

Interview with Karen DeFevers

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Interviewer: Philip Pogue

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Pogue: My name is Phil Pogue, and I'm at the Presidential Library in Springfield. It's June 8, 2011. We're talking on the topic of school reorganization. At this time, I'll have Karen DeFevers explain a little bit about her background, family, education and work experience.

DeFevers: My name is Karen DeFevers. I was raised in a family of educators. My grandmother and aunts and uncles were all educators, teachers most of them. My father was also a teacher and later became an elementary principal. So, [as] I grew up, schools were very important to me. I currently am married. I have two children of my own, and my daughter has followed in the footsteps of the family. She is also an educator. She's a middle school teacher, teaches English. My son would like to go into law enforcement, so he's completely going (chuckles) a different direction. My husband is a millwright. We've been married thirty years this year.

I have a bachelors' degree from Western Illinois University. I went about that in a round-about way. I graduated from Lincoln Land [Community College] with a concentration in business. Then I, actually, had gone to Eastern Illinois University to be a teacher and decided that's not really what I wanted to do, transferred, then found a job and worked for a while. Then [I] decided to go back to school and went through the Board of Governors program at Western [Illinois University] and got my bachelor's degree that

way. So, I actually attended [the] University of Illinois at Springfield but got my degree through Western. (laughs)

I currently work for Ameren Illinois. I am the manager of the contact center at Pawnee. I have been in customer service with Ameren Illinois, formerly Central Illinois Public Service Company, for over twenty-eight years.

Pogue: What roles did you play in the recent Girard-Virden merger?

DeFevers: I had decided I wanted to run for the school board. Some of the members of the Committee of Ten¹ had approached me, knowing that, and asked me if I would be interested in helping them with the consolidation effort. So, prior to the election of the consolidation, I actually helped knock on doors, make phone calls and try to get the word out about the consolidation and to support the consolidation.

Then, when we had the election in...I want to say, April was the election. When we had that election, then I was elected to the school board, and the consolidation passed.

Pogue: How many years did you actually, then, serve on the Virden School Board?

DeFevers: I was actually only on the school board a year and four months, I believe.

Pogue: What were the major duties of the school board member for Virden during that time period?

DeFevers: Well, we had very split duties. My main role was to take care of the existing Virden District, because that's the role that I was elected into. However, at the same time, we were also trying to do some legwork and preliminary work for the consolidation, to get some things done to help the new board when they were elected in another year and a half, roughly a year and a half, so that they would not have so much to do in a short amount of time, because the new district was actually not going to begin until July first and school, of course, always starts the middle of August. That would have only given them about six to eight weeks to get everything done, so we actually started doing a lot of the legwork for them.

We looked at things like curriculum. We did a preliminary [review] on the mascot and the school colors. We looked at the organizational structure and made recommendations on all of that, so that we actually... We did a lot of that for them ahead of time, so that then when the new board got in place, they could look at that and say, "Okay, either we like this, or we don't, and we want to start over."

¹ A working group of educators that, in 1892, recommended the standardization of [American high school curriculum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee_of_Ten). (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee_of_Ten)

Pogue: What was the relationship with the Committee of Ten to the Board of Education, once you were on it?

DeFevers: They continued to attend the meetings. They continued to voice some of their opinions and concerns with some of the decisions that were being made.

They had some things that they would have liked to have seen, and they explained what they kind of would have liked to have seen, the direction that the districts would go in. They didn't always have the same information that the school board had, as far as like some of the organizational structure and some of that information, but they stayed fairly involved.

Pogue: As far as your role, knocking on doors, what were some of the questions you were getting, prior to the referendum?

DeFevers: A lot of people said, "I've heard a lot about this. I guess it's a good thing. Why is it a good thing?" And so, then I could proceed to tell them the benefits for the school districts, that we would be able to offer a better curriculum to better prepare kids for the future and for going to college and that we hoped that, in the long run, it would just provide something better with both communities, to draw more people to the communities.

Pogue: What got you interested in both being involved in the campaign and then choosing to be a board member?

DeFevers: You know, I've always... Like I said, I've had ties to education all my life, and there, you know, I had tossed that idea around for a couple of years, and my kids both asked me not to do it while they were in school. My son was a senior. I knew he would be a senior the year I was going to be on the board and then would be graduating and that, so it wasn't going to be a major impact to him. And growing up as a principal's daughter, I kind of understood where they were coming from. They didn't want to feel like they were getting special... the kids would think they were getting special treatment, just because of Mom's role on the school board. So, I intentionally waited.

But, I've always been intrigued by the different things that I read and followed in the newspaper about what the school was deciding and different things that I didn't necessarily understand, that the school board was doing. I was friends with several of the members, and I would talk with them at different times and that. I knew, at times, they couldn't tell me everything I wanted to know. So I decided, if I wanted to know more about it, I needed to get involved, and I thought I could make more of a change.

Pogue: The issue of the two boards, once the election took place, was there much dialogue between Girard's new board and Virden's new board?

DeFevers: There really was. I have to say, the working relationship between the two boards was amazingly congenial. I couldn't have been happier. I was very pleased with how well the two boards got along.

We actually held joint meetings each month, and we took turns; one month would be in Girard, and one month would be in Virden. We'd hold a joint meeting, and then we would actually break apart and hold our individual meetings. If we were in Virden, we would have a room set aside, where the Girard people could go, and they could have their board meeting in the Virden building and that, as well. So, it really worked out very, very well. We were all working towards the same goal.

Pogue: Of the fourteen members that were on the two boards, how many were new people, because of that election?

DeFevers: Let's see... There were three of us on the Virden board and, I believe, two on the Girard board, so five, not quite half.

Pogue: When you said that you had kind of joint meetings and then you covered your own meetings, how long was a typical night, then?

DeFevers: Really, only about two and a half to three hours, maybe. We had an agenda for each meeting, and we have always had, at least at Virden, we had a president who held very tight to that. He did not allow extra topics to come in. That would be something that would be added for the next board meeting. So, we always knew what we were going to discuss at the joint meetings. And there were committee meetings that would take place, maybe beforehand. Those were also public meetings.

But, you would come into the meeting, and you would present. Like when we talked about the organizational structure, there was a committee, made up of members from the Girard board and the Virden board. We actually met and talked with the administrators about the organizational structure. We hashed through some of those kinds of things, so those were separate meetings that we had. Some of those were an hour and a half, two hour meetings, on that particular topic.

Then, we were able to come into the meeting with the joint boards and present and say, "This is why we decided what we decided" and provide them with that information, so that they could say, "This makes sense." Or, if they had questions, they could ask those questions at that time. But hopefully we had them answered, so the meetings actually went very smoothly.

Pogue: Was it very difficult for new board members, coming in, to not only work on a new district but handle the normal day business?

DeFevers: You know, I found it a little overwhelming, because I was getting used to the public meeting. The whole concept of public meetings, for me personally, was

a little overwhelming. I wasn't used to sitting there, with people looking at me. Typically, board meetings didn't bring very many people in attendance. There'd be a few, here and there.

But once the consolidation became a topic, there were lots of people involved and lots of people at the meetings. It dawned on me that, if I said something wrong or whatever I said, could be taken out of context, (laughs) and it could end up in the newspaper, or I would be quoted all over, in emails or whatever. I became very conscious of that, and I was very, very nervous for the first couple of meetings, about what I said and questions that I asked and that kind of thing.

But, as far as the two, getting over that hurdle was probably the biggest thing, because, not only did we have just the Virden people there, now we had Girard people there, as well. One of the things that I think, for me, helped was, with the Girard [board], the members on there were very good to explain things to the new members, so that we understood what was going on. And if we had questions beforehand, we could call the superintendent and ask, "What does this mean? We're looking at this on the budget. I don't understand what this bill is," or "Why we're paying this person?" or whatever. We could get those kinds of questions asked and answered ahead of time, so that we didn't have a lot of that kind of thing come up.

The biggest impact, probably, with the two, was all the committee meetings and the extra that was going on, because you had committee meetings for your individual school board, and you had committee meetings for the joint boards, as well.

Pogue: What kind of committees were you on?

DeFevers: I was on the Finance Committee, the Organizational Structure Committee and the Policy Committee. I think that was it.

Pogue: Now, I saw that you had a calendar of things, dealing with the new North Mac District, that you wanted to try to accomplish monthly. Did you follow that schedule?

DeFevers: Pretty closely, yes, we did. Actually, I think that was a good thing, because the board members knew what was going to be the topic to be discussed, and the community and the school district knew what was going to be a topic of discussion.

So, if they didn't really care about the colors in the mascot, they didn't necessarily come to that meeting, if that was one of the main things that we were going to be talking about. If they were worried about the location of the schools, different people would come in and out of those meetings. So they didn't have to worry about, "Well, what are they talking about tonight?" They knew ahead of time.

Of course, I know it's a law that we publish for public meetings, that you publish an agenda ahead of time. But I think having this guideline kept us on target, and it made sure that everybody knew this was what's going to be talked about; do I want to go tonight or not?

Pogue: Well, let's just go through each of the months and see what were hot topics (DeFevers laughs) for those. In May, you had school district name, colors, mascot, song, conference, co-op sports and transportation. Were any of those big issues?

DeFevers: Not really. I think we anticipated that the name and the colors and the mascot might be a big deal, but ultimately, we left that up to the kids, with the board having the final say, if it [the student group] came up with something really crazy or that we thought was out of line. And we thought they did a really good job.

Pogue: Then in June, curriculum survey, building locations and configurations and attendance center boundaries.

DeFevers: Yeah, the curriculum survey was basically to get a feel, from the people who attended in both school districts, for different new categories they would like to see. Girard offered French; Virden offered Spanish. We were trying to figure out, do you want French? Do you want Spanish? Do you want German? Do you want something else? What would you like to see?

We were trying to get a feel for some...to expand like the web-based and the IT technology-type classes, biology and some of the agricultural classes and to get a feel for what are some of the things that the kids want to take and that we think would be good that the kids could take. So, that's what that was.

We had a disappointingly low response to the survey, but the ones who responded were very clear with what they wanted and with their comments. Building locations they were rather spirited discussions, because both towns wanted the high school located in their town and wanted to give reasons why it should be there. Ultimately it came down to space. The Virden district ended up with the high school, because the high school had, actually, more space for the number of students at the high school.

Pogue: In July, you had the issues of the staffing of central office, maintenance custodial supervisors and transportation supervisors, athletic director and then how to deal with class pictures, trophies and uniforms.

DeFevers: Yeah, July meeting was a very, very spirited one, as well. (laughs) The organizational structure was a very, very hot topic. Not so much among the board members and the school district, but several members of the community felt that...We had two superintendents, and the decision was made to keep them both. They were both under contract, at the time, and we felt, going into

a merger, that there would be plenty to do, to get a new district up and running. Plus, you still have some things to finalize from the two old districts, so there's still plenty to do to keep two people very busy, at least in the first year or first two years. So, we had decided, as a board, to keep both people. Well, some of the people in the community felt that there should only be one superintendent, so there was some obvious discussion, back and forth, about what they believed and what we believed. That made for a spirited discussion.

With a merger, when you get to talking about... We've got all the class photos and the trophies. Here's all the things that Girard did, and here's all the things that Virden did. Now, what do you do with those things? There were lots of discussions, and people didn't know what to do, because it's really a new district. Do you bring some of those things in?

Ultimately, what was decided was, anything that had been won from either school that the current senior class, or the one's that just graduated, would have been involved in, was moved to the high school, because that would have impacted them. But the other trophies and that, each district was responsible for taking care of their own.

Pogue: Then August, graduation requirements.

DeFevers: You know, that was pretty easy. The two districts had a few different requirements so, the decision was made that, instead of trying to mix the kids up, that they would maintain the graduation requirements for the seniors for the school they had started with. So, the Girard kids had the same graduation requirements that they had as a freshman, and the same thing with the Virden. So they grandfathered them in.

Then, what they did was, with each class, they added one or two requirements, because they knew they would have another year. So the freshman class, the first freshman at North Mac High School, will have all the same requirements. But each class...like the senior class has a set of graduation requirements; now the class of 2012 will have a different set of graduation requirements, and the class of 2013, their kids will each have different requirements. Then [the class of] 2014, they'll all finally have the same graduation requirements, which is going to be a bookkeeping nightmare for (laughs) for the guidance counselors.

Pogue: And were there any issues with valedictorian and salutatorian?

DeFevers: Nope, they had two valedictorians and two salutatorians. I imagine that will continue until the freshman class.

Pogue: Length of the school day?

DeFevers: I don't even remember that discussion, so it must have been a non-event. (laughs)

Pogue: October, staff assignments?

DeFevers: That must have been talking about who would be teaching what classes, and that was pretty much left up to the administrators. Whatever they recommended, we accepted.

Pogue: November was just finalizing the curriculum and graduation requirements. Were there any issues, then, as you finalized the curriculum?

DeFevers: No, in fact, one thing we did find out, the kids were excited when they got a chance to see the new classes that they would have a possibility to take. In fact, my son was a senior—he was one of the last of the Virden Bulldogs—he saw the curriculum the juniors that year were looking at, and he was kind of jealous, because he said “I would have liked to have taken some of those classes.” So, I think it was a very good thing.

Pogue: December, finalize staff needs, textbooks, uniforms.

DeFevers: One of things we talked about was textbooks, because in order for each student... You now have French class. You typically had a class of maybe thirty kids. Well, now you may have sixty kids, but you’ve only got thirty books. So you really needed to double the books.

There was some discussion over, “Is there any way you can share resources?” or how to get books. Some of the books were out of print, that they were still using, Could the district really afford to buy new textbooks? So, that’s pretty much what that discussion was over.

I know during the year, there’s been some sharing and some other resources had to have been sought. They found used books from other schools and online and that, that they were able to purchase to get them through, until they purchased enough for everybody.

Pogue: How did you deal with the situation of fairly new textbooks and one being used in one district and a different one being used in another?

DeFevers: Well, what they tried to do in some of those was to utilize them for the different classes, where you may have like college prep English that was using... You would look at what had the harder curriculum or seemed to be the harder, or whatever suited the curriculum they were targeting for, like the college prep. And they could focus on that, use that book for that class and maybe use the other book, that the other school had used, for maybe the basic English class, instead, or maybe college prep III, instead of having to try to buy. They tried to make do with what they had, as best as possible.

Pogue: In January, finalize high school course description booklet and merge the district policies.

DeFevers: The description booklet was pretty much putting together what seemed like a mini-college book, where it has the course descriptions listed and then what the course entails.

Merging the policies was a little bit different, because we had different interpretations. That was very interesting, because Girard's legal department had advised them one way, and the lawyers for Virden had advised them another, and we didn't always agree. So then, we had to figure out, ok now, what are we going to do, and how are we going to look at this, and which policy are we going to adopt? For the most part, we agreed on most things.

They did put together a group of parents and students to totally look at the handbook and to pull what they thought was best from both handbooks, to create a new North Mac handbook.

Pogue: Was there any particular policy that was so divergent, between the two?

DeFevers: Not that I recall. I'm sure there probably was, at the time, but I don't recall right now.

Pogue: As far as February, register the high school students, the board of education election and hire administrators.

DeFevers: Not really, the election was pretty interesting, because there were... Of course, that's when the brand new board, for the new North Mac District, came on board. So some of the consolidation work we had been doing, that was the new board, then, once they were seated, would take over, and then they would start. They had a certain amount of things that they could do ahead of time. That was when they were able to actually begin meeting, separately, (laughs) and start actually working on the new district. That freed those of us, who were not on the new board, up to concentrate only on the old district.

Pogue: March, collective bargaining on a new contract, the grants, health insurance, any reductions in the staff, the budget, school calendar, address and district changes.

DeFevers: The collective bargaining, that was something that went on for a while. It actually went on through the summer and into the fall. I want to say, it was September or October—I can't remember for sure which month—before they actually agreed on a contract.

Pogue: And that would be with the North Mac board?

DeFevers: Yes, yes and with the North Mac Education Association, because, obviously, you had a contract that the Virden Education Association had, and you had a contract that the Girard Education Association had. They both had certain things in it that they wanted.

There were certain things that the North Mac Board knew that they wanted, or did not want, in the contracts and so, tried to negotiate and keep both groups and everybody somewhat happy with the new contract. [It] was very interesting.

Pogue: April was summer maintenance, the various property/casualty insurance adjustments, the support personnel, moving the furniture and updating inventories.

DeFevers: Most of that is pretty standard, as far as what I recall from when I was on the board. Those were things that kind of took place anyway. As far as moves of furniture, I think they were discussing what would move where, as far as when teachers moved from building to building, because we had the middle school in Virden and the middle school in Girard, so that, when they moved people from one place to the other, were there desks that needed to move and were file cabinets and that kind of thing? That's what they were discussing there.

At that point in time, the new board had pretty well taken over most of that. I don't think there was any major discussion over that. I was still attending the meetings and don't remember anything.

Pogue: And then in May, you had food bids, gasoline, handbooks, fees, school board policy manual, payroll dates, transportation plan.

DeFevers: And again, that's typical things that we would talk about at our regular board meetings, in that timeframe, to make sure, as far as the food bids and that going out, handbooks, gasoline, any fees and that for the next year.

The school board policy manual was probably something that was new to the mix, just because it was a new board. So, they were probably looking at both the old board policies and combining the two.

Payroll dates, I don't know if the two districts were paid differently or not. And then the transportation plan, that actually worked out to be pretty easy. We left the bus routes the way they were. They seemed to work with the elementary students.

The only thing that was different is, they had to figure out... We had to bus kids from Girard to Virden, to the high school, of course. And then, we had to get kids from the high school down to the middle school. That was all done really early, with the start times and that.

Pogue: And then finally, June was appointing attorneys, consolidating activity funds, confirming the building schedules, hiring auditors.

DeFevers: And that was, appointing the attorney. They had already interviewed a couple of attorneys, I know. The consolidation of the activity funds was basically one

of the final steps of closing out the two districts and any funds that were left with the two districts and making that into the one new district, then. Building schedules, trying to figure [that] out, that was up pretty much to the administrators. Then the auditor was just kind of like the attorney; they had to get, figure out who they were going to use, because each district had had their own.

Pogue: You mentioned the coordination needed between the Girard and Virden boards, as you tackled that. It sounded like there was a lot of preparation needed. So that meant that your administrators were kind of doing double, triple duty during this time period, because you mentioned some of the things were left for the administrators to handle.

DeFevers: The administrators, they really stepped up to the plate. Not only did they continue to run their buildings and to work on projects and to administer discipline and to do the normal things they do throughout the school year and meet their deadlines that they normally have—I mean there's certain things I know that happen regularly during the school year—they met all of those deadlines.

When we had the curriculum, and we wanted to talk about a new curriculum, the two boards were looking at a curriculum. The two high school principals, at that time, got together and worked on a new curriculum and helped identify, here's what we have; here's what you have, and here's what we'd like to see. [They] kind of put some things like that together. So they had extra duties, on top of that.

[It was the] same thing with the superintendents. They put in a tremendous amount of hours. They attended extra committee meetings for the board. They attended all the board meetings, and they had a lot... I mean, they worked long, hard hours. And that is just one of the things I really... I can't commend them enough.

Pogue: As we look at what we just did, going through a very difficult time, covering the various topics in a short manner, what proved to be the toughest?

DeFevers: You know, I think there's probably a tie there between the building locations and the organizational structure. I think those were probably the two toughest.

Pogue: And what seemed to be easier than expected?

DeFevers: Probably, to me, picking out the mascot and the colors. I really thought that would be a bigger deal, because that's something that everybody sees, and everybody had an opinion. There were lots of opinions floating around at that time. That was all everybody talked about, not only the students but the adults were talking about that, and grandparents were talking about that. And that really... With what they decided and with what they picked, everybody seemed very happy, and everybody has adopted those colors, very readily.

Pogue: And then, the buildings were re-colored or...?

DeFevers: They did. Over the summer, they had the gym floors varnished and repainted, with the new North Mac emblem and the school colors. Then, I know they had a big red mascot in the gym at Girard. They had that painted, and there was a big North Mac mascot painted on the wall.

They re-colored a lot in the baseball field and that. Anything that had been red and black in Girard was painted blue or black, and anything that was purple and white in Virden was painted blue and black.

Pogue: Well, now you've completed the year on the school board and started handing out the brochures, promoting the school. Were there any surprises or changes from what the vision was, as to what the new district was going to be like, to what actually started on July 1?

DeFevers: You know, not really. With my job, I have been through many mergers. So, realistically, I know you don't just tap a magic wand and say, "Presto chango," and everything happens all at once, just like you want it. I knew the first year was going to be a lot of "getting to know you" type things, and there would still be—even though the major things had been figured out to get them to work together—there would still be little things that they would run across that still had to be worked out together.

And I knew, not everybody was probably as happy as I was. But I think the school district did a tremendous job this year, of running very smoothly. They had very successful...I saw the grade point averages of the kids, the enthusiasm, the sports teams. They were well represented with Scholastic Bowl and all kinds of things. To me there were no real surprises or anything that I expected to be different.

Pogue: When you served on the Virden board that last year, was there anything tied to the merger that popped up, that hadn't been anticipated?

DeFevers: Not that comes to mind. I'm sure there were some little things that we said, "Oh, we didn't think about that," but there was nothing really major. We had used consultants and people who had been through mergers before. The superintendents had touched base with them, to kind of get a feel for, "Okay, what are some of the bigger things that we really needed to focus on?" They also worked on, "Okay, in addition to those, these are some things..." So I think they covered most of...the **big** topics, very, very well.

Pogue: And the new North Mac board, how many of those members were from the old Virden Girard board?

DeFevers: There were, let's see, two members from Virden and two members from Girard, so there's four. So there's three brand new members.

Pogue: So, if I can understand what you were saying, when you got elected on the board of Virден, you and the Girard board met in joint session and then had your own meetings.

DeFevers: Correct.

Pogue: Then, when the new North Mac board was formed, now you have three boards.

DeFevers: Correct.

Pogue: How did that all function?

DeFevers: Well, actually, once the new board was seated, they had their meetings, and we would actually attend to offer support or when they were trying to make a decision on like, say, the curriculum. Those of us that had been on the committee with the curriculum were there, so we could answer questions that they may have. We had also had conversations, prior to that, to explain things. We had attended their committee meeting, usually to go over what we had talked about. So they had the understanding of what we had already done the legwork for; we could relay that to them, as well. And then, if they had questions, they had to look at the material. They could look at everything and go forward with that.

The same thing with the organizational structure and that. They actually had their meetings. We just attended, kind of as a courtesy. So, we didn't have to attend every meeting, if they weren't discussing a topic that was going to be something that we were involved in.

Pogue: But, legally, they didn't have authority until July 1?

DeFevers: Yeah, I think there's either seven or ten; I can't remember the exact number. There are certain things that they had the ability to go ahead and move forward with. Some of those things were things like, I think they could hire an attorney, because they needed the legal representation. I think they could go ahead and approve the school name and the school mascot and the school colors, because things like athletic, we needed to do the gyms and repaint school colors and order uniforms for athletic activities. So, there were some things like that that they were able to go ahead and meet on and approve fairly quickly. Even without being official until July 1, they did have some jurisdictional approvals.

Pogue: Were there any difficulties in having the three boards operating at one time?

DeFevers: Probably the hardest thing was for those who were on the brand new board and the old board. They had a lot of meetings, because they had the existing district meetings and committee meetings, and then they had the new district meetings and committee meetings. I know a couple of them mentioned to me

that, had they known they were going to be gone just about every evening (laughs) with meetings, they might have rethought running. They kind of laughed when they said, but I don't think they realized that initially, to get everything up and going, what it was going to entail. They were thinking, I'm going to be on the new board, but they hadn't ended their role with the old board.

Pogue: Were there any kind of expectations that the old board, Virden, in particular, had for the new board taking over?

DeFevers: I think one of things that they kind of expected was that they would continue with kind of the strict guidelines and that the meetings not get out of hand. There was an agenda, and it stayed by the agenda. The meetings were fairly formal.

I know, I've heard of meetings in the past that would go until midnight, 1:00. Our meetings did not go that late. I think 10:30 was the latest I ever got home from something, from one of our meetings, and that's because there was [a] disciplinary [issue], and I think we had a retirement celebration at the beginning. I mean, there were a whole bunch of things in that whole evening. So it wasn't a normal board meeting. That was unusual for Virden.

So I think that was one of the expectations was that the board would continue along the lines of being organized and having those meetings and that they would be fiscally, very fiscally prudent.

Pogue: What improvements would you suggest for others who are facing mergers or school reorganizations, tied to the planning, having gone through this now?

DeFevers: You know, the superintendents could probably answer that better than me. But, in looking back, one of the things I think, as a board member, I wish I had been more aware of at that time, was how much pressure we did put on the superintendents and the administrators, so that we could have either relieved them of some of that responsibility—I mean, there's such a tight timeframe to get everything done—or gotten them some assistance from somewhere, so that they didn't have quite so much going on.

Pogue: Did the working relationships with Girard and Virden board members continue to be positive, as you dealt with all these issues?

DeFevers: Yes, in fact, I'm still friends with several of them that were on the Girard board.

Pogue: Is it harder to work with fourteen at one time than seven?

DeFevers: Not really, not really. It was a little harder to hear, because we were in a bigger room, and the acoustics weren't as good; there were more people. It was a little bit harder to hear some of the conversations, but no, not really.

Pogue: And did the two presidents alternate or how did they—?

DeFevers: Yes, they did. If the meeting was held in Virden, the president of the Virden board was the one who mediated or who ran the meeting for the joint boards. If the meeting was held in Girard, the president of the Girard board was the one who ran the joint meeting. So, like I said, I could not have been more pleased with how congenial the whole process was.

Pogue: What seemed to work in the planning stage? You talked about the role of the administrators, giving information, keeping things on task and your being able to work together as fourteen members. Was there anything else that seemed to function well?

DeFevers: Two things I think were very key to that, one was the timeline. We knew each month what we needed to accomplish. If we didn't, there was a valid reason why it didn't get accomplished, and it needed to be accomplished the following month, because that kept us on target, so that nothing slipped, so that the new board didn't have too much on their plate, going into trying to get the new district up and going.

The other thing I think that worked well was the committees and having a small group get together, so you didn't have fourteen people with fourteen opinions. Everybody knew when the committee meetings were. They were more welcome to come. The committee pretty much were the ones that did the talking and the bantering back and forth and that, but the others got to sit and listen, so they could hear and understand. And if they had a question, they were more than welcome to ask a question. But I think the committees were also very key to getting that accomplished.

Pogue: You mentioned you were on the committee of...was it finance, structure?

DeFevers: Um hmm.

Pogue: How often did they meet?

DeFevers: I had probably a committee meeting a week. It depended on what we were working on. When we were working on the organizational structure and the policy... Those weren't exactly the names of the committees; it slipped my mind now what they were called, but it seemed like the one committee I was on, several of those things fell under that realm. And I happened to be the chair of the Virden committee. (laughs) So, again, the Girard chair and I would split the role of that.

Pogue: What help did you get from the State Board of Education, the regional office, any of the co-ops that Virden and/or Girard would be in, any of the consolidation studies or outside consultants?

DeFevers: From what I understand, anybody we asked for assistance was very willing to provide us with guidance. The superintendents were typically the ones that sought that assistance. If we would bring up a question in a meeting and say, "Well, what about this interpretation?" They would actually take that as a task and go back and get an answer and then bring that answer back to the board.

Some of the things that they... Interpretations was one of the things, policy alignments, those were some of the other things that they did. All of those groups were very helpful, and we used them as we needed them, to help us sort through some of the things that we were going through.

Pogue: Well, you ended June 30 [2011] with your duties with the Virden board, and you were not running for the...

DeFevers: That's correct.

Pogue: ...North Mac, but then you got involved later on.

DeFevers: I did. (laughs)

Pogue: What was that?

DeFevers: Well, Virden had applied, several years ago, like in 2006, for a construction bond with the State of Illinois, and their number was pulled this year, where they were notified by the State of Illinois that there's a possibility that they were high enough on the list that they could get money or funds to either refurbish the old school or build a new school, and they wanted to know if we had funds available.

The new school district took effect July 1. The State of Illinois contacted the North Mac School District in August, and they said, "Well, since Virden's part of it, we'll allow you to go ahead and use it as the new district." So they notified them in August that they were up on the list. Well, as you can imagine, the new board had plenty of other things on their mind that first few months, trying to get everything settled. So, late fall, they got to talking about, "We need to pass a referendum." We would have an election coming up in April that we needed to go ahead and try to see if we could get a referendum passed.

I had offered, when I left the school board, I told both the administrators and I told several members of the board, "If you ever need my help with anything, don't hesitate to call. I've enjoyed being on the board, and education is very important to me. I want to see this succeed." I got a call and they said, "You might want to be at the next board meeting. You haven't been"... You know, I was sporadic in going to the meetings.

So they were putting together or wanted to put together a committee or have some people to try to pass a school referendum to get approved for

funding, so that we could go ahead and get the state funds. So, I was actually the lead, or one of the co-chairs, for the committee to try to pass the bond referendum for the new North Mac District this spring.

Pogue: And how long did it take to determine what the grant money potential was going to be used for?

DeFevers: The school board had talked with an architect, back in the fall, and had gotten an analysis. The Virden building, the high school itself, there's a portion of it that was built in the early 1900s. Part of the Girard building was built about the same time.

Girard, in recent years, had taken time to go in and refurbish the building. They had gutted the inside. They had done a lot of work, replaced roofs and done some things like that to the building to make it more structurally sound. Knowing that they had put in for this money, Virden has done basic maintenance, in hopes that when they got this they would make a decision at that time to either build a new school or refurbish the old one.

So they had actually talked to an architect in the fall and had an architect draw up several possibilities and gave them quotes on what it would be to either build a brand new school, buy land to build the brand new school somewhere else, redo the existing structure or build a wing off of the newest part of the high school and tear down the old part and then eventually build an art and music building.

What the board finally decided, and what they voted on, was that they wanted to build a wing or build a new school, basically, at the current location in Virden, tear down the old school and then, in the second phase later on, add, basically, an arts building.

So, my role, then, was to try to get a referendum passed, to convince the people that we needed this building, there in Virden.

Pogue: And what was the exact question that people were going to be asked to vote on?

DeFevers: Well, it was a very legal question, but it was, should they vote to pass this, basically, for \$15 million, to get the funding to move forward with this.

Pogue: And, therefore, the length of the campaign time you had to do this?

DeFevers: Not very long. One of the consultants that the board had met with had indicated that most successful referendums don't string it out for a whole year, because, if you do that, it makes people mad and kind of burns them out on the whole issue. And so, we met in January... Well, I knew about it in December; we met in January and early February, and we really got it kicked

off good, the middle of February, late February and concentrated really hard, all through March, to get the word out.

Pogue: What was the result of that?

DeFevers: Unfortunately, it did not pass. One of the unique things with this referendum was that taxes were not going to increase, or they were not expected to increase. The school board intended to restructure the existing debt so that there would not be an increase. Basically, the debt would be stretched out for a little bit longer period of time, but they did not want the debt to hit the constituents with a tax increase for the education.

Pogue: What seemed to be the key questions the public was asking?

DeFevers: Well, it was amazing how much they didn't understand about, "Why do we need a new building? We thought the building was okay." So then we went through explaining different things about that. They were led to believe that a new building would be built between the two cities; that was a concern for some of them. Basically, the school district couldn't afford the difference between \$15 million and \$40 million or more is huge for a small district.

There were other questions, when we talked about restructuring the debt. I tried to explain that and put that into terms of like getting a second mortgage on your home or getting a new loan at a lower rate. You may pay out a little more [or for a] longer period of time or whatever, but your amount stays the same or is lower that you pay each month. Those were the kinds of things that I tried to correlate to get them to understand a little bit better what we were talking about, because school finances can be very, very difficult for people who do not deal with them on a regular basis.

Pogue: How many public meetings were held on that?

DeFevers: Actually, the school board had held a public meeting in December and had three people show up. So, we held open houses towards the end of March and beginning of April, and I think we had a total of twenty-two people.

Pogue: How close was the vote?

DeFevers: It only was defeated by about 100 votes. It was pretty close.

Pogue: And did it fail in both former districts?

DeFevers: It did fail in both districts, which was actually a good thing. I would have hated for it to have passed in one and not the other, because I'm afraid there would have been finger pointing.

I learned a lot from this. I think some of the things we learned, I relied a lot on everybody using the local newspaper to get their information. I

learned some people don't read that paper a lot. We did reach out to the Springfield paper. They were very good to help give us some coverage, as well. I also reached out to the local TV station in Springfield, and I learned later—which I hadn't really thought about—that anybody who did not have cable... The Sangamon County line is the cutting point between whether you get the Chicago stations or the Springfield stations or the St. Louis news. So everybody in Macoupin County, which is Virden and Girard, all got the St. Louis news. So they didn't see the blurbs in the Springfield news and that.

And I really think social media, Facebook, Twitter and some of that, is another way that we could have probably used to get some of the word out to some of the younger voters.

One of the other things with this referendum, that's really the only thing that was on the ballot. Neither town had a lot of... Virden had one aldermanic race. Well, they had two aldermanic races, but I think only one was contested. Girard had the same, so it wasn't like there was a big voter turnout, which was very unfortunate.

Pogue: Following the election, what is the status of the school construction grant?

DeFevers: Well, from what I understand, we haven't heard anything else; we haven't heard anything more from the state. What will happen is the state will come back again and say, "Your name's on the list. Do you have the money in place?"

If we say, "No," then they'll bypass us, and we'll have to go to the bottom of the list. I hope that doesn't happen, because with a building from the 1900s, you can imagine that there's leakage problems, needs new roofs and lot of different things that it needs.

Pogue: Was any of the construction money going to be used, other than at the renovation of the high school?

DeFevers: Yes, they were going to actually replace all the roofs at the Girard facilities. It had been a number of years, and so they decided that would be money well spent, to go down there and repair those. I believe they had had a boiler system that was updated several years ago, and they were wanting to do some minor repairs or an upgrade to that system, as well, to make it a little better functioning, as far as efficiency and that.

Pogue: Now, did you have a counterpart in the Girard area, or were you dealing with the whole—

DeFevers: I did, yes. I did have help from both towns, actually. We had several people that were working from both towns. I actually am a Girard graduate, so I kind of still have ties to Girard and know a lot of people there.

Pogue: Kind of concluding, then, Governor Quinn made major news in his budget address when he requested that they go to 300 school districts, from roughly 169. A number of bills were submitted during this General Assembly. Some call for a County School Board, and others are tied to the State Board making recommendations.

Depending on whether the General Assembly approves them or not, mergers would take place. Finally, a commission was formed, under House Bill 1216. If the governor signs that, it would go into effect. Do you have any suggestions for the members of the General Assembly or for the governor, related to school mergers, from your own experience?

DeFevers: I do. I understand what their trying to do, because the general thought is, overall this will cut administration and that you still have the same number of kids. I realize that, in some of the smaller communities, you can probably consolidate and maybe do away with an administrator or two. But, you're transportation costs are still going to be higher because, in some of these schools, if you're going to have the school located in one town—which will probably be what ends up happening in some of these cases—you're going to be bussing back and forth. I'm not positive, and I have not seen the numbers. I haven't asked to see the numbers.

But I'm sure that the transportation costs for North Mac have increased, because they're now bussing middle school kids who would have normally gotten a ride to school in Virden. They're bussing them to Girard, and the same thing with high school students. They're bussing them to Virden, if they don't have a car, or they can't get a ride. So there's busses on the roads; you still have to go pick those kids up; there's still those requirements. I think the transportation costs are where the money—a lot of the money—is. I don't think it's in the administration and the staffing costs, where I tend to think that's where the governor thinks that that lies.

I also hope that they will ask administrators and people [in] downstate Illinois what they think about this and get their input from some of the ones that have consolidated and some of those that are looking to consolidate. I can tell you, we live in Macoupin County; I'm in Virden at the north end of the county. Mount Olive and Staunton, at the south end of the county, are an hour away. So a county school in Macoupin County makes no sense to me. The county would have to be split.

So then we get into reorganizing (laughs) the whole state. So, it's not as simple as what they think that it's going to be. I think it's more complicated, and I think it will need a lot of investigation. I think it needs a lot more input from the people who are involved, not just from the legislators and the governor.

Pogue: The last question, you started handing out brochures and promoting the merger and served for a time on the old Virden board, that planned the new North Mac District. You then worked on school construction. What has been the enjoyable part of watching North Mac now exist in its first year?

DeFevers: I think it has been a very successful year, just seeing the kids and how well adjusted they are. Everybody was worried that the kids wouldn't get along and that there were all these rivalries and that.

And several of the kids of said, "I've learned more this year. I've made new friends. I've had new experiences. I've gotten experiences I wouldn't have had before." And that's just in the first year. So I can't imagine what's to come. I think that's very exciting. I can't wait.

Pogue: Well Karen, thank you very much for coming in and sharing with us, your involvement with the topic of school reorganization.

DeFevers: You're welcome. Thank you for having me.

(end of interview)