

Interview with Dixie Gage

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Interviewer: Philip Pogue – ALPL Oral History Program

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Pogue: My name is Phil Pogue. It is April 12, 2011. We are here at the Girard Public Library. We are going to be talking about the topic of school reorganization with the focus on the recent North Mac¹ consolidation. We have with us Dixie Gage who will be talking to us about the consolidation and steps that the planning board had to do to, in particular, to prepare for a year in advance of the start of the school district. So at this time, Dixie, could you give us some background about your family, education and work experience?

Gage: Yes, I am a fourth generation family who is involved in agra business in the Girard area. My father is still currently farming. I have a Master’s degree in school counseling, thirty-five years teaching in the Carlinville public schools, and I am a former adjunct professor at Blackburn University in Carlinville.

Pogue: What role did you have in the Girard -Virden merger?

¹ North Mac became the official title for a new district which included parts of Macoupin and Sangamon Counties and a small corner of Montgomery County.

Gage: Well, I would like to say I was in it from the beginning. I believe it was 1958 when my mother actually served on the first committee to consider consolidating the two districts. Of course, that failed. It was run again in 1969 and she was again on that committee and that also failed. So, I was very pleased to help form the ad hoc committee which circumvented the Girard school board to consolidate the Girard and Virden school districts. I was a member of the committee of ten who filed the petition and following that I was elected to the last Girard school board and worked with the joint boards prior to the consolidated board taking over.

Pogue: The group that was the last Girard board: how many of you were new members?

Gage: There were two of us that were new members. The others had been on that board prior.

Pogue: Okay. What were your responsibilities on the committee of ten?

Gage: Well, the committee of ten was more a title than a function, because the entire ad hoc committee worked together on the duties of the committee of ten. Ten names, however, had to be put on the documentation presented to the regional office of education which was then forwarded to ISBE and sought permission to put this on the referendum ballot for April of 2009. The main jobs of the committee of ten, as I saw them, was establishing a tax rate, determining whether the board would be elected at large or there would be seven new voting districts established, and then also acquiring the number of signatures on the petition to be able to do this in the first place.

I would like to address a problem that has arisen because of this. The committee of ten chose to redistrict into seven new contiguous voting districts. We were under a timeline to get this on the April ballot. There were several gentlemen who took it upon themselves to do this and in a minimal amount of time. We were so happy and so thankful that they had succeeded that I, being a member of the Girard faction, did not really examine the redistricting as close as I should have. And here is why. The demographics of Virden are very different than the demographics of Girard. The people who did this were from Virden; they tended to redistrict Girard in the same manner or fashion that they redistricted Virden. We now have ourselves in a position in the old Girard portion of the North Mac district where we are having trouble getting school board members to run in each of the three districts that you might term would be Girard. A number of people who would be willing to run happen to all live in the same district. That is unfortunate that it was drawn up that way. I should have caught it. I didn't. I would forewarn any districts who are looking to do this to pay very close attention to the demographics of the area that they are dividing and think about how that will affect them in the future. We did choose to do the seven

voting districts, which was a lot of work, as opposed to electing members at large because we felt that electing them at large would be a bias that the lesser populated district of Girard would not agree to because the majority would be elected from the other town. That is why the ad hoc committee decided to work hard and establish the seven new voting districts.

Pogue: What was the relationship of the committee of ten with the two boards of education?

Gage: The committee of ten—and I like to refer to the committee of ten as the ad hoc committee—was for the most part in line. The Virden school superintendent supported the consolidation effort and the ad hoc committee and worked with us on a number of issues. A percentage of their school board also was in line with the consolidation and worked with us. However, the Girard school district was seven and zero against consolidation and actually worked and campaigned against it. Girard superintendent, it seemed to me, was opposed to it as there was no help from her. Little communication with her with the ad hoc committee when we tried to work with her, and she was not present for the hearing at the courthouse when we presented this to the ROE. So the atmosphere with the Girard school board and the ad hoc committee of ten was very different than the relationship with the Virden superintendent and the Virden board.

Pogue: What role did the committee of ten have at the regional hearing?

Gage: Not everyone on the committee of ten testified, although I did. There were other members at large that testified instead, but we were the ones responsible for establishing and conducting the hearing in conjunction with Larry Pfeiffer who was the head of the ROE at that time. We actually had a committee member who was an attorney and he actually presented the case at the hearing for us.

Pogue: Were individuals of the two boards of education present at the hearing?

Gage: It is hard for me to remember now. But I believe there was one or two from Virden who were present. There may have been one from the Girard board who came in late, but I am not sure that there were any members from the Girard board of education present.

Pogue: Did the two boards of education assist the committee of ten during the referendum campaign?

Gage: Well, as a consulting factor. Ron Graham, the superintendent of Virden, certainly acted as a consultant for our ad hoc committee. Girard superintendent, Marlene Brady did not. But basically the ad hoc committee functioned pretty much as an independent group.

- Pogue: Were there board elections during the year prior to consolidation? You indicated that that took place. Did that lead to, you mentioned, two new members in Girard and did Virden also have some changes with new people?
- Gage: Well, we were on a rather strict and minimal timeline. As it turned out, the board elections prior to consolidation were held simultaneously with the referendum vote. Girard had two openings and I decided that if I were asking people in our community to support consolidation, then I owed it to them to represent them and their wishes for consolidation on the Girard school board. I ran and I convinced a local farmer with children in the district to also run. I thought it was important that we have at least two out of the seven school board members in favor of consolidation. So, knowing full well that I would be a minority on the board, I chose to do that.
- Pogue: What was the relationship of the two boards dealing with unification once the referendum was held?
- Gage: Well, once the referendum passed, I felt that both school boards worked well independently and jointly, to make the district able to open its doors in August of 2010. We had asked that a special election be held in November of 2009 to elect a North Mac board so that they could begin meeting and making decisions that could be put in place by July 1st of 2010. However, that was denied, so the North Mac board was elected in April of 2010 and only had between then and July 1st to discuss and decide everything that needed to be in place for the opening of the school year. Being granted the early election of the school board members would have been a tremendous help, I feel, to the consolidation transition. But money was tight and the county denied that move.
- Pogue: By the county, are you talking about a county board or are you talking about regional office or ...?
- Gage: No. I am talking about actually the county. I don't know if it was the county board or the county clerk who actually said that we do not have the money to run a special election and, therefore, it was denied.
- Pogue: How difficult was it to run the Girard school district and the normal monthly issues that go on with running a school district plus trying to plan for a new one?
- Gage: Well, Marlene Brady was actually seeming to be the person in charge, and I would like to say that the ad hoc committee had worked very closely with Mr. Calvin Jackson, who is a member of the association of school business officials and who is currently a legislative liaison and professional development consultant. Mr. Jackson, you see, had attended Virden schools

and had served as a high school principal in Girard and during his reign, an attempt to consolidate the Virden and Girard districts had failed because the law stated that it had to be passed by a majority in each voting precinct, which it did pass in all except one and that was Nilwood. And after that failure, Mr. Jackson worked to get the law changed so that a consolidation vote can be passed by the majority of the total voting body. Had that law been in effect in 1969 the consolidation would have been history. However, I wanted to bring this up because Mr. Jackson had been a superintendent of a district in the northern part of Illinois that had consolidated three or four small towns. He offered his services and turned over his entire binder of documents and the timeline that he had created for consolidation to Marlene Brady, the superintendent of Girard school district and the newly appointed superintendent of the North Mac district. To my knowledge, it is my belief that he was never consulted by her for services, but I feel certain that his timeline was helpful in forming the timeline that was used and Ms. Brady saw to it that we stuck to the timeline. The individual school boards met at the same location on the same night; following the individual board meetings, the joint board met at that location and basically conducted business according to the timeline.

Pogue: So therefore, it was very helpful to have a listing of topics that virtually ran from May of one year to June of the next year.

Gage: I think that was essential. And I think it was very valuable that we had the voice of experience guiding us in Mr. Jackson's work. Although Ms. Brady commented that she had consulted other districts that had consolidated and was using their advice.

Pogue: Kind of taking a look at maybe each month that had some topics listed so we will just kind of go through that.

Gage: Okay.

Pogue: In May you had the issue of school district name, colors, mascots, song, what conference to be in, co-op sports and the start of looking at transportation. Were any of those significant discussion topics?

Gage: Well, in a round-about way because I was adamant on the board that we needed more community involvement. That was not the feeling of the administrators and Ms. Brady. However, I was successful and they did use the community involvement on one committee and that was a committee that they had students, community representatives, administrators, teachers on, to narrow this election for the school district name, colors, mascot and then this was presented to the students to vote on. I believe it was grades five through eleven that actually got to vote on those. I would have liked to have seen more community involvement in some of the other areas as well.

Pogue: So you ended up with North? Now is the official name Macoupin or is the official name North Mac?

Gage: No. The official name is North Mac.

Pogue: Okay. And the colors became ...?

Gage: Well, the colors became Carolina blue and black.

Pogue: And the mascot.

Gage: Are the Panthers.

Pogue: And the conference at that time was going to be the Prairie State?

Gage: Yes. But we now have applied to – and sorry, I don't recall the name of the other conference name.

Pogue: The Sangamon?

Gage: I think it maybe is Sangamon conference that we are going to be a member of this coming year. We applied for it when I was on the board. But you have a year's interim before you can actually join that conference.

Pogue: In June you had down as topics: curriculum, survey, building location and configurations and attendance center boundaries. Were any of those major hurdles?

Gage: No. They actually were not. It was pretty much a given based on the curriculum study that had been done prior to the vote that the only physical building that would house the number of students for high school would be Virden's high school and then it only fell in place that Girard's high school would become the middle school. Each elementary school would have been kept in their own towns as they had been prior.

Pogue: So the feasibility study done by Dr. Phillips was that?

Gage: Yes. That is correct.

Pogue: In June or July, you had staffing of the central office, the maintenance department, custodial supervisors, transportation supervisors, athletic department, then issues dealing with class pictures, trophies and uniforms. What were the hot ones there?

Gage: Well, the hot ones were the class pictures, trophies and uniforms. And each district – Girard and Virden – were left to deal with their own. It was the

contention of the joint board that minimal memorabilia should be left in the trophy cases and within view for students starting the school year on July

1st, 2010. We wanted them to start the year with a new identity and not have the Virden junior high come to Girard and see all of Girard's former trophies and vice versa. So we held all trophies and plaques, etc. for the past five years in each of the schools and then it was up to the Girard school board and the Virden school board to decide how they wanted to deal with the other many years' trophies and plaques in each district. Each one was handled differently.

I would rather not address how Virden's was handled. I will just speak to Girard's because I was on the Girard board at that time. A committee was formed by Ms. Brady. The committee was comprised of school officials and community members and it was decided that they would be moved to a number of places in Girard. Some are at City Hall. Some are at the public library and they would be displayed. Old uniforms and such, or trophies that this committee deemed insignificant or unimportant, were then offered for sale. I think the sale was held here at the Girard public library on a Saturday and people could come in and buy uniforms. There was a lot of discussion about uniforms because some of the past players wanted their uniforms with their number on it and so there were a number of items sold that were less significant. The more important trophies and plaques, however, in Girard are still on display.

Pogue: In August you had issues of graduation requirements. Were there differences between the two schools?

Gage: No. That went pretty smoothly. We reviewed the requirements of both Girard and Virden and came to an easy agreement on that.

Pogue: And did you have any issues about grading differences with grade point averages or were those also fairly similar?

Gage: Well, some of these things, you see, the Girard board and the Virden board jointly could not decide on. Some of these issues could only be decided once the North Mac board was in operation. We could make suggestions and express opinions and present them and then it perhaps made it easier for the North Mac to vote once they were in office since they had such a short time to do that. But there really wasn't any contention over the grading system that I am aware of either.

Pogue: September. The length of the school day.

- Gage: Well, the length of the school day didn't change drastically other than how transportation was affected by it. Transportation somewhat dictated the length of the school day and that was worked out.
- Pogue: What did you mean that it impacted? Because of transporting junior high students from one center to the other and vice versa?
- Gage: Yes, that is correct. We had students coming back from the capital vocational center. We had students coming back from special ed districts. One contention we did not have to deal with in this consolidation was the special district we would be in because both Girard and Virden were already members of the SASSED special ed district. But we had students coming in from that. We had the busing of Girard students to Virden, Virden students to Girard and all of that had to be worked out. That affected the length of the school day somewhat.
- Pogue: Staff assignments in October. Did that become an issue?
- Gage: Not really. We were not, you know, deciding perhaps definitely what the staff assignments would be, while we were more or less told and everyone was in agreement with it and gave our approval.
- Pogue: So, this was more of an administrative task?
- Gage: It is my perception that a great deal of these decisions were suggested by the administration and approved by the boards.
- Pogue: November: to finalize the curriculum in graduation. You indicated that those went fairly smooth and you had a feasibility study that kind of assisted the administration as well as the two boards. Is that correct?
- Gage: That is correct.
- Pogue: December. Finalizing staffing needs, textbooks and the new uniforms. Anything with that?
- Gage: There was some discussion about utilizing old uniforms and making due with what we had; using, perhaps, different textbooks in a grade level until textbook monies became available for the new district to purchase. Money was not abundant and to dive in and purchase all new uniforms and all new textbooks, as a board member, I was very concerned about that. But that is what was agreed to be done. New was purchased.
- Pogue: January, you had high school course description booklet merging the district policies.

Gage: Well, the high school course curriculum booklet was presented by the high school principal, Mr. Rob Horn, and it was pretty much agreed upon by everyone there. The district policies: actually, there are very few district policies that are not dictated by the state. I mean, the three or four inch notebook of policies that I received all had come down from the state. So, the discussion on merging district policies was almost a moot point from my perspective.

Pogue: In February: starting to register high school students. Was that the time of the new election and the hiring of administrators?

Gage: Yes, it was. Yes, it was. The new board was elected at that time and they started meeting immediately, but they were not actually able to vote and do anything legally until the July first date.

Pogue: How many of the new North Mac board were on the old Girard and Virden boards?

Gage: That is a very good question. I have to think about that a moment. I have to stop and think about that; I didn't have that lined out. There was only, I believe, one from Girard and there would have been probably one or two. I need to see a list of names in front of me and I don't have it.

Pogue: Okay, we are returning to that question. We were stopping to deal with the issue of how many of the seven Girard board members and seven Virden board members were now going on to the new North Mac board. Dixie, did you have any ...?

Gage: Yes. There were two members of the old Girard board, the last Girard board, elected to the new North Mac board. And there were two members of the last Virden school board elected to the North Mac board.

Pogue: And as far as the administration, I believe the Girard superintendent became the district superintendent. The Virden superintendent became the assistant superintendent. The principals: did the Girard high school?

Gage: The Girard high school principal became the high school principal. The Virden high school principal became the junior high or middle school principal and each of the elementary principals remained the same in the same buildings they had been in.

Pogue: Okay. So virtually all the administrators were still assigned to the new district that were in the two older ones.

Gage: That is correct.

- Pogue: Were there any issues with getting the students registered in a timely fashion?
- Gage: I don't believe so. I think the greatest registration problem perhaps lay with the high school counselor making sure that seniors, in particular, and juniors were covered in graduation requirements and that had to be done on a very short timeline during that summer. But it was accomplished.
- Pogue: In March you had collective bargaining on new contract, getting the grants written, health insurance, any staffing reductions, a tentative budget, school calendar and address district change issues. Anything with significance on those topics?
- Gage: Well, collective bargaining was actually put on the back burner. I mean, it began but it certainly wasn't settled that month. It ran actually well into the new school year, the 2010-2011 school year, the first year of North Mac in existence. So collective bargaining was a big issue and it actually was dealt with mostly by the new North Mac board. The rest of this, there was some re-employment of personnel, moves of furniture, that was all handled pretty much administratively.
- Pogue: In April: summer maintenance, and I assume there would be quite a bit to get the transition between high school and junior high worked out. You had: property casualty insurance, support personnel, the moving of the furniture, which you talked about, and updating all the district inventories.
- Gage: Right. And once again, that was pretty much handled administratively. Some of it had to be board approved. But the board really had minimal say in those areas. I mean, they condoned what was being done.
- Pogue: Were there more people needing to be hired for the summer maintenance as compared to before or just the same staff was utilized but targeted in a different way?
- Gage: Yes, that is correct. Basically the same staff was still employed and utilized in different ways and in different places.
- Pogue: In May you had bids for food, gasoline. You had the student handbooks fees, finalizing the policy manual that you covered before, the payroll dates, transportation plan. Anything with those?
- Gage: No. Once again, that was pretty much suggested by the administration and approved by the board.
- Pogue: And then in June you are ending the term of the old boards. You had the appointing of the attorney, consolidation of activity funds, the building schedules, the auditor.

Gage: Correct. That is correct and once again, I mean it was mostly administrative suggestions and approved by the boards.

Pogue: As you go back, you had quite a list of things to be done. What proved to be the toughest for the fourteen people who served on the two boards?

Gage: Well, I think transportation was a challenge. But that was worked out. I really feel that the contract and salary negotiations were probably the most difficult challenge facing the new districts. Both districts were in a negotiating year but there was a major difference in professional salaries between the two districts. Virden had a lot higher salary schedule. Language took a lot of work and compromise. Of course, the lower salaried staff would be raised to the level of the higher; that was a given. But the higher salaried Virden teachers demanded a raise on top of that. So, that became an issue for them. Virden wasn't willing to sit on it while Girard teachers were raised to their level. They wanted to go beyond ... they wanted a raise also. So that is one reason that negotiations lasted as long as they did and the North Mac board ended up handling that.

One of the issues that popped up that may or may not have been expected by some people is the issue with non-certified staff. Virden school district was wall to wall union. Girard school district did not recognize certified and non-certified staff on the same contract level. So naturally in the latter district, the non-certified wanted the same privileges as the other district so they voted to go wall-to-wall making the new salary demands even greater for the new district. A contract was tentatively agreed upon, but it was not signed until well into the new school year. You want me to go on about what was tough?

Pogue: Right.

Gage: Another tough part, I felt – and I am speaking totally here as an individual – is that I was like a salmon swimming upstream. There were five board members that had been drastically opposed to consolidation and they were united on every issue, so I walked into most board meetings as an independent. My votes, therefore, were pretty insignificant. I felt that I served very little value except to remind them of the need to think positively and constructively about consolidation. After consolidation had passed—to let you know how strong the feelings were—one board member on the last Girard district even lead a movement to help his small town of Nelwood petition out of the newly formed district. They lacked the numbers and the money needed for support, so that has since died a slow death, but it was continued for quite some time. The only thing that I felt that I made a real impact on was adding agriculture to the curriculum. A motion had been made to drop ag, but after a persuasive argument by myself, the motion to entertain a gradual introduction to ag classes did pass. I feel that the

program has been a big success. In fact, more ag classes are being added next year. Not only students, but the community has rallied its support behind the ag program in the new consolidated district. We just had a barn-to-barn golf classic this year that raised a little over \$20,000 for ag in the North Mac district. And I am quite proud of that.

I believe that the success of any school district is improved by parent community involvement. I would have liked to have seen more citizens be included on the committees that involved the consolidation—not voting privilege necessarily—but I was continually overruled on that issue. The only committee I did succeed in getting community involvement and student involvement in was the one I mentioned earlier on the mascot and color choices; having community members went very smoothly. It was good PR. I would highly recommend it to any districts consolidating to try to include more community involvement if they can. So I think those were the toughest challenges.

Pogue: What challenges actually became easier than what one would expect?

Gage: Well, the new district has been very united from the beginning, especially the students. It seems like most of the opposition came from a few parents of some of the older students. But even then, once the consolidation took place, once the new school year began, I felt that the students and the community were behind supporting the new district. In fact, I even detected a new vitality in the new district. There were new organizations formed for the students. There were new classes the students could attend. There was a huge attendance at sporting events and theatrical events. As I mentioned, look at the financial support for the ag program this year. Twenty thousand dollars in a community this size when money is lacking so much in this area. That bespeaks of the community support of the new school district in my opinion.

Pogue: Well, then, how did the new North Mac board fit in once they were selected in April. So now you have almost twenty people when you had some of these joint sessions.

Gage: Well, we actually met separately. The North Mac board met as the North Mac board. The Girard board was occupied with winding up Girard business. The Virden board was occupied with winding up Virden business. We were not even from that time on; we stopped having our joint individual board meetings. I mean, the Girard board and the Virden board did not continue to meet jointly because that business was being discussed by the North Mac board. So, after that point we just mainly took care of winding up the final business in each district.

- Pogue: So would that mean that after April, if you were on the Girard board you would have some sort of update as to what the progress was on the future merger from the administration, or did that come in a kind of separate memos?
- Gage: It kind of came in separate memos. The North Mac board for the most part was handling North Mac business. Even though they couldn't officially vote on anything until July first. Or act on anything.
- Pogue: Were there any other issues to keep the target goals moving? You said the role of the administration, the role of a consultant like Dr. Jackson, and was that also the leadership of the two boards?
- Gage: I think both boards were cognizant of the timeline and I am not speaking of the individual topics on the timeline. I am speaking of the actual time itself. We knew that we had very little time to get this so we could open the doors of North Mac School on July first and everybody was motivated to meet that challenge to accomplish that. I will say that I am aware that Miss Brady utilized quite a bit of legal advice. She relied on attorneys for a lot of advice that she needed. And then that was relayed to when the joint boards were meeting as well as the North Mac board.
- Pogue: Were there any difficulties of having the three boards kind of functioning all at the same time?
- Gage: No, not really. It was organized. I would receive an agenda for the Girard board. I would receive an agenda for the joint board. I was not on the North Mac board so I received no agenda for it. And we just each had our own assignments and our own topics to deal with and we dealt with them.
- Pogue: What seemed to be the expectation for this new district from the various boards since you are only talking about the Girard board? Once July started, what was the hope for what North Mac would be?
- Gage: Well, I think the wishes of the ad hoc committee came through on this because one of the things that the ad hoc committee had hoped for was an increase in the classes that could be offered and possibly offering some classes that the students could also earn dual credits for college with. And those things have come in to play. As I said, our ag department is growing, expanding. They did hire an ag teacher that was a new staff member that was hired. She also has a degree in science so we were able to afford her doubling up starting the ag program slowly. This next year it is going to be expanded upon. Students are able to take classes if they were not offered before. Parents, I have heard in the community, are talking very positively about that. Some students are able now to earn college credit. Parents are talking very favorably about that. I believe that we are going to be in a

larger sports conference next year. The public has received that very well. We now have a fine arts drama club in the middle school as well as the high school. We have had a play. We have a fine arts organization that has formed. The fine arts organization earns money for art, music and drama. We have now a North Mac school foundation, which neither school district had before, that earns money to supplement the district with materials and things that they are not able to afford; teachers can apply for grants through the foundation. Hopefully, we will have enough money some time that we can also offer scholarships but right now that is not available yet. So there has been an expansion of opportunities for the students and that is what was hoped for.

Pogue: Were there any surprises in the year-long planning that had to be taken by the Girard board or anything that was not expected from this time list that we covered for a twelve month period?

Gage: Well, at the time the ad hoc committee was supporting the consolidation, one of the talking points involved the state incentive money [laughs] and it all comes back to money, doesn't it? The state, you know, has been very short on money and the incentive money that was promised a lot of the public is like, "Yeah, we will believe that money when we see it." You know, it is not going to happen. What are we going to do without that incentive money? Basically what happened is, it was delayed, but the first payment of the incentive money was received in February and we are hopeful that it will continue to be funded.

Pogue: What improvements would you suggest for others facing merger as once they have agreed for consolidation or annexation or whatever means of reorganization and they had to then prepare for the new school district? What improvements would you think should be considered?

Gage: Well, certainly each situation is unique and Girard and Virden certainly was with Girard school board being against consolidation. But the school members, I felt, acted professionally and I think the mapping and following a timeline is crucial. The more time the newly seated board has before the opening day of the newly formed district, the better. I personally would have liked to have seen a new superintendent brought in. I realize we couldn't because of the money constraints. There were contracts that had to be honored and things and we didn't have the money to pay yet a third superintendent, but a newly formed district to me needs a new breath of life blown into it, and I would have liked to have seen new leadership and perhaps that is still yet coming. I mean that certainly is not over with at this time; I mean it is still a possibility. The Virden elementary stayed in Virden. The Girard elementary stayed in Girard. Not all the teachers stayed in their same buildings. Some switched. Some Girard went to Virden; some Virden went to Girard, mostly of their own choosing.

But I have heard some contention because basically what you are doing is the middle school and high school combined. They are a united body. The elementary schools, Girard is still Girard, with Girard's administrator. Virden is still Virden's with Virden's administrator, elementary principal. Virden's parents are still supporting that school and Girard parents are still supporting Girard school. Miss Brady was from Girard and she is, of course, running Virden the way she ran Girard and there is some resentment there.

My advice to future districts is to consider attendance centers that would have eliminated and unified, in my opinion—and this is only my opinion—it would have unified the district further. I don't think the elementary schools are as unified as they could be if they had gone to attendance centers. In other words, you might have even kept kindergarten in each town but had like one, two, three in Girard and four, five in Virden or flip them. I don't care. Vice versa. But it would have mingled the students, mingled the parents, mingled the administrators and it would have alleviated that division that I think is still felt. Of course, I am a teacher. I hear teacher talk. It is still felt some by the teachers, especially in the elementary building.

Pogue: Were there any other issues that seemed to work in this year-long planning stage beside the outline and keeping those deadlines in place and knowing that you had to be ready to go by July one and that the North Mac Board would not take over until April?

Gage: I can't think of any other than what I have stated.

Pogue: What help did you get from the state board of education, the regional office, the special ed cooperative, the consolidation studies, any outside consultants, or any other districts that had been in this situation?

Gage: Well, I would like to stop here just a minute and say that it is my opinion that the success of this referendum was not determined by consolidation studies or feasibility studies and definitely not by board recommendations. The success of this referendum was based on a group of intelligent, progressive-thinking individuals from both towns who had a finger on the pulse of their communities. We believed public sentiment supported this consolidation and members of the ad hoc worked together diligently, intelligently and with integrity in every step of the process. I have been a member of many, many committees through the years and on several boards and I have never been a part of a group that worked so complementarily and cohesively as this group. It was like a well oiled, finely tuned machine. We were fortunate to have an attorney, a newspaper owner, a businessman, educators, farmers and other professionals and interested citizens all dedicated to this cause. The meetings were very well attended. This was truly an opportunity to exercise citizen's rights as is allowed in our state

constitution. And it was certainly an honor to have been a part of that. That being said, the feasibility study was helpful only from the perspective—the only area I am aware that it helped—was it backed up the board’s statement of which grades would be in which buildings. To use Virden high school for the high school which some Girard people were not happy about, to use the middle and Girard’s old high school: the feasibility study was used for that. Calvin Jackson’s timeline would have been very helpful. I am not sure it was his timeline that we followed or one that Miss Brady obtained from other districts that consolidated, but the timeline was crucial no matter who formed it. The regional office of education was really only a part of this that I am aware of, in terms of the hearing and helping get this on the referendum on the ballot in April. Other than that, the regional office had very little input in the entire matter. I know Miss Brady consults our school attorneys regularly for advice and I think they were very helpful in a number of issues.

Pogue: Before we kind of review again the dates of this whole consolidation, in April there was a school building issue tied to state grant that Virden had written before as an independent district. I believe it was like a five million dollar plus responsibility of the local district out of about fifteen million dollars potential work which would have torn down some of the old Virden high school, added a new part as well as other remodeling; it was not successful. Were there any issues tied to the defeat of that particular school construction?

Gage: Well, I am speaking again from strictly my own perspective. There were a number of people, parents, who wanted a new building to be built between Girard and Virden. Girard was heavily in debt when this consolidation took place, much more so than Virden. Virden assumed Girard’s debts and agreed to this when they passed the vote to consolidate. The bottom line was they did not have enough borrowing power left to borrow the money to build the new building and buy land for a new high school between the two towns. This money became available in April of 2011, just this month actually. And a number of people, I think, voted against it because their statements, I have heard, were stated, “Well, if we can’t have a new high school between the two towns, then I am not going to vote for money being spent to build a new high school and tear down the old high school in Virden. I won’t do that.” So you get your little lines of division popping up again. But that really wasn’t an option, simply because of the monies that were involved. The fifteen million would have allowed the district to build some new classrooms in Virden. Tear down the old high school. Utilize newer rooms in Virden. Do some heating and cooling and roofing, items like that just to maintain the buildings they already have. It was not publicized enough, in my opinion, and there was not enough information and campaigning done to see this passed in the election that was just held. I myself attended one school board meeting where they were supposed to

present the information for the architect for what was going to be done with the money and I left knowing very little and feeling very confused.

Pogue: Did the issue pass in certain areas?

Gage: I believe it passed in Virden. I know it passed by a closer margin in Virden. Girard defeated it. Actually I think there was only about a hundred votes difference that caused it to fail. But Virden passed it more so than Girard.

Pogue: As we talk about school reorganization, we talked about incentives and we did not really dwell on it much because we were more focusing about the planning, but the state had an incentive program for schools to consolidate: one was dealing with maybe a district's debt, another is to help deal with the salary differential and also play a role that you got four thousand dollars per certified staff member. But one of the drawbacks seems to be that school construction is not considered in the Illinois version of incentives and that is a separate grant which is somewhat in jeopardy from year to year as to how much is appropriated from the state toward school construction. And then you had your rankings. School consolidation is one element that pushes you higher but does not automatically guarantee it as all part of one package. Would it have been helpful for a merger to have had school construction part of the whole package when the North Mac was created?

Gage: Well, I don't think there is a doubt about that. I mean that is almost a given from my perspective. And, yes, it certainly would have helped. One of the unfortunate problems of passing this referendum is, it was applied for by Virden, I believe in 2003. The big movement here in consolidation, and this is our first year being North Mac, and then all of a sudden this money became available for construction, you know, eight years later, that we did not know was going to be available and it just popped up all of a sudden. The voters have not quite gotten over the election to merge the two districts and then to turn right around in this next election and throw this referendum at them again to want more money for more taxes – they claim more taxes – it would not have raised taxes but a lot of the people believe it would have. And I think that is one of the reasons they voted it down. It was just too much too soon. If it had been included in the consolidation vote, yes, that would have been very helpful for incentive money.

Pogue: Well, in conclusion, I wanted to kind of review this timeframe so our listeners can have a good idea of why a timeline had to be developed. You talked about that there was past consolidation votes in fifty eight and sixty nine.

Gage: Those are approximate years. If my memory serves me right those were the years.

- Pogue: And then there was a Carlinville-Girard study in 2008.
- Gage: Correct.
- Pogue: Was that kind of in the spring or ...?
- Gage: Well, in the winter, yes, in the winter. Towards spring. After the first of the year, I believe.
- Pogue: And then in June the committee of ten in 2008 was formed.
- Gage: Yes, that is correct.
- Pogue: What month was the petition filed with the regional superintendent in 2008?
- Gage: [laughs]
- Pogue: Do you have any idea? Was it the fall or ...
- Gage: We had a deadline and I do not recall that deadline. I don't recall the number of signatures, either, on petitions within each district by a certain date. We had to have the seven voting districts already drawn up and decided when this petition was presented. We also had to have the tax rate established. There was an awful lot that had to be done in a very short amount of time in order to get this presented. I want to say, maybe September. But I am not sure.
- Pogue: Okay. Well, I do show that maybe September in that month was the regional hearing so perhaps ...
- Gage: So then it probably was August.
- Pogue: Okay. Then the regional superintendent had to react within so many days.
- Gage: That is correct.
- Pogue: Following the hearing. And the regional superintendent approved it.
- Gage: Yes.
- Pogue: So it then went to the county clerks and the county clerks would have been in Macoupin and Sangamon counties because North Mac covered those two counties.
- Gage: North Mac also includes a corner of Montgomery.
- Pogue: Okay. Then there was in 2008 a Girard-Virden study done by Dr. Phillips.

- Gage: Right, which we had to have redone or updated, if you will; they said it was redone but basically it was an update of that study at this time for the hearing.
- Pogue: Then an approval by the state superintendent.
- Gage: Correct. And I believe that came about Christmas.
- Pogue: Okay. Then in 2009 you had an April referendum.
- Gage: We had an April referendum after it was approved in ... well, I want to say Christmas. I was thinking I was on Christmas break when I got the news that they had approved it. And we had basically from January 1 until the election date in April to campaign.
- Pogue: And then once it became successful you had joint board meetings starting in May between the Virden and Girard boards.
- Gage: Yes.
- Pogue: And you covered that depth and then we jump to February 2020 where you had now the election for three boards.
- Gage: No, we had the election for the new North Mac.
- Pogue: New North Mac, okay.
- Gage: So, seven people were elected to the North Mac board. Each one from one of those newly formed districts that the ad hoc committee had presented in their petition.
- Pogue: Okay, so the April 2009 referendum: that was when new board members were selected for the old Girard ...
- Gage: That is correct. It happened at the very same date as the referendum vote.
- Pogue: And then did you say, April, May and June the North Mac just basically met independently?
- Gage: Well, once the last Virden board had been elected and the last Girard board had been elected, the two boards would meet. We would alternate towns, going back and forth between Girard and Virden. We would meet first as our individual boards in the same building in different locations within the building. And we were to have business done by a certain time and then we would meet as a joint board.
- Pogue: And when did the joint board meetings stop?

Gage: I don't recall if we continued to meet. We actually didn't do much business. I think we continued to meet all the way up until the North Mac board took over. But once the North Mac board was seated in February, they actually took over most of that joint business.

Pogue: Then July 2010 the North Mac board begins and then the role of the Girard-Virden boards was dissolved.

Gage: Yes.

Pogue: And in August 2010, students went to the North Mac district.

Gage: That is correct. So, in a nutshell, if somebody is wanting to know how long it takes to pull this off, our ad hoc committee started in June and we went in one year, and two months time we opened the new school district doors.

Pogue: So, this gives the listener a good idea of how timelines, because of the election laws that maybe trigger when certain dates have to be met and some of the restrictions that you talked about in not getting the North Mac board operating sooner, can play a role this whole planning stage. Well, we want to thank Dixie for giving us input as a member of the committee of ten and later with the Girard board involving the planning of the new North Mac district. We thank you for taking the time to explain this to our listeners.

Gage: You are most welcome. I do believe in the consolidation and I feel very glad that the voters in Girard and Virden passed this and we now have a new consolidated district.

[end of interview]