not doing these kinds of things, and it's just that they don't want to do it. They find all kinds of reason to delay and slow down and do those kinds of things like that. We moved very quickly in which we were the Prairie Central area. In fact, I still remember one of the board members, a couple of years into Prairie Central, who was not all that excited about consolidation, but he told me a couple of years later that, if we would take the vote today on school district consolidation, maybe 66 percent voted ["yes"] in 1984... He said, "I think it would be 85 or 90 percent of the people in the district today that would vote in favor of it." All he was saying was that this was a great experience for kids.

We did what we did. I had reservations, but I know now, after having been involved in this experience, what a great opportunity this has been and will continue to be for children.

Pogue: In the district that you're talking about, did consolidation lead to more and different courses? Did it lead to teachers teaching in their major fields? Did it lead to more extracurricular activities, more fine arts programs?

Jackson: Oh, all of the above. Of course, you were the superintendent there for what, five years? So you were a part of that and watched that. In all of the areas, the sciences, in mathematics, in the whole area of special education—we were able to do things for children in special ed. Instead of transporting students outside the district, we were large enough at that point to be able to have opportunities in the district—and then the vocational area.

Prairie Central today still has, I think, three ag [agriculture] teachers. We're rural, agricultural, farming, and if there's anything an area like that should have, it's a challenging ag program. One of my observations, particularly about the agricultural program, was that prior to consolidation, our students would go to the National FFA [Future Farmers of America] Convention. They would go as observers, just to watch what was happening. Once we formed Prairie Central, our students were winners. They went to the national convention to compete. And not only did they compete, but they won, and that has, since Prairie Central, been a big tradition in the agricultural program. We've had students who've traveled to other countries as a result of their success that they've had in this program. It's a tremendous program that we have in the Prairie Central School District.

And, of course, one of the other benefits of having a larger school district is the opportunity for young men and young women in the sports area, having opportunities that did not exist prior to Prairie Central. One of the things, the benefits that I saw, [was] particularly in a football program. I saw an opportunity to put together teams and compete at the freshman level, the

sophomore level, the junior varsity level, where we were large enough that we didn't have freshmen competing against seniors on a varsity football team. That was just an observation I made.

We had more opportunities in all of the areas. We just had some really successful young men and women who have gone through Prairie Central and have just made some tremendous accomplishments.

Pogue: Tied to the issue of school consolidation, the State of Illinois has not been as involved, as compared to the neighbors in Indiana, with school construction at the same time. That seems to be a separate program. Has there been any discussion through your involvement with the General Assembly and state board leaders to include school building issues, which sometimes inhibit consolidation?

Jackson: Well, part of our recommendations in that EFAB consolidation committee was to make sure that when they had their priority list, when they began to look at school construction, we felt like, that in some cases, you can't go through school consolidation because you need to be building new buildings, and that's difficult in some situations. So, we felt that there ought to be the incentive added there, where if a school building needs to be built, that the priority for consolidation is high enough that they will receive assistance that they need.

You know that at Prairie Central we built buildings early, ahead of all those school grant projects. All of us, as residents and taxpayers of the district, are paying for all of the bonds that were necessary. You know that we built the new junior high, that we built a new high school, almost all... There was some of the old high school that was of more recent construction in the early 1970s that was retained, but we essentially built a new high school, built a new vocational building that's a part of that at that site. Of course, the taxpayers in Prairie Central passed that bond issue and are still paying on those bonds today. There were no incentives for Prairie Central.

But as we look forward into the future, I think the EFAB committee saw the necessity of providing that incentive for people out here in school districts who really need that.

Now, when we formed Prairie Central, we were able to make the buildings that we had work. As I recall, the enrollment of Prairie Central the first year when we got started, in 1985, was like 1,721. But what happened after that, the enrollment increased to over 2,000 students, and what we found ourselves was out of room everywhere. Eventually those buildings were built and were added, as a result of that overcrowding that existed.

I do think that if we could ever get a sustainable, substantial school construction program, I think it would help in the school consolidation area. I think it's just got to be one of the items on the agenda, and I think our state

has done much better in the past than we've done in the last six, eight years because there were some school buildings that there were, you know...

We had about twenty-three school districts on a list that had agreements with our State that they were going to be provided those incentives. It took our State six or seven years to finally provide those incentives. A lot of things had changed, in terms of...even in construction cost, over that six or seven years. School districts that had plans to build buildings found that those buildings were going to be much more expensive these years later.

Some of the districts built those buildings and used local money to build them, waiting for the State match on that, which as I said, took the six or seven years to get there. I think that good people across the state will do the things that are necessary, but our State's got to provide those incentives, and they've got to make sure that they're there when they're supposed to be there.

Pogue: We've taken a look, generally, at school reorganization. We've looked at various types of consolidation, annexation, deactivation in kind of a mix of those. We've looked at a little bit of the incentives. We've talked about the history of school reorganization. Now we'll kind of take a look a, specifically, the Girard and Virden case.

You indicated earlier that you have a unique background, having grown up in Virden and served as a principal at Girard. Could you give us some history as to the potential of those two schools to merge, as far back as the 1960s?

Jackson: Sure. We worked very hard on that issue, back in 1968, and thought that it should happen. The quirk in the law, which we got changed, really prevented that from happening. There was a lot of interest over the years, and as I said, I'd had contact with people who had asked me for information. Of course, I always shared that with them.

I think it was what, in July—it was 2008—I received a call from some people that said, "We have put together a committee of about thirty people. We're pretty serious about this. Would you come and help us?" I said, "I'd be glad to." And I did. The committee that worked on that—and I know that you're going to be interviewing John Alexander—the effort of that committee was really led by John Alexander and another person, Bob Dodd. Mark Prose, essentially was the leader of that issue from the Girard perspective. This was an excellent committee; it was.

As I said, there was about thirty-some people from Virden and Girard. For me, I looked around the table, and I saw people I was in high school with at Virden. I continued to look around the table, and I saw people from Girard that I was their high school principal (laughs). So it was for me just really a lot of fun. They worked very hard on all those issues.

The committee, it [was] just really good, solid people, and the thing that I thought was so remarkable about that committee was that they would assign each other duties and responsibilities. You'd come back to the next meeting, and they had those things done. I don't ever recall going to a meeting when somebody had a responsibility for doing something or getting something, some project, done, and they came back to the next meeting and said, "I just didn't have the time to do it." I never heard that. Every time they had something... Those people worked very hard. They got done everything that they needed to get done.

Bob Dodd is an attorney, there in Virden, and he did all the legal work. It didn't cost them anything. It can be a costly thing to school districts going through this. Eventually, along the way, the Virden Board of Education did vote to be involved in this, and the Virden board, they did get involved. In fact, at the required hearing, before the regional superintendent, the Virden board president and then the superintendent, Ron Graham, came and testified at the hearing, in favor of the consolidation issue. The Girard board did not take the same steps that the Virden board took, in terms of supporting this consolidation issue.

Pogue: How many meetings were you attending?

Jackson: I don't know. I didn't count them, but we were meeting once or twice a week. I drove down once or twice a week. They were evening meetings, usually 6:30 or 7:00, so I came down just to meet with them. It was like old home week because I got a chance to see some people I hadn't seen for a while.

The other thing about it was... I keep saying, for me it was this forty years of unfinished business that we were working on, that we should have done forty years ago. I think about the students who'd gone through those two school districts in these last forty years, that maybe didn't have some opportunities that, hopefully, the new North Mac students are going to have here, starting in July 1.

Pogue: Were there any differences or different topics that had to be dealt with in 2008 that were different from 1968?

Jackson: Oh, probably, probably. I think a lot of issues that you deal with, from 1968 to now... Just the explosion of technology that has taken place and the [unintelligible]. In fact, Saturday I was at the alumni banquet in Girard. The buildings were open, so I had a chance to walk through the building. Of course, Girard has done some really nice building. [unintelligible] Neighbors was the superintendent a few years ago, when they did the new building that took place in Girard, very nice building, very nice additions.

When I was in Girard, they had an elementary school a few blocks over from the high school, and they had an elementary school in Nilwood. Well, they built these new buildings, and now they've consolidated or

concentrated, all of the students in the Girard School District, into the one building, excellent building.

You walk around that building and look at any school building, elementary or high school building today, one of the things that is so prevalent there are the computers and the computer labs. Even in offices, you see a high concentration of [computers] today, all hooked to the Internet, giving kids the opportunities to make sure that they're taking advantage of all the technology, whether it's a computer accounting classes that they're taking, where it's the writing class that you're doing in English, where all of that is done on computers today. It's just made a tremendous difference, whether it's the research that students are doing... They've just permeated our entire life. It's very easy to see how much technology has entered and become a part of all of the programs that we're involved with in schools today.

As I walked around that building, you could just see the... Many times it's the use. I noticed it in the classroom, many of the classrooms had the LCD [liquid-crystal display] projector and document readers, where again, it's just how we can use technology more efficiently and more effectively.

The other thing is how computer literate the kids are today. I mean, we talk about them in school, but every home, kids have access to computers, at least in most homes today. Many homes are like ours; they're wireless. You walk in with your computer; you don't have to worry about hooking into the Internet. You have that capability in homes today. The opportunities there for the children, I think, are just going to be tremendous.

Pogue: What were some of the key questions the committee had to look at as they pursued consolidation?

Jackson: I think that when you do this kind of thing, you always get into questions, such as, "Where will the unit office be?" "Where are we going to set up all of our schools?" To some extent, the buildings that we have to work with are going to divide or decide that kind of issue. You get into questions of busing, "How long will kids spend..." I mean, "Will they spend on a bus, riding to and from?" You get into questions like that. There are, of course, questions that come up, questions where you begin to look the financing of the district, the tax rate, "What's the tax rate going to be?" "Is the tax rate equal to or significantly higher than the tax rate in one or more of the districts?" You get into questions about standing bonds, "How do you handle the outstanding bonds?"

In the North Mac School District, the petition, the committee that worked on this decided that most of the outstanding bonds were in Girard. They decided that one of the things that they would do—this is what people voted on—is that they would immediately deal with the bonds and refund the bonds so that all the taxpayers in all the North Mac District would pay for the bonds. In other words, they would spread the bonds of Virden and Girard, both, across the new North Mac School District. So, again, those are issues as

districts come together, because bonds are paid for by people who vote on them.

When we formed Prairie Central, the one building there in Forrest, the new (clears throat)... Forrest built that building. It was a junior-senior high; it was three years old when we formed Prairie Central. So the only bonds that were outstanding in the district were the bonds in Forrest. In other words, the taxpayers from Forrest paid for those bonds for a number of years, until we reached a point where it made sense to refund them. Then the bonds were refunded, when the new bond issue was passed to build a new high school and the junior high. That's always the question when you deal with these issues, how to deal with that.

Of course, another issue is election of school board members, "Who's going to control the board?" I know in Prairie Central, that was a concern about some people because if you would go by equalized assessed value, the largest EAV was in Fairbury. If you would go by enrollment, the largest enrollment was in Fairbury. And if you went by population, the people in Fairbury could have elected all seven board members. Yet, (clears throat) we felt it was important to develop an agreement. This agreement that we developed had no standing in law, but the three boards agreed that we would slate board members, and we slated all board members who were on the current boards. That had no legal standing, but nevertheless, the boards agreed to slate three board members from Fairbury, two from Forrest, and two from Chatsworth. Fairbury essentially gave up control of the board because Forrest and Chatsworth had four board members, and Fairbury had three. They did that; they agreed to do that because they just thought that was important to do.

Now, all these years later, that doesn't make any difference, and probably not many people even remember that. But Jim Roberts wrote an editorial in the *Fairbury Blade* and talked about the "Blue Ribbon School Board." There were eight people. There was another board member who took out a petition and ran for the board. When it came down to the election, the seven slated board members were elected. What was interesting [was], in that first election, that we had board members from Girard that got the most votes cast. What that meant was, people from Fairbury had to vote for those Chatsworth board members.

In Prairie Central, we've seen that happen. I think that four-three... Although Chenoa is a part of the mix now, we've seen that happen. All these years later, that's not even a question. It didn't take people very long to get to the point where they weren't representing Fairbury or Forrest or Chatsworth; they were representing Prairie Central, and they were representing the children in Prairie Central. They got over that.

Now, in the North Mac District, it was done a little bit differently. In the North Mac District, what we set up were seven board of education districts, so that people in the North Mac District are voting for the board

member that represents...much like what you do here. In Illinois, you vote for your representative, or you vote for your senator, representing the district that you live in. Well, in North Mac, they're essentially doing the seven thing.

There are seven board of education districts, population pretty much the same. People have a chance to run, depending on where they live in the district, out of that seven districts that they live in. That is always an option when school district consolidation, to decide that that way. And that was what the committee felt was important to do to make sure the representation existed in the North Mac District. Those seven board members got elected last February, and they've been working very hard, filled all the kinds of things that you do, leading up to starting up a new district. So I won, and they're, there doing that.

They have employed Marlene Brady, who was the superintendent at Girard, as the superintendent of the district. And they've employed Ron Graham, who is the superintendent at Virden, as assistant superintendent, to get the district started July 1. They've been deeply involved in all the planning and the work leading up to the starting of the district.

Pogue: Tied to this consolidation in North Mac, what were the key dates that had to be met by law to handle the consolidation?

Jackson: Of course, the major date was with developing the Committee of Ten, which was developed out of this committee.<sup>1</sup> They have legal standing, and they worked on, developed, the petition and then presented that petition to the regional superintendent. The regional superintendent accepted that petition, the legal issues involved in just making sure that everything is done correctly. Then the regional superintendent scheduled a hearing on the petition. People had a chance to come down—it was in Carlinville, in the county courthouse in Carlinville—and he conducted the hearing, did an excellent job of doing that. Following the hearing, they developed the transcripts. Then he had to decide... As regional superintendents across the state who deal with this, they make a recommendation.

Then it goes to the state superintendent, and the state superintendent, with his legal advisor, they study all the issues related, make sure that everything is done and done correctly. Once they decide that it is, then they send it back, and an election is scheduled for the people to vote on the consolidation issue, which of course...

There are those dates involved in timing of it, because in the state now, there are dates where you can hold these kinds... The law spells out days and times when all of these issues have to come together. Normally, when you get involved in these issues, you can go sit down with a regional superintendent, and you can work out all of those timelines, depending on when you have the

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<sup>1</sup> In a school consolidation a Committee of Ten is responsible for resolving competing academic philosophies and issues. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee\\_of\\_Ten](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee_of_Ten))

consolidation election, because following that is going to be the election to elect the Board of Education, which was last February for the North Mac. All of this is really important, in terms of timing all of these conditions, decisions, and these issues around the election calendar that exists.

Pogue: Let me kind of recheck here. Two thousand eight is when discussions began, and the Committee of Ten was officially formed in what month, roughly?

Jackson: Very early in the process. I probably have that someplace. I think the hearing, I think, was in December—it seems to me—of 2008. There were some discussions about whether we should move this this quickly, whether we should hurry up and get these things done to have... Because then the election, I think, was the April of... I think it was the April of that year. You always... “Are we moving too fast?” “Should we slow down?” Well this, yeah, see, the election (clears throat) was April of (clears throat) 2009. See now, the election passed in April of 2009. July 1 of 2009, there’s, of course, not enough time between that period of time to start a new district. So they had to go from April of 2009 to February of 2010 to elect a board because there wasn’t a time.

Now, we talked about special elections, even though we had, what is it, five dates, or is it four dates, over a two year period of time when we can have elections. I had given them examples of where special elections have been held, and (microphone noise) it takes a presentation before one of the county judges to seek approval. That has happened across the state, but it has to be some kind of an emergency. I’m not sure that this would have qualified for that kind of an emergency (clears throat). So I think people just satisfied themselves to wait until the February.

Of course, the regional superintendent conducts that election for the board. Once the board members are elected, then the regional superintendent meets with the new board and helps organize the new board and then helps them elect the board president. Then the new district is on its way and moving.

There’s some questions about, once that board is elected, what can they do? Of course, you know, the law provides them to do a lot of things. But when that board was elected in February, and they organized, I think within a couple of weeks after that, that board starts meeting at that time because there’s a tremendous amount of work, as you and I both know, to move from Girard and Virden school boards to this new North Mac District, starting July 1. There’s a lot of work, and the first thing they need to do is decide what their leadership’s going to be, “Who’s going to be the superintendent in the district?” and getting around to doing some of those things like that, which they did get done; they got done very quickly on that. So they decided all the committees and all of those things that you and I both know that you’re heavily involved in planning.

You were a superintendent a long time, and you know all the work that you're doing. When you're in that consolidated district, you're not only finishing up all the things that you do in your own district—as Marlene and Ron are doing—but you're also planning for the new district. It's a tremendous amount of work that both of them are going through right now, getting ready to start this new district. They've had a huge task to get this stuff all done.

Pogue: You mentioned that the regional superintendent held the hearing. Who is the regional superintendent?

Jackson: Mr. Pfeiffer. He's been very, very actively involved in dealing with all of the kinds of things that go on at that time and providing the leadership, as I said, from the very beginning of accepting the petitions to looking at all of that with his legal counsel. Larry Pfeiffer just really did a good job of working with the districts and helping them in every way, as they plan for all of that process (clears throat).

He conducted the hearing, in the courthouse in Carlinville. I've sat through a number of these, and it was well organized and well planned. I just thought that he did a really good job of that whole hearing process.

Pogue: Were there any specific topics brought up at the hearing, or that were required to be presented at the hearing?

Jackson: There are a number of those. It seems to me there are three questions that they're looking at and that the questions are: "Are the districts contiguous?" "Is there enough size in the district that they're going to be able to provide a quality education?" There are about two or three major questions like that that have to be answered. And the regional superintendent has to be satisfied with all the answers to those questions. Beyond that, I would say that, as I've worked on consolidation over the years, I always assumed that... As we did the one at Prairie Central, I looked at that and said, "It's pretty easy to answer the three required questions that you had to answer."

But then, the question for me, the bigger question is, "Is there enough information in that petition that if somebody appeals the decision of the state superintendent, is there enough information for a judge to look at that, read the transcript, and say, 'Yes, this needs to go forward.'"

When we did ours, we put together a lot of information. We had a number of people that we asked to go testify. We broke a lot of things out, dealing with academics, dealing with enrollment, dealing with vocation of school, dealing with a whole host of areas, because we wanted to provide enough information in the transcript that, if there was an appeal, that a judge could look at this and say, "This needs to go forward. The voters need to have an opportunity to vote on it, to say 'yes' or 'no' and to decide the issue." I think that's what we wanted to do. We wanted to get this out there, in front of

the voters in both Virden and Girard School Districts, and give them a chance to decide the issue. We did give them that chance, and they did decide it.

Pogue: There was also a study done by UIS [University of Illinois-Springfield] people.

Jackson: Yes, there was.

Pogue: What types of questions were in that study?

Jackson: Bill Phillips, by the way, is the person that led that study. Bill Phillips is a... He's a former school superintendent, like you and me, and he's a professor here at UIS, University of Illinois in Springfield. He has a tremendous amount of experience. In fact, as people call me and ask about school consolidation, and they ask me about studies, I usually tell them that... And there's some other people across the state who do studies, but I always make sure that they have Bill's name because he just does good work. He brings other people together with him to do that work, and I think it's well done. He has a lot of experience in that area.

I think they're looking realistically at the studies that were done. They're looking at all of the issue. They're comparing... They're looking at the curriculum that's offered in both of the school districts. They're looking at the enrollment; they're doing a kind of history of the enrollment, and they're making projections beyond the current year. They're looking into finance data. They're looking at where the districts have come from and where they're going, and financially, what's the future look like in both districts? They're looking at...

That study includes not only the issues related to tax rates and those issues like that, but they're looking at the bonds, outstanding bonds. So they're looking at all of those kinds of situations in school districts, a pretty extensive study. Most of the studies I see will exceed 100 pages today. Like I said, you're talking with people that have a lot of experience in this area.

Pogue: Did Bill testify at the hearing?

Jackson: No, no. Let's see, I don't remember them being at the hearing.

Pogue: So they did the study, and then they presented it to the two districts?

Jackson: Actually, I was there the night that they presented the study that was done. Again, these people do a pretty thorough job of the study. They not only presented it, but they answered questions for people who had questions about various aspects of the study.

Pogue: What type of questions seemed to come from the audience?

Jackson: It's been so long ago, I don't recall now. The questions that always persist from the standpoint of the people is, "We don't need to rush this thing. Why don't we take a little more time to study?" I think some of the things that some

of the people talked about were, “We don’t have to hurry into this thing. We can take time, and maybe we ought to consider some of the other districts in our area. Maybe there’s an opportunity to bring some of those other districts in our area. Maybe there’s opportunities out there we don’t know about yet.”

I just never took those kind of things seriously. I always felt like, “We’ve got to do what we’ve got to do right now, and maybe there are other opportunities later.” I would tell you, I worked with another district up north. You and I were talking about these districts.

There are maps that show you the borders. In fact, I probably have some of them that show you the borders of districts. I remember, I was working with a district up north, and what convinced them that they needed to take this seriously was that I did take them a copy of the map. I just showed them they were isolated; this can happen.

In fact, Phil, when we formed Prairie Central, there were folks in Chenoa said, “We knew you were going to vote, but we didn’t take it seriously. We didn’t think that would pass. So then we thought we would get involved with Prairie Central (clears throat), with the district a little later.” Then they said, “Holy cow, that thing passed.” They said, “What do we do now?” because that kind of took us off of the table, in terms of them.

You probably know this, but... I don’t know, it was probably a year or two into Prairie Central that we had some pretty intense discussions with Chenoa, as a matter of fact, even to the extent that we thought we were going to vote on consolidation with Chenoa. For some reason or another, they backed out. In fact, we’d even had discussions to the extent of voting with Chenoa, and “Where would school buildings be?” “Where would classes in buildings be?” We had a lot of discussions. We thought we were going to vote with Chenoa, and for some reason or another, as I say, they backed off of that. Then, of course, they did get involved with all their neighbors, and they were looking at a lot of different things. Eventually, Chenoa is part of Prairie Central now (laughs). It took a long to get there, but they are a part of Prairie Central. So, you know, people are always looking at a lot of...

By the way, we talked about this: I still favor some kind of opportunity... A few years ago, while I think Thompson was there, there was a committee at that time that I worked [with]. It was a reorganization study when Jim Thompson was governor. Ross Hodel was Governor Thompson’s assistant for education. We did a lot of that work, and it caused regional superintendents to go out and make studies. I thought that was a good plan. In fact, it even required some votes to be taken. I’m not sure I agreed with that, but I do think that it’s important for regional superintendents across the state to do studies and to look realistically at what would really make sense in terms of school district reorganization.

By the way, as I think about that, one of the interesting opportunities that I had was I was asked to go up to a little district. It was called Otter Creek Piatt. Are you familiar with that one?

Pogue: No.

Jackson: Okay. I think when I went up there, they had twenty-six students in that district. In fact, they had, again, a three member board of directors in that district. They said, "Come up; we'll have a meeting in the gym, and we'll get everybody there." And they did. I think there were fifty people there, but they only had twenty-six students. It was a nice little school building, and they had lots of opportunities. But again, you look, and you begin to see what the future holds. We talked a lot, answered a lot of questions for people that night about all the issues.

Now, Otter Creek Piatt School District actually became part of Ransom. They, I think, annexed to Ransom School District, which is an elementary district. They're in LaSalle County. Both of those districts feed into Streator High School, as I recall. They had an option of becoming part of Streator Elementary, but they chose to become part of Ransom. Again, another move in a little, small, good elementary school district. That was the choice that they made.

When I would talk with people about that, the biggest thing that surprised them was a three member board of directors. The other thing that surprised them was, "We have a school district out here with twenty-six kids in it?" Yes, we do (laughs). I don't think we have any that small now. I don't recall what the smallest one is, but we do have some pretty small districts.

One of the challenges I think we face is... On your list that you have, you probably have a list of those school districts where maybe we have fewer than... The list I'm looking at has fewer than that, but we had some. I was looking at high schools under 100 students, and right here, I was looking at this list. The statistics I'm looking at that tell me that we have some high schools, and we still have nine secondary districts, with fewer than 300 kids. In 2008-2009, we have twenty-five unit districts with fewer than 300 students.

If you really begin to look at a unit district of fewer than 300 students, and you begin to think about the challenges and the opportunities in high school, and if the unit district is fewer than 300—and we have twenty-five of those—what must the enrollment be in that high school? What would it...100 or less in those?

Pogue: It certainly would be right around that.

Jackson: I think the challenge today is, how do those high schools of 100 students, when we talk about the opportunities for kids... Now, of course, technology can be a part of that. There's opportunities out here with technology, but it's not the same. What about the physics and the chemistry and those advanced

science classes? What about teaching some of that math and science at the eighth grade level, so when they get into high school they can take that four or five years of mathematics and four or five years of science? You graduate some of those kids, and they go to college. Then they have a chance, at the college level, to see what other kids had that they didn't have and the disadvantage they're put at because they didn't have those opportunities that some of the kids at some of those larger schools [had]. We still have those [smaller] schools here, in the State of Illinois.

Pogue: We've taken a good look at the general issue of school reorganization. You mentioned, just a few minutes ago, that back in the 1980s there was a push to have all regional superintendents do hearings in their counties. That was very emotional, as they went from school district to school district, as I recall.

Jackson: You remember that.

Pogue: Oh, yes. We had a gym full at that time.

Jackson: Yeah.

Pogue: And then there was also, I think later, the push for unit districts with the ideal high school of 500. Are we anywhere else with a new push or, as you indicated, the last eight years have been somewhat stagnant with...

Jackson: Well, that study was done, and they said a high school with 500 [students] and an elementary of 1,000, no unit district less than 1,500, I think, were the numbers they used at the time. You stop and think about that, it kind of made sense at the time, as you thought about it. But you also recognized the challenges of getting into those kinds of issues.

What I really think is that, periodically, regional superintendents ought to do a study of the districts in their county. I remember testifying at the state board when they were talking about that. We should be really looking [at]: What appears to be the optimum size of a school district? And what is the most efficient district? We were looking, and I think people have continued to look at some of those things, about matching up operating expense with test scores, where we could really look at the test scores of various districts and district size and then look at the operating expense.

We were looking there, over the years; we were looking at that in relationship to, Where are those school districts that are really efficient? They're really efficient [when]: They've got good high test scores, and yet they have an operating expense which is not as high as many districts in the state, and trying to answer the question, What is it? What is it that's going on at those districts, where they're able to do those, and they're able to get that good achievement, and yet they're not spending as much money doing it as some other people?

I think there was a feeling at looking at that, trying to find out and study that, find out why it is, that they're able to accomplish those things. That

does make sense. Whatever the model is, it might not work every place, but I know there's been various discussions—as you do—where people have talked a lot about those things like that.

But I really do believe that regional superintendents (clears throat) would be the people to begin to look at this and to do studies and find out if... If you want to get into this process of reorganization, you've got to be serious about it. You've got to put some resources into it and then, realistically look at it. The question came up, Can districts be too large? Is Chicago too large? Those questions always come up, as you get into these kinds of studies like this.

Pogue: Well, we've been very delighted to have you here, Dr. Jackson, to talk to us about school reorganization, your own involvement with it as both an administrator and later as a consultant and then your involvement with the recent merger with Virden and Girard. And as you said, it took over forty years to be a seed that developed into a tree. So, we do thank you for your time and being part of this project.

Jackson: Thanks, Phil. I enjoyed the opportunity.

(end of transcript)