

Interview with Roger Eddy

AI-A-L-2011-002

Interview # 1: January 14, 2011

Interviewer: Philip Pogue

COPYRIGHT

The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

Pogue: This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, *Agriculture in Illinois* project. My name is Philip Pogue, and I'll be interviewing Representative Roger Eddy today. It's January 14, 2011. Our topic will be school reorganization. So, we're happy to have Representative Eddy give us some time on this particular topic. First of all, Representative Eddy, what is your own legislative experience, and what districts do you represent?

Eddy: I've been in the General Assembly for eight years. Actually, just sworn in yesterday for my fifth term, which will be my ninth and tenth year of service. I represent the 109th Legislative District, which currently includes all or parts of eight counties in east central Illinois, part of Wabash County, all of Lawrence, all of Crawford, all of Clark, almost all of Edgar, all of Cumberland and parts of Effingham and Shelby County.

Pogue: What motivated you to serve in the General Assembly?



Representative Roger Eddy

Eddy: Well, I've been in education my entire life. I was a teacher and a principal and then became a superintendent. When a new map was drawn—due to census map drawing that took place, now almost ten years ago—the district looked such that I had an opportunity to come to the General Assembly and perhaps work on education issues that had bothered me for some years, and I'd been on a village board before. Also, had done some other public service and was encouraged by others. So, I decided that I would attempt to bring my background and experience in education to Springfield.

Pogue: What legislative committees do you currently serve on?

Eddy: Well, currently, I serve on the Elementary and Secondary Education Regular Committee, which is a public policy committee for elementary and secondary ed [education]. I also serve on the Elementary and Secondary Education Appropriations Committee, which is the committee that appropriates for elementary and secondary education in the state funds, and the revenue and finance committee. I also serve on the Computer Technology Committee in the House and the Education Reform Committees. So most of my committee assignments have to do with my education background.

Pogue: Would school reorganization fall under any of those committees?

Eddy: Yes, most efforts to change or to enhance public policy, related to reorganization of school districts, would come through the regular education committee, as a public policy issue, or, perhaps, reform committee, now that that's been formed.

Pogue: Outside of the General Assembly, what positions did, do you hold?

Eddy: I'm currently—and have been for the last fifteen years—school superintendent at Hutsonville, Illinois, which is a rural district, in Crawford County, of about four hundred students, pre-K through twelve.

Pogue: What kind of educational background do you have, and what positions have you held prior to your current one?

Eddy: I have a bachelor's degree in education from Northern Illinois University. I have a master's in education administration from Eastern Illinois University, and a specialist degree from Eastern Illinois University in education administration.

I was a teacher and a coach for seven years at Hutsonville. I was principal of the high school there for three years. Then I went Watseka, Illinois. I was principal at Watseka High School for five years, before returning to Hutsonville as superintendent, fifteen years ago. So, I have thirty years in education.

Pogue: As reported by the State Board of Education, there were one hundred and forty-one school mergers, between 1983 and 2010. From 1983 to '89, there were thirty-five, and then, from '90 to '99, there were sixty-six. And from 2000 to 2010, there were forty. Did that number surprise you and that the actual numbers have dropped in the last decade, at mergers?

Eddy: No, I think that those districts that really, for whatever reason, were either pushed into reorganization, because of finance or the size of the school, maybe becoming difficult to offer a wide variety of programs, those are fewer. At the least now, I think districts are trying to work together in a cooperative manner, rather than lose their schools.

So, I think that you're likely to see, without some type of forced reorganization, the same kind of trend for schools to try and find other ways to stay independent so that they can continue to have local control and alleviate the fear that, if the school leaves the community, the community might dry out.

Pogue: Of those hundred and forty-one mergers, sixty-six were annexations, fifty-five consolidations. Thirteen were deactivations; four were annexation conversions and one was unique in conversion, such as Illini West, or a hybrid, Flannigan-Cornell, or one co-op high school, Paris. Why do the two methods seem to be the most dominate ways to merge, annex or consolidate?

Eddy: Well, I think those two methods offer a path that can be—at least in the minds of school boards that are involved—participatory. There can be public hearings. People can be involved, and there can be a hope for a buy-in in the communities that are being affected.

The process that's involved in those types of consolidations require public hearings. They require input, and they allow for, I think, communities to voice their concerns in a manner that at least provides them some input. So, I think that's probably why those are the dominate methods.

Pogue: Back in 1985, a major school reform took place, and a number of the activities were such things as expanding the school calendar a few days, allowing districts to raise their rates, if they were unit districts, creating pre-kindergarten, at-risk programs, alternative education programs, the tech prep. Learning goals and state testing actually started to come in at that time.

Pulaski Day [recognition of Polish-born Revolutionary War officer, Casimir Pulaski] was even part of that 1985 reform, but one of the big items was school reorganization. There was to be countywide hearings of all the districts, and plans had to be held and put together and submitted to the State Board of Education. The goal was to create five hundred plus high school enrollment. That thing caused a lot of controversy. At that time, you were not

part of the legislature, but you were in the schools. What do you remember about 1985?

Eddy: Well, I was teaching at Hutsonville. Hutsonville is a small, rural school district that, obviously, didn't have five hundred students. So, it directly affected me and the concern as to whether or not I would continue to have a job. I think that similar concern in rural areas was common. So, that, along with the fervor over whether or not a community can continue to be vibrant and thrive, without having a school as a central part of that community, I think spawned a fear that put pressure on members of the General Assembly, so that that effort to force consolidation to a certain size was quickly met with a lot of resistance.

There are very few members of the General Assembly left from that time period, as you know. The ones that I have talked to, though, related stories of the pressure and the difficulty that this caused back home. Even at times when something makes sense and looks efficient and may be the best thing public policy-wise to do, once individuals go back home from the General Assembly and begin to find out what the locals think about this plan, sometimes their minds are changed. That's what happened in this case.

The other thing I think that happened was, a study that actually was used as a basis for this was attacked, and example after example of high performing, low cost per pupil schools were thrown in the face of that study. School districts that were not of five hundred, but were achieving very well and were doing it at a cost that was far less, than the amount per pupil average spending in the state, made their case.

Facts were presented, at least in some individual cases, belied the study. So, with the study being discounted and the pressure being applied, the push really just kind of lost its edge and, as you know, was done away with and became, again, not mandated, but more of a choice to pursue this type of thing.

Pogue: Although there've been talks of merging more districts—particularly by the newspapers, business groups—the whole idea that Illinois has a lot of taxing bodies and, even after the vote on the state income tax, the pundits were talking about Illinois having so many taxing districts that, when you add up the property tax, the state income tax, the local taxes, there's a push to reduce those.

What is the mood of the legislature, in lieu of what you talked about in 1985, for all these taxing bodies, let alone all the school districts? Is this something that they really look at or only look at when there's a significant issue coming up that leads to making changes?

Eddy: Well, I think there has to be a pressure point for something like this to be examined in the context of someone bringing forward legislation to force consolidation again, because you'll have the same kind of reaction. Reaction from small rural areas is going to be very, very intense, because they feel like, in some cases, they're big enough. Maybe, especially if you begin a size limitation. I know, in Jasper County, Illinois, they already have one high school in the entire county. That high school is, I believe, going to have fewer than four hundred students soon because of enrollment declines.

So, the question becomes, if you're going to begin to push a size—and the size is five hundred for a high school, for example—do you take two counties and put them together? Then you have transportation issues.

Someone also may then say, "Well, let's do a population density requirement that would allow an exemption in those cases." So, you get a whole bunch of hybrids from some original theory. Then, when you begin to talk about the dual districts in the state, K-8 and nine-twelve—where it might make sense to have one unit district that would be able to combine four or five, six elementary, K-8 districts into the nine-twelve that they already attend, upon completion of K-8—those local K-8s don't want to lose the control over the curriculum. They have a lot of pride in their school.

So, you run into the same problem, whether you're talking about rural school districts, with low population and low enrollments, or if you're talking, even in suburban areas where you have the dual districts, it's going to be a struggle for people to let go of their school district.

One of the other issues that's always a concern, you know, is the mascot. The school mascot seems to be one of the toughest animals to kill, in the entire world. They remember the football game, or they remember the state series that they attended, or they were able to compete in. Those things are dear to those communities, and giving them up is going to be difficult.

So, I think, when legislators start talking about theories, they may be able to, once again, on paper—what, twenty-five years later—think they're going to make a push. But I think, when they go back to their communities, in many cases, they're going to find the pressure to not pursue what may, in the minds of many, seem to be more efficient and better public policy.

Pogue: I think we've kind of touched on the question of the difficulties of having more mergers. Is there any other factor that you see that has presented some reasons for the difficulty of schools to get together?

Eddy: Well, just the emergence of other methods that school districts have adopted to deal with their low enrollments, for example, by combining with other schools close to them to offer courses to two or three schools or by sharing teachers. Some school districts have decided that, instead of hiring someone

just in their district, they'll share a foreign language teacher between two or three districts. They've found other ways to cope with their small enrollments.

So, I think about the emergence of cooperatives in different forms, the use of technology to provide, in some rural schools, classroom offerings that weren't available, the emergence of dual credit at local community colleges, where the local, small, rural school districts' curriculum can be enhanced by allowing those students to attend community college courses at a nearby community college. There just have been a number of advancements in different types of ways that, even if you're small, you can offer and expand your curriculum.

Pogue: What are some of the incentives that the General Assembly provides districts who are considering to merger?

Eddy: Well, the major one, I think, has to do with the fact that you will receive financially, for a period of years, an incentive equal to the amount that you would have received had you been separate districts. I think that's important because, especially in the case of teachers that maybe are going to lose their job because of some of these consolidations, they're held harmless for a while. But, beyond that, the efficiency incentive is probably the greater long-term, and that's not provided by the state.

That's provided by the combination of how these schools combine, save money in transportation, save money in personnel, eventually. Just because you get money for four years doesn't mean that you're going to be a solvent district, unless you actually implement, during that time, some of the efficiencies that come with the consolidation.

So, while the money is there and it's temporary, it has to be replaced with a long-term, solid financial footing. The other thing, of course, the state has done is, it's provided money for consolidation studies. I think that funding has helped. There are numerous studies taking place now, even, and there have been for years. So, I think that funding has helped, too.

Pogue: Why has school construction not been part of the equation, but in a kind of a separate category that schools are ranked, in order, although consolidation or reorganization is one of the priorities? It's not necessarily part of the incentive that you talked about.

Eddy: Well, I think we've missed an opportunity with that. It has been offered by several legislators, to enhance the match that the state puts into a consolidated district, if those districts were to consolidate. In other words, right now, the top amount that the state will provide for a local district is 75%. There's been talk of saying, "Well, if it's for consolidation, let's bump it to 85%, or let's just pay 100% of the cost of that building, as a carrot." Pretty consistently, I

think, the attitude has been, if we wait long enough, they're going to consolidate, and we don't have to do that. We don't have to use that money that way.

But I'll tell you, more cases than not, what happened is those school districts build three schools in small rural areas, where they might have built one. The other thing that happens is, when two districts combine, one may have a grant index that would provide them 75% of the cost, while another part that's coming in may have a grant index that they were only going to get 40%, just based on their EAV (equalized assessed value) per pupil, the wealth of the district.

I've introduced three General Assemblies in a row, a bill that would just simply allow for the higher of those two grant indexes to prevail, so that individual tax payers in one district wouldn't be punished by having a blended or lower match, which means more money would have to be bonded. On all occasions, the speaker has rejected the notion, saying there are enough incentives for consolidation. I disagree with that, obviously, and I'll continue to pursue that, because I think that could be something that would make a difference in some cases.

Now, we had to deal with it for co-ops. We did it in the last couple of years, because we had a cooperative in Paris, Illinois, a cooperative district, that was due to come up for school construction money. And there really wasn't a methodology to calculate the grant. So, I did pass legislation that allows you to blend the two, not get the higher, but to at least blend them. That's helping in that case. I think the bottom line, though, is that, my personal opinion, if you incentivize that a little more, you would see a lot more consolidations.

Pogue: Public Act 94-1019 was approved in July of 2006. Will there be any new movements in the General Assembly on additional legislation tied to school reorganization?

Eddy: You know, I would not be surprised to see something. The mood seems right, because we are in very difficult financial straits in the state, even with the income tax that passed this past week, an historic increase. There are not going to be a lot more monies for schools. They're talking about just being able to pay schools what they owe them and kind of stop the red ink. So, there are going to be a lot of school districts that are going to face some very, very difficult financial times, and we continue to see a decline in enrollment in rural school districts. We also continue to see the public outcry over spending by the government. That will trickle down to the local level, so there might be more pressure.

Now, along with that, then, if we were to provide some incentives and look at maybe even removing some obstacles—such as the one I just

mentioned, related to not having a penalty for districts to get school construction money, by allowing the higher of two grant indexes, for example—I think we can do some things. I think it will be very difficult to force, still. But there could also be just the reality of the financial straits that the state is in and the lack of increases in general state aid or foundation level forcing districts into looking again at some kind of reorganization.

Pogue: Could you briefly explain the various ways school can reorganize?

Eddy: Well, I can take a stab at it. I mean, deactivation is simply, the school district board of education votes to deactivate the school, and then they attend another school district, pay tuition, and they could reactivate in that case. So, it's not necessarily a total dissolution of the district.

In a cooperative high school situation, there's a new board formed between the cooperating districts that governs that new high school, such as the case in Paris. The two unit districts remain.

They just have created kind of a third entity. That's the cooperative high school. The idea is to allow the independence of those two unit districts at the K-8 level, while combining for the high school. That can be between more than just two schools or two unit districts. So far, there's just been a couple of attempts at that, but that seems to be something others are looking at.

In a detachment or an annexation situation, the regional board of school trustees gets involved. That board works under the direction of the regional superintendent of schools. They decide whether a certain portion of an existing school district, a territory, would be taken and annexed to another school district. Again, those types of actions go through the regional board of school trustees and are to be for the best interests of the students and [are] oftentimes very controversial, as you can imagine.

Dissolution annexation is where you have a district dissolve and then annex to another school district. That, again, takes action by the regional board of school trustees to make those decisions. That board is under some pressure again, depending on whether the territory coming in happens to have some low enrollment and brings costs to the district having to accept that annexation or if it happens to be some land that is pretty wealthy. I mean, maybe it's good farmland that needs to be annexed in to help the EAV of a school district for tax purposes. So, those get to be a little bit controversial.

A high school unit conversion is when districts convert into a unit, from a high school only district and a unit district consolidation. We talk about two separate districts—a K-8 and a 9-12 or a number of K-8 districts and a 9-12—converting into one unit school district that would be K-12. The

combined school district is one where there are various combinations and different lines in several different dual districts. That one gets real complicated, because sometimes, even within an existing high school district, there are overlaps of K-8 districts. So, not everything's neat. Some kids in a K-8 go to one high school district and some go to another high school district. So, you just bring more people to the table, and there's more cooks in the kitchen.

And then, [there's] the multi-unit conversion. Again, this is a new one, because it has to deal with the fact that we have so many types of unit configurations anymore. Some of the methods have never been used, because they are so unique. But, they were created, I think, just simply, if some unique combination of school districts decided they wanted to try and combine for efficiency or other reasons, that they could [do so], without further legislative action.

I think, when they sat down and tried to figure this out, they tried to figure out what all of the different combinations of schools and types of lines we have, how we could accommodate all of them. There simply hasn't been movement in some of those combinations to attempt to reorganize.

Pogue: Since some of them are fairly new and date back, I think, to 2006, who are the people that kind of originated the idea? Did that come from local districts or the State Board of Education or members of the General Assembly?

Eddy: Well, I think all of that. I think the State Board of Education in '06, the person over at the governor's office, a gentleman named Elliott Regenstein, was involved with pushing this, along with some others who have been involved with reorganization. I know Dr. Bill Phillips was involved in some of the talks leading up to that, and that came as a result of issues that, I think, emerged during some of the reorganizations.

These things happened that seemed to be impediments. So, although there was the idea in '06 that we were going to try to make it easier, or remove some of the obstacles, maybe those weren't really the obstacles. Maybe those were the things being used as excuses, and the real obstacles were the ones I talked about earlier, and that's, people simply wanted to keep their school. So, I think those ideas came from various directions.

Pogue: What is the process used by the General Assembly to enact school reorganization legislation? What steps do they go through? What committees oversee it?

Eddy: Well, someone would have to introduce legislation, by having it drafted by the Legislative Research Bureau. Whatever the idea is...let's say, if somebody wanted to force reorganization. Let's say we wanted to no longer have dual districts, and everybody had to be a K-12 district. That would be put into draft

language by the Legislative Research Bureau, introduced as a bill and likely be assigned to the Education Committee for a hearing. Hearings would take place. People would make their case on both sides of that issue. If it was successful and successfully made it out of the House, it would start all over again in the Senate, with their Education Committee and go through the same process, having to pass the House and the Senate. Then the governor would have to sign it.

So, a pretty lengthy process, with a lot of open public input. I would guess, depending on how forceful the language was, there would be a reaction.

Pogue: Was there much reaction to the latest one, back in 2006?

Eddy: No, there wasn't, because it didn't force anything. Again, it nibbled around the edges, I think, might be a way to put it. Those involved with reorganization identified some of the concerns that districts they had worked with in the studies were stating. Some of them were minor. They thought—again, in an attempt to remove what were minor obstacles—a law was passed, hoping that those were the reasons, maybe, that people weren't reorganizing.

But I think we found out that the reasons are so much deeper, and that maybe those were excuses. Once those excuses were removed, we got back to the original mascot, local control issue. So, there are those who believe that, without some real forced mandates by the General Assembly, a lot of consolidation will never take place. They're probably right.

The other thing that forces it, of course, is finance, not having money and not having enrollment. We know that hold harmless, for example, was a funding formula that allowed school districts, even though they had declining enrollments, to continue to receive the same amount of money that they had the year before. Now, in the last couple of years, because of finances, hold harmless has gone away. So, school districts aren't being held harmless. That, as much as anything, might force districts to financially consider reorganization again, because their declining enrollment will now affect the general state aid, because they will not receive that additional payment.

Pogue: Are there key leaders of the General Assembly in school reorganization legislation or also State Board of Education experts that are counted on for discussion? When we had school finance issues, you could always name one or two or three key people, whether they were from Illinois State University or champions in the General Assembly. Is there anything like that for school reorganization?

Eddy: Well, there are people that have been involved in discussions of school reorganization for quite some time now. [In] the governor's office, right now, I would say Julie Smith probably would be someone who would be the lead,

the point person, on any discussions out of the governor's office, for any mandated reorganization.

In the General Assembly itself, you'd certainly see Jerry Mitchell—who was a former superintendent—become involved very, very quickly. There are individuals like Bob Pritchard, who is the chair of the education caucus in the House, a group of individuals who meet and talk about education legislation. Certainly, I would imagine I would have some involvement in those discussions, if they came forward. And you have gentlemen, like Dr. Bill Phillips, out at University of Illinois-Springfield, who has been involved in reorganization for a long time. So, there are individuals. I think, over at the State Board of Education, this is a topic that's come up recently, as far as, maybe, even an initiative or at least trying to explore how this can be promoted.

Chris Koch, who is the state superintendent, would likely be someone who has the best handle on it. Darin Reesburg, who is their lead counsel over there, I'm certain has had some experience with this. From a school construction standpoint, Debbie Vespa, has dealt with school construction and, in a number of cases, seen multiple buildings built in counties, instead of one. So, I think those are some of the people that would be immediately brought in.

Pogue: Have there been any outside experts, in addition to the people that you've listed here, who provide information on school reorganization, such as people from outside the state?

Eddy: Well, there are public policy institutes that continue to study this and provide us some information. The Illinois Policy Institute¹ has provided some. There was a commission last year that was set up to make recommendations on government efficiencies that studied this, as part of their recommendations to the governor's office.

But, I think, again, this is the type of thing that has to be an initiative of an administration or a caucus, and there has to be real movement toward some type of really strong language, if it's going to happen, because I don't think it's the kind of thing that's going to just materialize. There's going to have to be a significant force behind something like this.

Pogue: Well, Illinois, back in 1940, had over 11,000 districts. Right now it's roughly around 869. I think we've covered a lot of the reasons why it has been difficult to reduce the districts. We also have the unique dual unit high school set-up. Are there any other things that we need to talk about that tie in to this difficulty?

¹ The Illinois Policy Institute is a nonpartisan, research organization, working to make Illinois first in economic outlook and job creation. <http://www.illinoispolicy.org/about-us/> (accessed April 11, 2014)

Eddy: I really do think it gets back to those real pertinent questions about local control and individuals having that ownership in their school and not wanting to let it go.

Pogue: Your own district has undertaken a school reorganization study. Who did that study, and was it helpful?

Eddy: Well, the study was paid for by the state, actually, a large part of it. It cost a little bit more than the funding we received. But, it was done by the consulting and research group, and it was headed by Dr. Bill Phillips out at University of Illinois-Springfield. Scott Day, Charlie Rohn, from Eastern Illinois University, was part of that team, as well, and John Dee was involved in that. The result was a very, very good document that provided us with information related to the two school districts that both boards could use to determine whether or not we should pursue some type of reorganization, if it made sense, if there were efficiencies, not just in terms of efficiencies in finances, but what would this combination of these districts mean to kids and their education and their future?

The two boards, in this case, were of the mind that it was worth pursuing, at least to the point of bringing the question to the voters, that there were enough positives involved. So, a committee of ten was formed. We had the hearings, and the question was put on the ballot. We got quite a long way with this, actually. The voters in my school district approved the measure. The voters in the Palestine School District did not.

As you know, in that kind of a case, both districts separately, a majority has to vote for it. Probably the biggest problem was, at the time, there was a school construction grant that each district held. Hutsonville had a school construction grant, and Palestine had a construction grant. It wasn't the difference in grant indexes, at the time, though. It was that there was no flexibility for us, at that late date, to change our application to build a high school for both districts, and our school district was ahead of Palestine in the school construction, the year we were going to get the money. It was towards the end of the capital that was available.

So, our board had to make a decision as to whether or not they wanted to take a chance and submit a new application, thereby giving up a bird in the hand, the money that they had an entitlement for. So, they made the decision that we can't do that. We've been in need of a school here, and we're going to build it here. Well, because the school was going to be built in Hutsonville, instead of at some location between the two communities—maybe even closer to a community college that exists down there at Lincoln Trail—I think that the individual citizens of Palestine School District voted it down, because the location of the high school was going to be in Hutsonville.

I understand that. If there would have been that flexibility—and there was not that flexibility in the law for the site to be changed or for the same application to be used and amended, rather than to have to reapply—I think it would have had a better chance of passing, if it was built somewhere other than Hutsonville. Now I say that, as a superintendent of Hutsonville. We have a new school, a new high school in our district, because our grant did come through. We built [it], and it's been terrific for our students.

Palestine later built a new K-8 school, so the construction grant was good for both. But, I think that was a case that there just wasn't the flexibility in the public policy that would allow us to enhance that possibility on the ballot. Now, there are those who say it wouldn't have passed anyway, that the Palestine Pioneers versus the Hutsonville Tigers athletic history and the mascot issue would have caused it. But, I don't believe that's true, only because, shortly after that we co-op all sports, in football, basketball, baseball, all sports, boys and girls, we co-op those sports. So, I don't think it's a mascot in our situation, but it could be the concern of two small communities losing their identity and one of them being able to keep it by having the high school in it, while the other one wouldn't.

If we could have built that out in the middle of the two districts, somewhere near Lincoln Trail College, there might have been a lot more support for it from the Palestine community.

Pogue: From the study itself, what are the key factors that you think are the most important as districts look at reorganization?

Eddy: Well, I think there are two basic factors. One, is this going to be better for our kids? Are we going to be able to provide them, especially at the high school level, where there are small class sizes, maybe, and the offerings aren't quite as wide as they might be in a larger school. Are we going to do something better for our kids? Is it going to be easier to transport them? Is it going to be more convenient for parents? As far as the kids, are we going to have a better offering?

The second thing has to do with finance. Are we going to be able to offer that improved educational program and quality at an improved cost? I think, really, if the answer in both those cases, both of those situations, is yes, it's going to be less money, and we're going to have a better product, and we're going to have a better offering for our kids.

That's, after you do the study, you decide if the answer to those two questions are yes. People have a right to decide, and that's when you go to the referendum and ask them whether you [would] like to save money and have a better product. And you have a series of public hearings on that. At the end of the day, people are convinced or not convinced, I think, as to whether or not

you're offering them improvement in educational opportunities and a better quality, at a savings.

I think you can have one without the other. I think, if you're able to at the same amount of money, even, enhance the educational quality, I think most people are going to go for it. If all of the other factors can kind of be mitigated, this idea of community and whether we're losing local control and all those other factors. But I think those are the two main areas that are considered.

Pogue: In kind of a closing for our interview today, are there any current proposals for school reorganization that are now being considered by the General Assembly?

Eddy: I'm not aware of any. However, this—the day we're happening to talk—is the first day that bills are being recorded for the Ninety-Seventh General Assembly. At last count, I think there were 161 bills introduced. There will be hundreds more introduced in the next couple of weeks, at the beginning.

And there very well could be some legislation introduced, because of the financial situation that we're in and because of the kind of cry out for less cost, less government, you know, maybe the types of things that, in other states, have led to even county and township governments being combined, because of all of these different governments and bureaucracies and the cost that's involved.

Today, as everyone knows, Illinois' fiscal condition is in dire straits, so I would not be surprised if we do see some efforts—maybe even by the State Board of Education, maybe even as a governor's agenda—to push some reorganization reforms this year.

Pogue: Well, we want to thank Representative Eddy for his time today and talking to us about school reorganization and the types of ways schools can merge and for giving us a better explanation of how that came about in the General Assembly. So, we want to thank Representative Eddy for his time today.

Eddy: A pleasure.

(end of interview session #1)

Interview with Roger Eddy

AI-A-L-2012-013

Interview # 2: April 25, 2012

Interviewer: Philip Pogue

COPYRIGHT

The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. “Fair use” criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

Pogue: It’s April 25th. My name is Philip Pogue. We’re here in Springfield, Illinois, and we’re talking to Roger Eddy, as a follow-up regarding the Classrooms First Commission. Mr. Eddy had been a state representative when this started. He’s currently superintendent at Hutsonville and also has been named the executive director of the Illinois Association of School Boards, which would be beginning this summer. So, we want to thank him again for participating in our *school reorganization* oral history project. At this time, do you feel that the Classrooms First Commission met the objectives of House Bill 1216?

Eddy: Well, I think the commission’s in the process and has paid close attention to the objectives and the purpose. Obviously, the objective of [House Bill] 1216, in a political nature, was to deflect some of the criticism and really dismissal of the governor’s original statement, back in a speech where he said there should be three hundred school districts in the state. So, as a tool to deflect some of that political pressure, it’s worked really, really well.

Now, as far as the state objectives, I think Lieutenant Governor Simon [Sheila Simon] and her staff did a good job of keeping on the task of making sure that the commission’s recommendations focused on reducing the money spent on duplication of efforts. There certainly was a specific effort to do that. Improving the education of students by having obstacles removed is one that’s a little ambiguous, but I think some of the report—and certainly some of the

conversations and the individuals who were invited in to testify—addressed that.

Lowering the property tax burden, as a specific recommendation, I think, was something that generally was covered. However, that mostly had to do, in my view, with the idea that, if you took a dual district, an elementary and a high school district, and stair step down—allowed for stair stepping down the combined tax rate, over the period of years—that was a portion of, I think, the report, that comes as close as anything to directly addressing that recommendation.

The net cost savings of realignment is something that they're still working on. I think most of the research that we saw, during the meetings of the commission, showed that reorganizations, by and large, really haven't saved money, that in many, many cases reorganizations have resulted in added cost. So, that was a tough one.

In providing input to districts on reorganization, I think that's ongoing and that, maybe, some of the studies that are going to be required as part of the recommendations will surface that. So, generally, I think the commission stayed on target, and the recommendations were adhered to that were originally set out in the legislation.

Pogue: Now, you were on the commission as a state legislator. How did that get established?

Eddy: Well, the minority leader of the House, Tom Cross, made the appointment. He made the appointment by sending a letter to the commission, to Lieutenant Governor Simon, after her request was made, naming me as that member.

Pogue: Were there any additions to your objectives on the commission, as compared to the actual legislation?

Eddy: Well, I think, because the House Bill 1216 was broad and the recommendations were contained within a broad area, probably nothing specifically that you could say went outside the parameters, because they were broad to begin with. I mean, when you talk about things like providing recommendations as to what the net cost savings of realignment is in the state, that takes in just about anything you might talk about that has to do with cost.

A lot of districts share resources now. So, we did a lot of talk about shared resources. Well, certainly, anything specific in there is covered by the broad nature of 1216, which, I think, the intent was to make it pretty all-encompassing. I think the commission worked within those broad parameters without necessarily going outside. I can't think of anything that was done outside of the scope of what was accomplished.

Probably the biggest thing was the fact that the name was changed. The Classrooms First Commission became a name, where the legislation basically talked about consolidation. Whenever you start getting into reorganization and consolidation, then I think the School District Realignment and Consolidation Commission was something that offended people, right off the bat, because it assumed consolidation. I think Lieutenant Governor Simon very deftly changed that to the Classrooms First Commission. So, maybe that's the one thing (chuckle) that was the biggest difference between what the legislation said and what we actually did.

Pogue: The fall hearings you had—you had four—representing the various sections of the state, Carterville, Moline, Normal and Des Plaines. What did you learn from those hearings, and were there noticeable differences in the tone at those hearings?

Eddy: Well, I didn't attend all four. I think the way it was set up, the staff wanted to make sure that you got to a couple of those. I went north and south. I went to the one in Carterville, early on, and I attended the one in Des Plaines. There were common themes there.

I mean, the common theme was the state really didn't need to force any type of reorganization, as the people locally had a better idea of what was best, as far as delivering educational services to children, especially, some type of very arbitrary line drawing done by counties and/or other types of state measured methodology. So, that was clear.

The other thing, I think, was clear was—especially north to south—that, obviously, in the Des Plaines area, the property wealth is considerably more than it is in the rural parts of Illinois, and in areas where a large percentage of the expenses related to educating students came from local taxpayers, they were even less interested in the state telling them what to do.

Now, in areas of the state where they become reliant on state resources, there wasn't quite the same tone, related to the funding part, because they couldn't really make the claim, well, you're not giving us money; how can you tell us what we're doing? So, there was that difference geographically, but there was a tone that, in general, they didn't want the state coming in and making decisions that had to do with delivering education services to their kids.

Pogue: Did you feel the turnout at the public hearings was what the commission expected?

Eddy: Turnout was good. I mean, the turnout was really good. I know, when the one in Carterville, which was the original one, had, oh, I don't know if there were...might have been a hundred people in the audience there. In Des

Plaines, it was just as good. So, yeah, I think the response was very good, by the public.

Pogue: Was the Des Plaines one where the discussion on dual districts was more focused?

Eddy: Uh huh, there was a little more focus there; although, down in southern Illinois, there, especially around the Mt. Vernon area, there are multiple dual districts, so it was brought up there. But, certainly in the suburban area, there was a concentration on that. I mean, it was part more of the agenda item and brought up, and there were individuals there to speak directly to that issue.

Pogue: Were there any unique topics that were brought up that were a surprise to the commission members?

Eddy: Well, you know, I've been involved in reorganization consolidation discussions and task forces for twenty years, so there wasn't anything to me that was new. I think the fact that there's a school construction program and resources available for school districts related to that—I know, down at the hearing at Carterville, Zeigler-Royalton and Christopher, the superintendent from those districts made it a point to discuss the pending possibility that school construction grant money was going to be forthcoming and that, perhaps, there should be some connection between reorganization and consolidation and funding those grants.

But no, other than that, to me there really weren't any, maybe to some commission members who haven't been around it a while. But, like I said, I've been toying with this for a lot of years, so no big surprises.

Pogue: The public also had the opportunity for online survey responses. Were there any interesting ones that came up through that source?

Eddy: There were a lot of online suggestions, and many of those suggestions had to do with efficiencies and how school districts might be able to share. There were obviously comments made about small districts and the need to shut small, declining enrollment districts down.

There were even comments related to county schools on those online surveys and they varied, but a lot of good input about shared services, and really, superintendents and others around the state, writing in and talking about efficiencies that were already occurring. They wanted to share those efficiencies. So, I think the response to the online [survey] was very good.

Pogue: The study groups were formed after the public hearings. You had educational shared efficiency, operational shared efficiency, within district efficiency and realignment. How did those four come to be?

Eddy: Well, I think Lieutenant Governor Simon, as the chair, decided that, based on House Bill 1216, that these would be the four areas that we would kind of funnel recommendations through, with focus on those areas that came out of the legislation.

The efficiency part...I mean, when you go back to the text of the House bill and you look at what the charge to the commission was, reducing money spent on duplication of efforts, improving education by removing obstacles, a lot had to do with efficiency and cost and then, of course, providing recommendations about savings. That had to do with efficiency and cost. So, it seemed natural that there would be smaller study groups that would discuss that issue.

Of course, the realignment one had to do with the legislation's need, or the need the legislation, placed on the committee, to discuss reorganization, specifically, and how, what we might recommend, as far as "realignment" of districts. Yeah, they make sense.

Pogue: How did the educational shared efficiency and operational shared efficiency differ in focus?

Eddy: Well, I think the educational shared efficiency had a lot of technology components that were contained within it. They talked about how school districts might be able to benefit from tie-in networks or Skype or other type of ways to share education efficiencies.

Now, operational maybe had to do with sharing buses, sharing food service, sharing of, really, special education, vocational education and larger programs. So, the operational part probably centered more around, maybe even, administration, sharing administrative duties, perhaps. One of the governor's targets seemed to be the number of administrators, especially, maybe, trying to share things like accounting programs or human resources, those types of things. So, operational had to do with those types of operations you might recognize in school districts carrying out. The educational one had to do with educational programs. Now, I did not serve on either one of those.

Pogue: Now, within district efficiency, when I looked at the members who were on that committee, they appear to represent larger school districts. Is that where that issue...?

Eddy: I think it primarily had to do with large organizations or large school districts and whether or not, because of their size, there were some inefficiencies that could be identified. So, I think you're absolutely right. I think it had to do with a size issue and how we might look at more efficiencies in those larger districts.

Pogue: How did people get on the various work groups?

Eddy: I had a call from Lieutenant Governor Simon. I don't know if that was common. She called and asked me if I would serve on the realignment committee. So, my guess is that, between her staff and her suggestions, someone's background maybe, she looked at that and just made the request herself.

Pogue: And then, how were chairs determined?

Eddy: I think it was the same way. I mean, I was not a chair of one of those, so she just asked if I would serve on it. I think it was Lieutenant Governor Simon's decision.

Pogue: What were some of the major recommendations that each of the sub-groups came up with that's now part of the draft resolution?

Eddy: Well, you know, some of them, I'm not as familiar as I am with others. The realignment recommendations had to do with looking at school districts, in terms of enrollment, for example, in terms of their academic success and making some type of statements or recommendations as to how districts, for example, with low enrollments, especially historical trended low enrollments, in the future might, or maybe, should look at whether or not other options exist for the future, so that, as they decline in enrollment, as the numbers go down, they might look at other potentials.

We also looked at the incentives that exist today, and we talked about which of those incentives make sense, which of those incentives might be reworked to offer, perhaps, a greater interest in, I guess, attracting districts to reorganize. So, we talked about things like transportation incentives. Maybe not traditionally, there's been the difference in pay, the salaries, and whether or not that continues to be something we can support. Most commission members thought probably not, that that money could be used in different ways.

Also, whether or not traditional contiguous boundary requirements should be part of ongoing reorganization law, or if we should allow districts that are non-contiguous to look at reorganizing in certain situations. So, I think we looked over all of the perceived obstacles.

We talked about the fact that, for example, with reorganization that involves school construction, maybe there should be some type of pilot project or pool of money established, so that districts would have an incentive to reorganize, if a building were going to be provided at a higher grant index, for example.

We looked at disincentives. Another good example is the fact that dual districts' tax rate, combined, is higher than what a unit district would be able to levy in the same geographic area, if the two school districts were to combine, and is there a way to address that? That's a realignment obstacle, and, again, that one allowed us to address, in the study, the issue related to tax reduction, because if you add the two up, it's obviously greater than the cap for a unit district to levy. So, we talked about taking away the disincentive, at least initially, by allowing that to stair step down. So, I think just about everything we talked about was in there.

Now, maybe a little stronger than I had anticipated, and I wasn't on the commission at the very end, but throughout, we were concerned about this idea that enrollment and some measure of student achievement might result in a combined score or ranking that would result in the recommendation that a school district explore reorganization.

I was a little concerned about the enrollment and academic performance, which was measured on one test, given one day a year, being indicators for reorganization. I was pretty vocal about that. Financial indicators are financial indicators, whether a school district is doing well or is not doing well. Some of the calculations that were being included had to do with the EAV (equalized assessed value) per pupil, declining EAV, property wealth versus non-property wealth. I had always just felt like we have a ranking in place, related to a school district's financial status, and if a district was on a financial watch or early warning, that might be an indicator that they should look at options available, because of financial issues. I never really bought into the theory that, because a school didn't AYP (adequate yearly progress) or didn't do certain [things] or score a certain amount on a test, given one day a year, that that should be an academic indicator. I thought it should be much broader.

But what resulted, as far as a recommendation, had to do with more of an emphasis on population of a county or an enrollment of school districts in a county than, I think, it should have, especially in large geographic areas, where they're densely populated.

I think we should always have focused on two things. One is, whether or not the students in a district are getting a quality education in a number of measures, not one test, one day a year. I don't think that measures the quality of an education that the students get. The other is whether or not districts financially are able to provide—through a combination of property taxes, local money, state money and federal money—the resources necessary to provide that education. Those, to me, are the two issues. The enrollment issue will eventually affect the financial issue.

The commission looked at a three-year average and maybe tried to be a little proactive, as to trying to determine...well, maybe this district's not in financial jeopardy now, but, because of these enrollment numbers, they're going to be, and they should, maybe, look at it.

So, I think that, overall, the depth and breadth of the examination was pretty good, at least with the realignment group. It brought us to some conclusions, too, that there really isn't an arbitrary measure that you can come up with and I think always pointed back to my original thought. That is, communities know. From a fiscal and an academic standpoint, those two things combine when it's time to explore reorganization opportunities.

Pogue: Were you present when the recommendations from your group were then sent to the full group?

Eddy: No, no. I was in the forming of them, and I saw drafts of the recommendations, and, as I mentioned, I was a little surprised, only in that some of the recommendations centered around enrollment a little more than I thought they probably were going to. Quality seemed to me to be more important. But it didn't end up being that way in the final report.

Pogue: Now one question dealing with [an issue] that made the newspapers, is that sixteen counties were listed as maybe being targets for future studies.

Eddy: Requiring study.

Pogue: Requiring study.

Eddy: Right.

Pogue: I had a question because one county I was in, Bond, which is very small, was not listed, and Lee, another county that I was in and has Dixon, is listed. So how did all that come about?

Eddy: Well, if I remember correctly, it had to do with a total number of students enrolled in those areas, based on some type of geographic spread, as well as trend of enrollment and trend of population. So, maybe Bond has a trend that is trending up, and maybe Lee County is trending down, enrollment-wise. That weighting factor may have thrown—even though they may have more numbers now—the trend could have caused it to be.

Again, I think if we're going to begin to look at arbitrary numbers as recommendations, based on population enrollment, we're missing the point. I think there are two indicators, and there always have been two indicators that should point to whether or not a reorganization research and study should take place. I'm not even sure they should be forced.

We have a system in place, where many districts have used—now they haven't done it on a county basis, like this recommendation is—used the services of universities and others, who provide consolidation studies. I think that's the way to go.

But it should be based on two major factors. One is fiscal. If a school district is providing students an education at a cost that is less than the average cost of providing a student education in the state, or average, or even slightly above average, and they're doing it in a quality manner, based on a number of measures, leave them alone. The state should not, in my view, be involved in the local decision and forcing any decision or even research if people in a community are receiving, or the kids receive, a quality education at a fiscally sound cost. Those should be the two indicators.

Pogue: Were there any interesting ones from the other sub-groups, as you looked at them, that you were not there when it was actually approved, that you find most interesting?

Eddy: Well, one of the things we found out, as we heard testimony, there are a lot of shared efficiencies already in school districts. A lot of things are going on. So, the idea that school districts should share resources is something that I think commission members learned about from superintendents and others who came in and provided us with.

Now, the one thing I think that's real valuable is setting up a way to share those efficiencies across districts and especially the ideas, things that are happening in some areas, where that could be replicated in other areas, related to professional development or, well, just a number of shared services. Technology, lots of districts have become very, very resourceful, working with each other around the state. We just need to share those successes.

Pogue: As far as the size of the commission, as the bill was amended, it led to more people being put onto the commission. Did you feel that the commission size was appropriate, and was the membership well balanced?

Eddy: I thought the size was fine. I also thought Lieutenant Governor Simon's real commitment to making sure that others had a chance to speak, not just commission members, was important, too, because audience members were provided the opportunity for input, too. So, I think, the more input you have, especially related to this subject, the better off you are. So, yeah, I thought it was fine.

Pogue: You mentioned the Lieutenant Governor was critical for selection, as well as the operation of the commission. What other roles did the Lieutenant Governor play?

Eddy: Well, she led the discussion, and certainly would, along with the other members, make inquiries, related to the testimony. I think [she] provided direction and leadership and navigated the commission—at least at the very start—away from public criticism and kind of defined it as something that was existing, for the interest of classrooms and kids and not political reasons and that the purpose of the commission was not to force anything, but to listen. I think she did a very good job of all those things.

Pogue: What role did the State Board of Education play?

Eddy: They facilitated a lot of the discussion. They provided us with lots of data. For example, when we were looking at enrollment trends in school districts, we were looking at EAV per pupil or trying to determine if there was any type of a quantified formula that you could come up with. They provided spreadsheets and a lot of technical support.

Linda Riley Mitchell, the CFO [chief financial officer] over there, Deb Vespa... Well, I'd leave somebody out if I tried to list them all, but they were always available to answer questions, and their staff was very hospitable and accommodating

Pogue: Were there any other studies or other individuals that were very helpful to the commission?

Eddy: Well, several of us had served on other commissions and task forces on consolidation. Bill Philips, UIS [University of Illinois-Springfield] professor, who also, along with Scott Day and, really, some other professors or education reorganization folks around the state that have actually done studies, were vital.

Steve Webb, a rural superintendent from down in southern Illinois, at Goreville, who's also the president of the Small Rural School Association, brought a very, very important perspective to the commission. Yeah, people with experience and practical knowledge, like Bill and Steve, were very valuable.

Pogue: The commission came out of the statements made by Governor Quinn that the state would save a great amount of money by reducing the number of districts by two-thirds, primarily by reducing administrative costs. The commission, I think, in the fall, responded with how much it actually would be a cost increase, when you throw in all the incentive programs. How did that releasing of the figures impact the role of the commission?

Eddy: Well, I think the reality of that was known, not the number, but the general reality that reorganizations don't save money, something we heard time after

time, even from those who have been through reorganizations, successful reorganizations. They don't save money.

The other theme was, look, if you take a district that's in financially good shape, and you combine it with another district that's in financially good shape, because of the way the formula works, you're going to have a district that's in financially good shape. If you take two school districts that are struggling financially, and you put them together, it does not solve their financial problems.

So, I think, early on and certainly throughout the commission hearings, the idea that reorganization is a means to save money was something that was just a fallacy from the beginning. Now, the governor, to his credit, I think his comments had more to do with administrative costs and maybe, specifically, there could be some administrative savings. He's probably not wrong about that, necessarily.

But, to look at overall it could save that kind of money and, again, remember, his comments that savings wouldn't be to the state; it would be to the local districts. So, the State of Illinois, likely, wasn't going to save money. Because of incentive costs, it became pretty apparent, pretty quickly, the state couldn't afford that kind of widespread consolidation or reorganization.

Pogue: One of the roles of the commission was to look, I guess, at the state incentives. There were some new proposals presented. Could you explain what those were?

Eddy: Well, I think, generally, it was the idea that we should move away from the types of incentives that drive cost that, maybe, can't be sustained. For example, if you provided incentive, like we do now, for the highest of the two salaries, and you bring an elementary district together with a high school district, and high school teachers are paid significantly more, in most cases, than the elementary district, you might receive that money for four years, but you're placing those elementary teachers on a higher salary schedule forever. So, four years down the road, that incentive really has only caused one thing and that is for that new district to adopt a higher salary schedule.

So, instead, the commission thought, well, why don't we get away from that mindset and talk about the things that might cost districts money, when they reorganize. First of all, a reorganized district probably is one that should negotiate a new salary schedule and not just go to the higher of two.

Now, in those dual district situations, as you can imagine, those who are at the higher salary schedule are certainly not going to be interested in negotiating down, so that's going to be problematic, in and of itself.

But what should the state's role be in that? Should the state pay for that as an incentive to reorganize only for four years, or should they provide other types of incentives that can be used for some of the true costs of reorganizing, maybe curricular costs, like textbooks to purchase, you know, a common curriculum to pay for some transportation, initial transportation costs that might come out.

So that was the idea behind it was to think a little more creatively about what the true costs are and allow for districts, especially, to use the money in a way they think is best, a more locally-decided way, rather than prescribed.

Pogue: Would that mean that there might be less incentives to create unit districts in wealthier areas?

Eddy: Well, there's at least two problematic issues, related to creating unit districts out of dual districts in wealthy areas. One is certainly the salary schedule difference. You have to deal with that at some point or another, even if you're not going to deal with it by providing an incentive for the difference. That's a tough one.

The other one is the separate levy authority for a grade school district and a high school district. That, added together, is higher than the limit available, allowable for a unit district, and the districts that you are reorganizing have gotten used to existing on the combined amount of money, whether it's to support salaries or to support buildings and grounds or programs or whatever.

So, if you're going to, even over a period of time, stair step that down at some point or another, decisions are going to have to be made, and districts are going to have to operate on less money locally. Well, the way the formula works, if their primary method of funding is local money, it's going to be difficult for the state in any way to make up the difference, because there's not a funding mechanism that takes into account that lack of access to the local property wealth. So, yeah, it's very problematic, and there aren't any easy solutions for those types of things.

Pogue: At the same time the commission was doing its work, in the fall, legislative leaders were also making news by talking about local districts picking up more of the pension payments. They were losing money to pay for regional offices through that corporate personal property tax. The whole transportation fund was reduced, and the new formula was being considered. But, the net result was that the districts were losing funding for transportation. Did that have an effect on your commission work?

Eddy: Not directly, although I think that the general knowledge that funds are tight and things aren't going to get better very quickly was known, even to the extent that, if the state was going to try and provide these additional incentives, for example, or encourage consolidation with additional incentives, where would the money come from, when we can't fund the foundation level, for example, and when transportation was being cut?

Add to that, the idea that there's this potential shift, cost shift, to school districts and what the details of that might be, it was in everybody's mind, I believe, that there's no real connection between the savings that might take place through consolidation or reorganization and addressing these funding issues, because, as I mentioned earlier, it's not a widely-held belief that reorganization or consolidation saves money. So, you weren't going to address those funding issues with reorganizations, in those cases where you have districts that are struggling financially. They're going to struggle worse because of the lack of funds.

Pogue: Now, you were not on the commission on March 20, when the elections took place, or you were?

Eddy: I was.

Pogue: You were.

Eddy: So, the twenty-second, twenty-third, yeah.

Pogue: Did any of the discussion of the two referendums of consolidation—one in the western part of the state and the other in southern Illinois—that were soundly defeated, get brought up?

Eddy: Not in anything that I was involved in. I didn't hear anything about that.

Pogue: Did the commission look at the financial and academic stress of some of the largest school districts in the state and ever consider reducing their size?

Eddy: It was brought up that, if there's an optimal size, for example, isn't it better that we have smaller...maybe the efficiency is with smaller, or, at least, some medium size number, rather than these huge bureaucracies. And it wasn't, directly, in my experience, on the commission. It wasn't something that came up as often as these smaller districts or these dual districts needed to consolidate. Breaking up districts or forming smaller ones or numbers, even school within school concepts, wasn't anything that became a focus.

Pogue: We've talked a little bit about the school construction project, and there was, in the draft proposals, a pilot consideration. What was that about?

Eddy: Well, in many, many cases, it's been the experience of those that are involved in reorganization, especially, again, I mention Dr. Phillips and others. I have personal background experience with that, as well.

I ran a referendum for consolidation and reorganization at my school district, and I'm convinced that, if we could have relocated the building project we did in Hutsonville, between the two schools, through the school construction grant program, it would have made a huge difference. If there was a pot of money available that was specifically for co-op high schools or dual districts in rural areas, I believe that the building issue is one of the main issues, when school districts look at reorganization. Several of the other individuals, who had some experience with reorganization, felt the same way.

So, recommendation would be to provide a pool of money, and find out if it didn't attract the type of reorganization we envision it to attract. But we didn't want to mess with the program that was in place or displace any of the existing schools who were in the current school program. So, this would be new money, a new program. And, again, you get back to new money. Where are you going to get the money?

Pogue: What were the major obstacles that the commission learned or tried to address, that deal with reorganization, both at the local, state or perhaps some other reason?

Eddy: Well, you always have the obstacle of—and we heard about it over and over and over—tradition, and the mascot and how difficult it is to kill a school mascot, hardest animal in the world to kill, school mascot. The history, the ballgames, you know, just those traditional rivalries. To overcome that is very, very hard.

The other is the reality that there are a lot of schools struggling financially. And, according to the way we measure school success academically, maybe some who aren't making AYP are struggling academically. If you take districts that are struggling, and you simply put them together, you have two struggling districts that are put together. You really need more than that to effectuate positive reorganization that will lead to quality education for kids.

I think you have to have local communities on board for that. I think anything directed from the state takes away that local ownership. So, you have to be real careful. I think that came up many, many times.

Pogue: It appeared, from the recommendations that the commission wanted to increase the authority of the Regional Board of School Trustees, to grant more dissolutions, perhaps, without public vote?

Eddy: Well, I think, again, if you get back to the reality, in some cases, of allowing people in detachment, annexation, dissolution to be the final decision, you, maybe, sometimes allow those traditions to take precedence over what a Regional Board of School Trustees might think is better for the education of kids.

Now, I happen to still think that, again, even a Regional Board of School Trustees is answerable. I think, at the end of the day, they're going to be answerable to the local people. Maybe they'll have some authority, but I think they'd hesitate to use it in situations where the local folks show up and let them know how they feel about the potential of combining or closing or dissolving or detaching districts.

So, I think it's always better, if it's something that's born of and through the local boards of education and community members.

Pogue: It also appears that the commission would recommend individual legislation that might allow districts to reorganize, even if state law might restrict them. An example being the current case in Leepertown that was passed.

Eddy: Yeah. Representative Mautino brought that legislation to us, in the fall, if I remember correctly. It was really, truly a case where there was no legal, statutory resolution allowable, because, if I remember correctly, they weren't contiguous. The idea was, well, shouldn't we do that for all of those situations?

But the fear there was that you might see district shopping going on, where districts that were contiguous might be passed over in reorganization for those that were non-contiguous. Then, you would leave out certain segments of kids, and there was a fear, specifically then, that it might have to do with poor students, minority students. You'd still have those pockets that are contiguous, with the district that jumps over them to go get maybe a little more desirable district. So, that's why, at the end of the day, instead of having broad legislation that would cover all of those areas and allow this non-contiguous, it should be done on a specific, case-by-case basis, because district shopping is a real concern.

Pogue: What will be the biggest challenges, now that you're no longer on the commission, but as a political observer, as a district superintendent, to implement these recommendations, once they're sent to the General Assembly and to the governor?

Eddy: I still think that any hint of forced reorganization or consolidation is going to be difficult for the public to swallow. And, in those counties that have been targeted, so to speak, for reorganization studies, if they meet certain criteria related to trended population or enrollment, that's going to meet with some resistance. And I'm not so sure it shouldn't be.

Again, I was a little bit surprised that arbitrary numbers were going to be used. I think you have to concentrate more on academic performance, in some broader measure, than this commission was willing to look at...and [the] fiscal reality of a district. Those two things should indicate, locally, whether or not a district should reorganize. But, the final make-up of that district should be left up to the people locally. It shouldn't be dictated from the state. There's no way the state knows better what's best for the children of a community than those communities do.

Pogue: We've talked about the issues of transportation and pensions that were floating about, at the same time the commission was doing its study. Did the issue of PTELL [Property Tax Extension Limitation Law] come up as a problem with reorganization?

Eddy: It was something. Because, at the same time there were some legislation that was being passed related to PTELL, where districts would be not just capped at the 5% aggregate extension from the year before, but also, just simply not allowed to levy additional amounts that would still be within the cap on any property that lost value, during the year. So, you couldn't use the existing cap rule.

Jack Franks had a bill that passed the House, during the time the commission was meeting. That certainly would make it more difficult, fiscally, to determine on a long three to five year basis, whether or not the resulting reorganized district would be financially viable.

Pogue: Did the issue of unpaid state bills and the growth of state responsibility with Medicaid also have an impact?

Eddy: Probably, generally, in the whole idea that there's not going to be a lot of funding available to support some of these recommendations and requirements. Everything plays into it, Medicaid taking up a larger share of the general revenue fund, the pension payment. The reality is, resources that might be available to support reorganization wouldn't be there.

Pogue: Did the commission talk at all about the state constitution and article five and the relationship between state and local districts?

Eddy: Not to my recollection. That wasn't something that was directly discussed.

Pogue: It appears that the commission did not support the idea of a one-size-fits-all and is trying to develop a more flexible approach. Is that...?

Eddy: I think that's accurate. Early on, Lieutenant Governor Simon even made that statement on numerous occasions. It was one that I went in heavy on to begin

with. Arbitrary numbers don't work. This state is so diverse that an arbitrary approach is doomed to fail.

Pogue: As a district superintendent and as a state representative, what did people in your area tell you about school reorganization, once the commission was formed?

Eddy: Well, I think they were pleasantly surprised that the commission took on a kind of different mission, and especially, began focusing on efficiencies and shared services and how districts might save money and reduce costs, rather than what I think originally they envisioned, as a commission that was going to tell people now that they had to reorganize. So, they felt like the direction was good.

Now, they also made it very clear that any attempt at a forced reorganization or consolidation that came out of Springfield, rather than even recommendations that would allow local choice, was going to be rejected soundly. I think we found that out, all over the state, very, very quickly, that this has to be local. It has to be a local decision, and it has to be, if we're going to have reorganizations, that they should be done on what local community members want.

Pogue: Having looked at the recommendations, how would some of these help districts like Hutsonville?

Eddy: Well, I'm not sure that Hutsonville, for example, is a district that...because they are financially very stable, I mean fiscally. Even the state financial profile isn't all that—especially comparatively to other districts—all that accurate in the description. The district is in good financial shape. They spend less than the average amount per pupil, and they're a high performing school. Their grade school has been a blue ribbon school for years.

Now, again, if you're going to use one measure of academic performance, which I don't think is a good measure, the ISAT [Illinois Standard Achievement Test] test, the school district's not in academic warning. I mean, it's not in any type of status. So, if you take those two indicators, I think that Hutsonville, as well as a lot of other schools—where, at first look you might say, okay, their enrollment's down; they're part of a county that has a three-year declining population trend—those indicators shouldn't be the final indicators. So, we can use some of the efficiency recommendations.

We can certainly look at what other districts are doing around the state to share services and, perhaps, use that to improve services that we provide and, maybe, in a more efficient manner. But, other than that, I don't think there's anything really that's going to help the Hutsonville School District, as

far as making a determination on reorganization that wouldn't be made otherwise. I think it's going to happen at Hutsonville or other schools when a combination of fiscal and academic realities set in.

Pogue: How do you foresee the Illinois Association of School Boards utilizing this kind of information?

Eddy: Well, again, I think the mission of the school board association is to provide support to local boards of education that would assist them in quality school governance, and to the end of that mission, providing information to schools related to shared services, efficiencies, understanding of options that are available. Perhaps just making sure board members are aware of public policy and changes that may be being proposed that might threaten local control. That's our role, and we certainly have a stake in making sure that school board members, who are locally elected and serve voluntarily, understand the potential exists for the state to attempt to force reorganizations that may not be good for their kids.

That's our role. I mean, we have to make sure they're aware, but also, take the good parts of this and make sure that efficiencies and shared services are known and that those board members and local administrators might look at those potentials.

Pogue: Were you on any of the other commissions or committees that looked at the issue of regional superintendents, school report cards, school rating scale and Senate Bill 7, which were also big topics?

Eddy: I wasn't on PEAC. I was a chief co-sponsor of Senate Bill 7, one of the chief co-sponsors of that bill, and I was on the ROE (Regional Office of Education) Commission, up until the time I resigned from the General Assembly.

Pogue: And how do you feel those studies, and actually the law in Senate Bill 7, are working?

Eddy: Well, I think Senate Bill 7 is a great philosophy and has some potential. I think, probably, in some ways, the details that are coming out related to it deserve some additional legislation at some point.

The State Board of Education has done a decent job of writing some rules and trying to promulgate some guidelines for implementation of Senate Bill 7. It's going to be an undertaking to successfully provide high quality training to the number of superintendents and principals in order to implement a performance evaluation model. That's the challenge ahead.

I think maybe a tiered approach might have been better. If a district, for example, wasn't required to implement performance evaluation of teachers

until '14-'15, '15-'16 or '16-'17, maybe just received some portions of evaluation training, and that those districts that were targeted for school improvement, where those evaluations and those districts that received those supplemental educational grants, and there was some funding available for the training, would have been the first round. The rest would have been brought in later. I think getting it right, maybe, would be better than right away, for that many. It's going to be a challenge to do that.

So [with] Senate Bill 7, there are a lot of questions. There are a lot of concerns about litigation, related to Senate Bill 7, that I think could be answered, if some follow-up legislation could be enacted, just some trailer bills that I think the State Board of Education believe should be enacted, as well.

Now the ROE Commission was an interesting one in that, at the end of the day, the recommendation was thirty-five regional offices of education, based on, I think, a population of the service area of over 60,000, rather than the forty-two or forty-three thousand service area there is now. We'll see if that is adopted and those changes are made.

But, the idea was to consolidate and save some money and still provide services to an area that wouldn't become so large that it would be difficult to provide those services, also, continue to get the support of the county governments. I think the total dollar amount of supporting regional offices of education, in salaries plus service line, is about \$14 million in the state budget.

County governments, at last look, contributed over \$10 million towards those offices being established. I don't know how willing county governments would be to continue to support—at almost, you know, half the dollar for dollar match—regional services.

The State Board of Education made it very clear, during their commission hearings, that they're in no position to pick up the mandates that the regional superintendent's office carry out. In fact, they rely very much on regional superintendents to help support educational services in geographic areas that are very sparse.

So, hopefully, there will be two things happen. The thirty-five service regions becomes a number we can live with. The geography isn't so spread out that in some areas the delivery of those educational support services becomes too burdensome and the counties continue to support, financially, the local education structure to deliver services.

Secondly, I think that the governor's office understands that the commission feels that the mandates of the regional office of education are

state mandates and thus should be supported with general revenue and not local corporate, personal property replacement money, which was done last year.

So, hopefully, there's some kind of an agreement there, with the reduction in cost, the continued support of the counties and the recognition by the governor's office that this is general revenue. Those three things come together in a compromise that's going to allow the offices to continue to provide the support that they do and do not just support, but supervision of life safety and other types of inspections that guarantee that the buildings our children go to are safe.

Pogue: Well, as we conclude our interview, you spent a lot of time on the commission, before you left it. How do you feel that the commission is going to be remembered?

Eddy: You know, I started by saying the question was, did the commission do its job or did it fulfill the requirements of the legislation? Certainly, one major function of this commission was to take a proposal that the governor had made, with an arbitrary number of three hundred school districts, examine it, and determine whether or not you could just say, okay, we've got to have this number of districts, with this population.

I think the commission will be remembered for taking that notion and applying reality that, if you're going to do this, it really can't be arbitrary, and it can't be done as part of a political speech. It needs to be done in a more thoughtful process and, secondly, reiterate what we've always known about reorganization, it's not easy; it's not simple. There's no real set of magic solutions.

Even when you get down to the recommendations that eventually will come, the implementation, over the years of various recommendations related to reorganizing school districts, are difficult, difficult things to implement. And these will be, as well, because of Illinois, being such a strong local control state, which is okay. I think that's okay. I think that's a good thing. That's my personal view.

Again, I don't believe that there's any stronger desire than the desire of local community members to make sure their students receive a quality education. I'd much rather leave it up to seven locally-elected board members from that community than someone at the state.

Pogue: I want to thank you for providing us an insight into the work of the commission and some of its recommendations that are now being presented at the public hearings that are going on throughout the state. Thank you for your

service as a State Representative, representing your district. And good luck in your new position with the School Board Association.

Eddy: I appreciate all that, and I appreciate the opportunity to have served in the General Assembly. It's been a real honor and a privilege. And, being a public school superintendent for sixteen years, a principal and a teacher before that, was equally satisfying. I'm looking forward to combining those experiences and backgrounds into meeting the challenges and some real opportunities in the future, in this position. So, thank you.

(end of interview session #2)