

Interview with Barbara Flynn Currie

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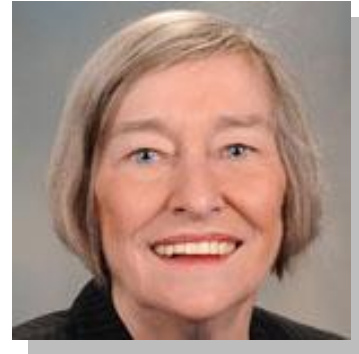
Interviewer: Phil Pogue

Pogue: My name is Phil Pogue. We're doing a project for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library on the topic education is key. The topic deals with a 1985 Educational Reform Act that had over 169 reforms in it. Today we're going to be talking to Representative Barbara Flynn Currie, in her office in Chicago. It's August 6, 2014. Representative Currie, thank you very much for being a participant in our project to describe this important education act.

Currie: Delighted to participate.

Pogue: To start with, would you review your family history?

Currie: Sure, my parents were both very engaged in matters political, and policy-oriented people they were. We spent our dinner table conversations, when I was growing up, talking about major issues of the day. My father was a professor in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. My mother was a middle school teacher.



Barbara Flynn Currie

I grew up in Hyde Park and went to St. Thomas the Apostle Grammar School, University of Chicago High School. In college I was a student at the University of Chicago. I married before I finished, so I came back to Chicago when my husband took a job teaching in the law school. We brought up our children, and I finished college slowly, on the motherhood plan.

Pogue: Could you give us some background on your work history?

Currie: When I first was married I did a little work at a clerical kind of job at Harvard, where my husband was a student. Then, when we had children, I mostly stayed at home and took care of them. I did a little part-time work as a graduate student because I had gone back to school, again slowly on the motherhood plan, and I did some work through the National Institute of Mental Health on a survey project. At some point along the way I also did some part-time college teaching. But the most important job I've held is the one I hold now, which is state representative. I ran for the job in 1978, was elected in seventy-nine. I've been in the House of Representatives since.

Pogue: What was your college major?

- Currie: Political science.
- Pogue: What attracted you to that?
- Currie: Partly my parents, who were very engaged in the community and very interested in public policy.
- Pogue: As a state representative, what kinds of committees have you been involved with?
- Currie: I ran the Revenue Committee for many years, and I'm now the chairman of the Rules Committee.
- Pogue: What exactly is the Rules Committee?
- Currie: That's the procedural committee that determines which bills have an opportunity to be heard in substantive committees. We also review amendments, motions, other kinds of things. So, it's a procedural committee. It's a gatekeeping function.
- Pogue: How many years have you been involved with the Rules Committee?
- Currie: I'm not sure. Certainly since 1997 but maybe before then.
- Pogue: What is the responsibility of a chairman?
- Currie: It's a small committee, three from the majority party, two from the minority party, so the job of chairman is pretty important.
- Pogue: Why did you also have an interest in education?
- Currie: I think everybody who serves in Springfield is interested in education. We all got educated, and we have a sense that we really know a lot about the field, having once been students ourselves. Many of us also are parents, and we've seen our children go through the school system.

I was particularly interested when I first went to Springfield in issues of early childhood education. The Ypsilanti Study had already come out, and it underscored the importance of early learning opportunities for educationally at-risk youngsters.¹ So, among the early bills I introduced was one that would provide state support for pre-school programs and also a bill that would have asked the state to reimburse the second half of kindergarten, second half-day of kindergarten for districts that were running full day programs.

¹ The landmark Ypsilanti study traced the progress of 58 black children from low-income families who were enrolled in a preschool education program in the mid-1960's. The study found significantly higher rates of high school graduation and employment and lower rates of arrest and teen-age pregnancy than among a comparable group that had not participated in early childhood education programs.
(<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/04/09/science/education-study-stresses-preschool-benefits.html>)

Pogue: How long did it take to plant those seeds in Springfield?

Currie: A long time. This was 1979, and it was not until the eighty-five act [Illinois Educational Reform Act of 1985] that the early childhood programs became law.

Pogue: What were some of the obstacles or concerns about pre-kindergarten and full day kindergarten?

Currie: There were a lot of antediluvian members of the Illinois General Assembly during that era. Many of them thought that children should be kept at their mother's knee, and their mothers should be kept pregnant and cooking in the kitchen. So, we had a lot of very reactionary people at that time who thought it was not a good idea for children to be anyplace but at home.

That changed over time and, of course, it was during that era that women in very large numbers were returning to the workforce. So, the ideal family, in which Dad's the breadwinner and Mom stays home rearing the kids, was rapidly disappearing from the American economic scene.

Pogue: In 1979, who were some of the champions for early childhood education?

Currie: There were a few people who were interested. I think Art Berman in the Senate was certainly interested in it.² And I think people on the State Board [of Education], those who kept close attention to what was going on in academic research, recognized the importance of early childhood opportunities for at-risk kids.

Pogue: When you were thinking about early childhood, back in 1979, what models were you even thinking of at the time?

Currie: I was thinking very much of the Ypsilanti program, which talked about quality pre-school opportunities and how over time those experiences made a significant difference, not so much in whether kids got As or Bs but whether kids required special education services, whether kids were likely to get into trouble with the law, and whether they were likely to end up on welfare.

Pogue: How did the study get promoted? Was it promoted well in Illinois, since it came out of Michigan?

Currie: It was. It was University of Michigan researchers, but it did get a lot of attention in the national press. Again, I don't know that all of my colleagues were alert to it, but it certainly was something that many of us talked about. I think the initial finding was that, for every dollar you spend on quality early

² Arthur L. "Art" Berman (born May 4, 1935) is a retired American lawyer and politician in the Democratic Party. Berman served in the Illinois House of Representatives from 1967 to 1976 and then served in the Illinois Senate from 1977 until 2000. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Berman)

childhood programs, you're saving \$7 in the long run in the costs of incarceration, special education, and the welfare system. Those findings have held up over the years. The youngsters in the Ypsilanti study had been followed for a time, and they continue to be followed.

Pogue: In your earlier days as a state representative were you on the Education Committee?

Currie: I don't believe I ever served on the Education Committee.

Pogue: You were active in promoting early childhood but not on the committee?

Currie: Right, right.

Pogue: Did you have any supporters on the Education Committee?

Currie: I did. In fact, ultimately, I think I got the bill got out of committee in 1985. I believe I got the bill out of committee in an earlier time as well, although it did not succeed on the floor. I can't remember what year that was. I don't think it was seventy-nine.

Pogue: What conditions in the General Assembly led to the Educational Reform Act of 1985?

Currie: I think a lot of it was the national focus, Nation At Risk [a 1983 report of American President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education], a lot of talk about it's time for education reform, a general sense that we needed to improve how we provide quality public education across the board. So, it was not unusual.

You think about the environment. In the late sixties and early seventies, it was all about the environment, the beginnings of Earth Day, the Environmental Protection Agency created in Illinois. So, here we were with the same kind of focus, the same kind of concern about our public education system. That was a national phenomenon, and it certainly had an impact in Illinois.

And, of course, there had been people throughout the years who thought that Illinois should have, separate from whatever national focus...that yes, of course, we could be doing better in Illinois. That had, in part, to do with funding, but it also had to do other issues.

Pogue: In 1983, there was an Illinois Commission on the Improvement of Elementary and Secondary Education. They did a lot of study and eventually gave a report in January of eighty-five, just prior to the legislative activity. Were you involved in that?

Currie: I was not a member of that commission.

Pogue: Did you submit ideas to the commission?

Currie: If I did, it would have been mostly focused on early childhood.

Pogue: In 1985, when you went to Springfield, was there a sense that educational reform was ready to pop out?

Currie: I think there was a sense that we needed to work on education reform. Exactly how that was going to look at the end of the day was, at that moment, still unsettled.

One issue had largely to do with funding. How are you going to pay for it? Because I think there was practically nobody who didn't believe that one of the problems facing public education in the State of Illinois was inadequate funding, also issues of inequitable funding. Besides early childhood education, equity in funding has always been a major concern of mine.

Pogue: Was 1985 a good fiscal year for revenue?

Currie: We needed to find extra revenue if we were going to find a way to make some major changes in the way we finance...in our ability to implement reforms that cost more than \$1.50.

Pogue: Did the political parties work together getting ready for reform?

Currie: I think they did. I think it was a time when there was a fair amount of bi-partisanship, certainly in the Education Committee in the House, and I believe in the Senate there was a big focus on bi-partisanship.

Pogue: In 1984, House Speaker Madigan held a lot of statewide conferences on educational issues. So, you had a commission doing work; you had the Speaker holding meetings. What impact did those meetings have?

Currie: I think just more bolstering the sense that reform is in the air; reform is on its way.

Pogue: Did you attend or hear...

Currie: Oh, I'm sure I went to a number of them. In fact, I'd be surprised if I got to miss any of them.

Pogue: So you've got the Commission Report in January. The Speaker held meetings in eighty-four. You have the Nation at Risk and other studies, such as your Ypsilanti. Then Governor Thompson gave a State-of-the-State address on education that included an Illinois Better Schools Program. What was the mood of the legislature with that State-of the—

- Currie: I don't remember specifically, but again, we're all piling on, right? Bipartisan, all the advocacy groups, the partisan forces, including the Speaker and the governor. You know, it's a real pile-on.
- Pogue: Were there any other groups that were very active in helping push the reform up the ladder, so votes would be taken?
- Currie: I think the IFT [Illinois Federation of Teachers], the IEA [Illinois Education Association], I think school administrators, I think individual advocacy organizations, special-ed groups, people concerned about dropouts, alternative schools people... I think everybody played a role, and I think that what you saw at the end of the day was a reform package that pretty much covered the waterfront.
- Pogue: Were there some key legislative leaders who were kind of helping put everything together at this time?
- Currie: I would say Art Berman in the Senate was certainly a major player. He'd been a major player in education issues all his time in Springfield, generally regarded as "Mr. Education." Glenn Schneider was certainly very active, a House Democrat, in that arena, and—I'm forgetting his name—there was a Republican who was also "Mr. Education."³
- Pogue: Gene Hoffman?
- Currie: Gene Hoffman, right, in the House.⁴ So, those people I think were... Those three people were generally thought to be major leaders. There may well be others that I'm forgetting. I know Dick Mulcahey was then the chair of the House Elementary and Secondary Education Committee. I don't remember thinking of him as being a particular leader in this arena, but he obviously was, or we wouldn't have got it done. And I think Ted Sanders of the State Board of Education played a good, strong role in guiding the planks of the platform, the pieces of the reform effort.
- Pogue: Ted Sanders was fairly new to Illinois at this time.
- Currie: Yeah, but he had a good strong reputation, and he certainly could, as we say, wake up and smell the coffee. Anybody who didn't notice that we were on our way to doing something major shouldn't have been playing in that same ballpark.

³ J. Glenn Schneider's career as a high school history teacher in Naperville made him a knowledgeable member of the Illinois House of Representatives, where he represented the Naperville area for six terms from 1971 to 1983. (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/obituaries/ct-glenn-schneider-obituary-20170305-story.html>)

⁴ Former Republican state Rep. Gene L. Hoffman served for 24 years in the Illinois General Assembly and during that time was commonly known on both sides of the aisle as "Mr. Education." (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2008-01-09-0801080896-story.html>)

- Pogue: Would you say Ted Sanders had a good relationship with the General Assembly?
- Currie: I think he did, yes.
- Pogue: You talked a little bit about the importance of funding. How did the state come up with the funding considerations for such a major program?
- Currie: Didn't we do a telephone tax? I think we did something on telecom and there may have been some other pieces of the proposal. We shied away from general taxes. Particularly my Republican colleagues were reluctant to increase the income tax, for example. But my recollection is that we relied primarily on telecom. There may have been a couple of other pieces that went into the funding package.
- Pogue: This was early in your experience as a member of the General Assembly. Had you ever been involved in such a major reform package before?
- Currie: The only one that preceded it, I think, would be... In 1979, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that the Illinois Constitution that had been adopted in 1970 essentially said we're going to abolish the personal property tax and replace it. So, the Supreme Court, much to everybody's surprise, said, "That's what the Constitution says, and that's what it means. Okay, General Assembly, it's going to be repealed. You have to replace it." That was a very contentious issue and a very time consuming, interesting one. And that actually was in, I think, if not my first term, my second. It was in my first term. But whether it was seventy-nine or eighty that we actually took action, I don't remember.
- Pogue: In putting all these many bills together, Senate Bill 730 was the one that got the most publicity. But there were many others that needed to be passed, tied to each of the 169 reforms. As a member of the General Assembly, how active were you in knowing what was going on with this whole package?
- Currie: I knew a fair bit. I think what was important was that the education committees determined that instead of having individual sponsors taking credit for this piece or that piece of the action, that it was important to have a committee bill. This is a bill that we all agreed to. That's how 730 came along...and 1070.

My particular interest, as I say, was the early childhood education piece. For political reasons, my piece got separated. So, House Bill 90 was an important part of that reform. That was the early childhood education piece, and people were fearful of leaving it, the big package, because Phyllis

Schlafly and her Eagle Forum had decided to come to Springfield and cause trouble.⁵

Pogue: When you said that it would be pulled as a separate—

Currie: It was pulled. There had been a bill, House Bill 90; it was going to be rolled into the larger program. At the eleventh hour, it was pulled back out again because there was a fear that Phyllis Schlafly and her conservative buddies would jettison the whole reform program.

Pogue: Were other pieces of the Educational Reform Act similarly treated?

Currie: No.

Pogue: When it got through—

Currie: At least not to my recollection. That was the biggie.

Pogue: How difficult was it to get the individual bill through?

Currie: As it turned out, not nearly as difficult as all of the worriers were fearful that it might be. It passed with a pretty significant vote in both chambers. Jim Thompson, to his credit as governor... Even though I think he was pleased to see it pulled from the main package because it would have put everything in jeopardy, he did a good job encouraging people to vote for it and so did many of the stakeholders. So, the bill passed without... I mean with dissent but without just the narrowest of edges.

Pogue: What were the main ingredients of the pre-kindergarten bill?

Currie: That we had one. That the state would by virtue of this bill, this legislation, say, “Yes, we’re going to fund a program to offer early learning opportunities for at-risk youngsters”. We had never done that before. At that time most states didn’t do it. There was federal Head Start, and that had been around for a time.⁶ But this was a different layer and a different focus. And as I told you, in 1979, attitudes didn’t change overnight. There was then a feeling that the system should stay out of the early childhood activity.

Pogue: Some of the challenges to create an early childhood program with school districts would be such things as finding qualified teachers...

⁵ Eagle Forum is a conservative interest group in the United States founded by Phyllis Schlafly in 1972 and is the parent organization that also includes the Eagle Forum Education and Legal Defense Fund and the Eagle Forum PAC. The Eagle Forum has been primarily focused on social issues; it describes itself as pro-family and reports membership of 80,000. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eagle_Forum)

⁶ Launched in 1965, Head Start was originally conceived as a catch-up summer school program that would teach low-income children in a few weeks what they needed to know to start elementary school. Head Start is one of the longest-running programs to address the effects of systemic poverty in the United States by intervening to aid children ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Head_Start_\(program\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Head_Start_(program)))

Currie: Right. And the program that we established was an application program that was not an automatic anybody who wants one gets one. You had to apply; you had to meet certain criteria. And it wasn't just school districts that could apply but community organizations; others could apply as well.

One of the things that was really good about our program—Sally Pancrazio, who was then a member of the State Board of Education staff, was terrific on this—one of the things that I think was really good about our program was that it did have pretty good quality standards from the very beginning.

But funding was not what you'd call huge in the beginning. And over time... It took a long time to increase funding so that we could reach more than just a small section of the population that was the focus of House Bill 90.

Pogue: Was this program initially set up to target three and four-year-olds?

Currie: Yes. It was only later that we also did work on the earlier...from birth to three. This was focused on three to five.

Pogue: There were some other early bills that talked about parent education. Was that something that you were involved in too?

Currie: Yeah, but that was not really part of the early childhood. There were things, New Parents as Teachers, other kinds of programs that were also out there in the ether.⁷

Pogue: When you talked about the role Sally played representing the State Board of Education, what were some of the important things that the State Board did to help push this thing together?

Currie: After the bill passed... First of all, as I say, I think Ted Sanders was doing a good job lobbying. The governor was doing a good job, and Sally Pancrazio was an expert in this arena. So, first of all, the skeletal structure, what does it look like? How is it going to operate? She was very helpful in putting that together.

Then, once passed, of course, you have rules and regulations. How is the State Board going to implement it? As I say, this was an application program. It was nothing automatic. With the full day kindergarten, that was automatic. So, if you're a school district, and you're offering a kindergarten program that goes from 9:00 until 3:00, under the bill, the state would reimburse at its usual rates the second half of the day. That was automatic. But when it came to the three to five year-old set, that was an application program.

⁷ The Parents as Teachers model is a cohesive package of services with four primary goals: Increase **parent** knowledge of early childhood development and improve parenting practices. Provide early detection of developmental delays and health issues. Prevent child abuse and neglect. (<http://patillinois.org/>)

So, Sally was helpful in making sure that the language of the statute focused on quality. And then, as the person responsible for implementing the rules and regulations that the State Board adopted, I think it really did encourage quality as a major focus.

- Pogue: Were there any big issues, as far as negotiating with the people that were putting the full package together that became the 1985 Educational Reform Act?
- Currie: There was certainly a lot of negotiation, a lot of compromises. As I say, all the major stakeholders got something at the end of the day, or I think it wouldn't have easily passed. But when it came to the early childhood part, that got kind of separated and sat there on its own.
- Pogue: Could you describe to us how all this process came about? We've talked about time lines, the Commission's Report in 1985, the Governor's State-of-the-State address. Now everybody is starting to submit their bills, and you are not necessarily in the big package but you...
- Currie: Right. There wasn't a big package to begin with. There were a lot of separate bills. So, mine was a separate bill, House Bill 90. And then its contents were rolled into 730 [the Educational Reform Act], but then they took it out because they were fearful that it could jeopardize everything else.
- Pogue: Did you attend any of the Ed Committee meetings during that time?
- Currie: Some but not most of them.
- Pogue: When did you realize that, because of all of the push of the people, this thing is going to get passed?
- Currie: I think that we pretty well knew. I don't remember the timeline, but I think that once a lot of bills came out of committee, and then there was more focus on trying to refine them and put them all together, I think that was a signal that we were on our way. Once the financing package came together, I think that was the other signal that things were going to work.
- Pogue: Was there much discussion on the floor on early childhood, or was this mostly in committee?
- Currie: No. Because it was a separate bill, there was quite a lot of discussion. There was discussion about it on the floor, separate from all the other items which were in a single bill.
- Pogue: What were some of the topics that were covered in those discussions?
- Currie: In which? About...

Pogue: The early childhood.

Currie: In fact, as I say, I think it turned out that the Phyllis Schlafly people were lacking in political resources. I think there wasn't as much discussion, nor were there as many negative votes as people had expected. I don't even remember if there was a lot of talk about children staying home in the kitchen with their mothers or if it was just the people who knew [that] they were with the Eagle Forum were voting no quietly or whether they were chatty about it. I just don't remember.

Pogue: Did the Senate have a similar kind of bill?

Currie: I think they did. I don't know if they did, but I believe it was House Bill 90 that passed both chambers. I'm sure there would have been some action on the early childhood front, but I don't remember who was the leader.

Pogue: You talked about the actual vote; what were your feelings when you knew this is now being scheduled for a final vote?

Currie: I was quite delighted, and I was quite delighted that we won. Take **that** Phyllis Schlafly. Take **that** Eagle Forum.

Pogue: We talked about this large number of bills. Were these passed over periods of a week, or was there a big massive vote?

Currie: It was really two bills. There was the House bill and the Senate bill, and my recollection is that pretty much what we did was encompassed in those two proposals. They were big, comprehensive bills. I don't think that we did a lot of separate individual bills. It was really the comprehensive one that took most of the discussion and ate up most of the air in the chamber. [That] is my recollection. I certainly could be wrong.

Pogue: Were you involved in any of the other reforms or have feelings about some of the other topics that were being presented? Some of those were defining a purpose for schooling, having learning goals, having state accountability with assessments...

Currie: Yeah, I was interested in all of them. I was not directly engaged in most of these. As I say, my particular focus would have been education funding equity and early childhood.

Pogue: What was the status of funding equity?

Currie: It did not get addressed in this bill in any significant way, except to the extent that increasing funding for the state school aid formula always included a component that reflected the relative wealth of the children in a particular district.

Pogue: What was the feeling in 1985 about the status of funding? We just had the 1970 Constitution—it wasn't very old at that time—that talked about the state having a primary role.

Currie: Right. And there had already been a challenge to the state formula on the grounds that the state was not paying more than half of the cost of public schooling. And in the Illinois Supreme Court, that challenge failed. The Court ruled that the language about primary responsibility was hortatory.

That didn't mean that the issue went away. The issue of adequacy and certainly the issue of equity was becoming more and more a focus. In fact, Jim Edgar, several years later when he was the governor of the state, pressed for a proposal that would have significantly increased equity in the way we fund public education.

Pogue: Among the other programs that were in the final package, one dealt with teacher evaluation, principal evaluation. Were there strong feelings that this is something that we needed to do for accountability?

Currie: I think that is right. Let me just point out, however, that people are still—there was an article in the [Chicago] Tribune just today—people are still saying the standards really aren't high enough, and they're too many loopholes, and it's too easy to become a teacher without having the actual background experience that you should. So, yes, that was certainly an important part of the background, that we need to beef up teacher training; we need to beef up teacher credentials and recertification.

I don't think that the bill went all that far in that direction, but not bad for 1985. I think it was important to, particularly, my Republican colleagues that there'd be a real focus on teacher improvement.

Pogue: You were promoting early childhood. Were there other legislators promoting things that had kind of been held at the back burner and had never gotten through. Were they all then added?

Currie: I am sure that is right. I wasn't so aware of who they were or what their issues were. But again, I mentioned earlier, special advocacy organizations, whether about dropouts or special ed or gifted programs, they were certainly out there beating the drums for their particular preferred issue.

Pogue: There was a start of the state textbook program at that time. Was that a controversial item?

Currie: Sure. But I think that was a way of mollifying the "catlicks," as we say, the Catholic Church. This was a way of saying that there will be something for everybody. Even those families who do not use the public system, they all have something to be able to write home about at the end of the day.

Pogue: Also at that time, there were some reforms targeted to Chicago. This is not the major Chicago Reform Act that would come later, but there were some targets, as well as the issue of getting State Board authority over Chicago certification or getting that more uniform. Was that a hot button item?

Currie: I really don't remember. I suspect that it was, but I'm pretty sure that by the time we did it, the Chicago people were okay.

Pogue: Once the bill was passed, what kind of reports were you getting from your constituency on what came out of this major reform and also with early childhood?

Currie: My experience was that the early childhood piece was much appreciated by people who were involved in actually educating kids. I would say that most of what we did in the whole reform package didn't... I don't think it mattered much to real people in the real world, as most of what we do doesn't matter to real people in the real world. They don't see the results.

So, we put a little more money into education. That probably meant that we paid the teachers a little better, and I suspect the teachers who got better pay noticed and were grateful. But as for everybody else, these things take time to work their way through the system. And I don't know that most people most of the time look at what we do in Springfield and come back later and say, "Gee, that was really swell."

Pogue: Having had it pass, and now State Board is working on it, and eventually monies would start to go out to the school districts, what did you hope, as a legislator, would take place?

Currie: My hope was that, in fact, we would be doing a better job at the local level in educating our young and turning out a better product. My hope with my early childhood program was that, in fact, we'd be giving kids at risk of school failure a better chance at succeeding. And I think that we did; I think that that worked.

But it wasn't done when we passed the bills. It's done over time, when you increase funding so that the chances of a program getting state support when that program is providing early childhood services is increased when you put more money into the effort.

Pogue: You were not on the Education Committee, so later on, you didn't receive a lot of the progress reports from the local districts and all the training, the details. How did you keep aware of what was happening then?

Currie: I think there are all kinds of ways that legislators pick up on what's going on. Our staff would have done precis, abstracts, short reports based on the longer reports. So, I think we were all kept up-to-date.

Pogue: As far as some of the other items in the Reform Act, there was a hot topic called School Reorganization. And although it doesn't necessarily affect your constituency up here, how contentious was it?

Currie: Very contentious, still contentious today. In fact, if I recall correctly, it was either in eighty-two or eighty-six that it became a big issue in the gubernatorial campaign between Adlai Stevenson and Jim Thompson. In fact, I think Jim Thompson had signed a bill that was not in this package, but there had been a proposal that increased incentives and maybe even had a few sticks—I can't remember the specifics—that encouraged school consolidations, school reorganization, primarily a downstate issue.

The public went berserk. And Adlai Stevenson began picking up the cudgels and beating the governor about the head and ears. The governor pulled back, and we haven't done very much on school consolidation since.

The problems are several. First of all, you have a community for whom it turns out that the schools are the biggest employer. Second, you're the parent, and you were a whatever, a Centralia Bulldog and you want to make sure your kid gets to be one too. So, rivalries and history and all those kinds of things play a very important role.

On the other hand, we have far too many school districts. We still do. And there are some of them that really do need to be merged because you can't provide a wealth of educational opportunity when you have too few students.

Pogue: Another area of interest that you may not have been involved in but perhaps got involved in later was the Educational Service Centers [ESCs] that were created.

Currie: Yeah, I was never really involved in those, although my view was that they certainly beat out the idea of elected regional superintendents. So, I was a supporter of the ESCs. But that too ran into some political buzz saws. The idea of electing regional superintendents never struck me as the right way to run a railroad. But I understand that the politics were pretty powerful in their favor.

Pogue: So eventually the service centers ended up in kind of a combat with the regional offices as to which one would survive...

Currie: Right.

Pogue: ...and the regional offices were the ones.

Currie: Yeah, although in recent years there has been decreased state funding for the regional offices. I don't know if that means that the Education Service Centers are doing better. Maybe it just means that the State Board is taking on more

responsibility. But I think the handwriting's on the wall. The idea of electing regional sups [superintendents], really, not the right way to go.

Pogue: On the other hand, part of the Reform Act was a holiday that did impact Chicago, called Casimir Pulaski Day.

Currie: That's right.

Pogue: I read some of the transcripts (laughs) of the floor debate...

Currie: I don't want to think about it.

Pogue: ...so, could you tell us how that one came about?

Currie: I think that came about because it had not been very long that we'd established Martin Luther King Day. I don't mean to say that people were...it's like your turn, my turn. But I think there was a sense, a kind of a nose out of joint, a kind of a "Well, we've never been taken seriously. We've never been valued. We've been dissed." So Casimir Pulaski Day became a place, a slogan, a mantra on which people could hang their hat. I think that that was a kind of a price, as it were, that the ethnic community in Chicago, the ethnic representatives in Chicago, white ethnic representatives, thought would be an appropriate way of showing our enthusiasm for all heroes.

Pogue: Did that cause any controversy when it was on the floor?

Currie: I don't remember. If you read the transcript, you remember; you know better than I. But I think by that time it was, "Okay, this is the package, and we're voting for it."

Pogue: And since that time...

Currie: Of course, it's an "opt out" holiday. That is to say school districts aren't required to observe it, although Chicago traditionally has.

Pogue: So that became the modifier, that it became a voluntary...

Currie: ...local option. And people from areas of the state where Casimir Pulaski was not memorable didn't have to do it.

Pogue: Another part of the 1985 Act was the recognition that the principal was the instructional leader.

Currie: That also, I think, happened because there was more and more educational research saying that, if the principal is the one in charge of the educational programming in any given building, whatever is happening with the district superintendent, no matter how many school buildings, it's the principal that's

the fulcrum. I think there was increasing evidence from the literature that that's really the way it should work.

Pogue: In the original bill it said that people had to certify that the principal was spending more than 50 percent of his/her time as the instructional leader and not as a manager. How has that evolved here in Chicago?

Currie: I know there were huge rifts between the operating engineers, the building engineers, and the principals, a lot of head butting. I think that that came to a boil later, when we did the local school council bill. But that was a huge issue in which the question, "Who's really in charge of the building?" That's not so much a question of educational leader. It spilled over into the question, "Who's got the keys to the facility?" It was a huge political brouhaha in Chicago between the building engineers and the principal about who really was in charge of the building. That, I think, erupted later.

Pogue: Another component of this was actually some funding for school construction. How important was that?

Currie: I suspect it was important in some parts of the state where the ability to raise local resources was not great or in parts of the state that weren't going to get much money from the formula anyway, and maybe this was a sop to make them feel more comfortable voting for the bill.

Pogue: Then there was the funding to deal with truancy and dropouts and creating alternative schools. How important was that for this area that you're serving?

Currie: I think it was pretty important. And again, I think that the end product reflected many cooks with their spoon in the broth. That was a developing constituency, people concerned about what happens to the kids who drop out. In a place like Chicago, on the south and west sides, their numbers were pretty significant.

Pogue: When you met with your constituents in the fall of eighty-five, to explain what has happened, how enthusiastic was the group? Or did they feel this was more benefitting other parts of the state?

Currie: I think there was a feeling that the whole thing looked like a good package. You spin it the way you see it. For me, things like the early childhood education, the truant stuff, the idea that there will be more accountability, all those are certainly nice ways to describe what Springfield's been up to. I don't remember any push-back from my vote for the overall package. I don't remember anybody jumping up at town-hall meetings and saying, "What a terrible bill. This is really not the right way to go." I think there was a general feeling that it was a good thing.

Pogue: In the following years, how has the early childhood piece that you were the most interested in changed?

Currie: First of all, it has attracted more and more funding. Every year it was a battle. How much money was going to go into early childhood education? In the last several years, we've lost a little ground because of the state's fiscal problems. But we had moved significantly up, and we kept moving up, until the last few years with the state fiscal problems.

The other thing that happened—and this is really great—is that we put more focus on the birth-to-three side of the equation, which was not a central part of House Bill 90. But again, the evidence shows more and more that brain development, ways to overcome difficult life experiences, that the sooner you start, the better off the child is. All of that research led to a greater interest on the part of lawmakers to see to it that the birth-to-three set were not left out of the equation.

Pogue: You talked about the issue of universal pre-K [pre-kindergarten], we've heard that sometimes with various governors—

Currie: That's another thing that happened. When Blagojevich was governor, I sponsored the bill to say that it isn't just at-risk kids that we considered eligible for pre-school funding. Any child is eligible. But we also said that, to the extent that there are funding limits, the first focus will always, will continue to be the kids at special risk.

So, we have universal pre-K in the state of Illinois—I think we were the first state to make that commitment—but we hedged the commitment to the extent that if funds aren't available to cover 100 percent of the population that's interested in participating, to make sure the funds go first to the kids who are most needy.

Pogue: As a lawmaker, what do you hope can be done in the area of birth-to-three?

Currie: I think if we can put more resources into it. No one is suggesting that the birth-to-three program is something that the state's going to come in and do. It's a voluntary program for parents who want extra help, who evince a need for help. The idea is to make services available to people who are having a struggle with new babies, either for financial, emotional, maturity issues. I just am hopeful that we can continue to do a good job on that front.

My impression is that the experts think that our birth-to-three model is a good one. And I believe that they also believe that our pre-school program is a model. So, for example, there's a bill pending in the House right now that is a kind of financing revamp and makes other changes. [It] doesn't really change the early childhood arena at all because in the view of the experts that the supporters of this change consulted, they said, "You've got a great pre-school program."

Pogue: There are a number of funding sources and groups involved with birth-to-three or even pre-kindergarten. You alluded to Head Start, the role of Head

Start. You've got faith-based groups that have taken that on as an activity with them. You've got other programs like WIC [Women, Infants and Children food and nutrition program] and home-health types of programs. As a lawmaker, what do you hope to do in trying to unite all of these different groups?

Currie: For example, federal Head Start is only a half-day program, and sometimes school districts and other organizations use the state-funded pre-K as a way to enhance the experience, extending the day. My experience talking to educators is that they prefer the state model. They think it does put a greater emphasis on quality than does the Head State model.

WIC is really just a nutrition program, and while it does a good job and has been increasingly doing a good job encouraging breast-feeding and so forth, there's an awful lot more that can help a struggling parent with a new baby at home.

Pogue: Because of your involvement with the 1985 Educational Reform Act, other educational reforms made headlines after 1985. You had the Chicago one that gave power to the mayor.

Currie: Right. The local school councils before then. I don't remember what the year was, but several years before the mayoral takeover, there was an increased emphasis on local control over individual school buildings in Chicago.

Pogue: How do you feel, philosophically, these reforms have been compared to that big package in 1985?

Currie: Most of the changes since then have been much more procedural. And remember, we made changes all the way through. It was, I don't know, seven or eight years ago that I worked on teacher evaluation, teacher's recertification, very hot topics, even in spite of what we had done in eighty-five.

We're constantly in the business of beefing up, of improving, of taking problems as they develop and trying to figure out ways to resolve them. I don't think that anybody would suggest that the answer in 1985 was the be all and the end all.

Pogue: When you talked about the new procedures for teacher evaluation, recertification, could you explain a little bit about that?

Currie: For example, one of the things that people noticed after eighty-five... In fact, we may have made several changes. I can't remember what year it was, but I was in charge of trying to work with groups on the question, "How to you make the standards stronger?" For example, there were ways in which teachers could beat the continuing education, continuing development requirements. That included things like working to encourage people to go on

the picket line, if you're in the middle of a strike. Some people thought that probably wasn't the best definition of professional development that we might have had.

The idea was to try to create stronger standards that required more of teachers than walking a picket line and required more of superintendents, required stronger certification and standards for them and required them to do a better job of explaining to the workforce what the standards really are.

Pogue: Did that work also include changes at the universities that provide education?

Currie: That's one of the biggest issues that we still have not, in my view, adequately addressed. There's no question that we've... That was part of what we were looking at, and I think we did make some changes. But, I think most observers would say we didn't do enough.

Pogue: What do you mean, not enough?

Currie: I think that there still was a sense that the teacher training institutions in Illinois are churning out people who are not likely to be very successful in the classroom, who've not been given an adequate, a thorough enough grounding in educational philosophy and educational practice. I don't know to what extent that's really true, partly true, sort of true. But I think there is a sense that we haven't done as much to professionalize the teacher training institutions as we still could. There still is room to improve on that front.

Pogue: In the future, do you see another 1985 Reform Act, with so many activities listed in it, or do you feel it'll continue to deal with more of the procedures?

Currie: I think probably both. My sense is that as a polity, as a nation, we reinvent the wheel every twenty or thirty years. I see no reason to think that we won't reinvent the educational wheel.

Pogue: The federal government was somewhat involved because of the Nation at Risk activity, although there were not much funding with it. Then we had No Child Left Behind at the federal level.⁸ We've got Race to the Top and Common Core that we're hearing about.^{9, 10} As a state representative, what do you feel should be the federal role in education?

⁸ No Child Left Behind was the main law for K-12 general education in the United States from 2002-2015. The law held schools accountable for how kids learned and achieved. (<https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/your-childs-rights/basics-about-childs-rights/no-child-left-behind-nclb-what-you-need-to-know>)

⁹ Race to the Top was a \$4.35 billion United States Department of Education competitive grant created to spur and reward innovation and reforms in state and local district K-12 education. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_to_the_Top)

¹⁰ The Common Core State Standards Initiative is an educational initiative from 2010 that details what K-12 students throughout the United States should know in English language arts and mathematics at the conclusion of each school grade. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Core_State_Standards_Initiative)

Currie: I'm not sure. I do think that we could always use more funds from them, just because I think we have so much trouble creating enough of a pot of money ourselves. Any money they want to send our way is dandy. It's hard for me to see, however, how their...

I think, for example, No Child Left Behind, I have heard many complaints about from my constituents. And I think it's instructive that the feds have not reauthorized it, that people had not thought it looked like a really good deal. You had Ted Kennedy on the one hand and George Bush on the other saying, "Best thing since sliced bread." But as it wound its way down to the local classroom level, I've not heard a lot of enthusiasm for it.

I don't understand why the Common Core is in the middle of so much heat at the moment because it looked to me as if that really was developed from the ground up, and I think it had very strong endorsements from knowledgeable people. And now all of a sudden it seems to be easily attacked from the right, and I don't quite understand why. I guess I'm a little leery that sometimes when the feds jump in, they may do so untimely, or they may do so in ways that are not as sensitive as they could be.

And I'm still annoyed we didn't get Race to the Top money.

Pogue: As for the 1985 Act, you talked about some of the key points that led to the passage as: One, you had the governor and the legislative leaders helping push it. You had a nation that had been getting publicity about the status of schools. You had members of the General Assembly that have led commissions and held hearings. You had the rank-and-file that have had many separate issues that helped push this. Is that something that can still take place in Illinois in the near future?

Currie: Yes, I think it can. I think it can. I think Illinois is not riven by the partisanship that has gridlocked Washington. While sometimes I feel that we're close, we're not quite there. I think in Washington things will change too. I don't think what we're looking at is something immutable. Again, I think every X year, every generation, every 20 years, 30 years we do reinvent the wheel. And I think that can happen in our political discourse, as well as with respect to the issues that we decide to address and how we decide to address them.

Pogue: As we wind down our interview, how would you rank the Educational Reform Act of 1985 with many of the legislative activities that you were involved in since the 1970s?

Currie: That's a very tough call. As I said, we've revisited many pieces of the Reform Act, so it certainly wouldn't be fair to say, "Yes, been there, done that. It's finished." That's not an accurate depiction. On the other hand, that's not also what you would say about virtually anything else we do. Among the things

that we do as a legislature, the important things, the star-quality things, I think this one probably holds up as a case study pretty well.

Pogue: As we conclude our interview, what do you hope that Illinois schools can do in the near future?

Currie: I hope that they are able to continue educating children so that they understand civics; they understand American government, and so that they can compete in the global marketplace.

In fact, I don't think Illinois schools do so badly. And if you ask most parents, most parents are very happy with their own individual schools. There is a general sense that the education system isn't doing what it ought, but parents tend to feel pretty good about what their own school is doing for their own particular child. I sometimes think that we blow the whistle; we create a sense of chaos...not chaos, but a sense that everything is a failure, even though it isn't.

I think a large part of our educational problems reside in places like the inner city, where there is not an opportunity for economic independence, where there is a hopelessness, where there is a sense that people don't have a real chance, and so there is still inadequate opportunity to grow. There are still problems that are endemic to poverty that continue to plague individual schools and individual systems.

I think that it would improve the quality of our product if we could do a little more consolidation in some of those districts where there really aren't enough bodies to offer advanced algebra or trigonometry, just by virtue of the lack of a sufficient majority.

I think that the problems of poverty need particular address, and I don't know that we're very good at figuring out how to do that. I do think more consolidation would help, but I don't think that our school system does a particularly poor job across the board, by and large, in turning out well prepared youngsters. When I think about when I was a kid going to school, let me tell you, the curriculum today is much tougher.

Pogue: Our last question deals with the fact that Illinois has tried to put a P-20 Council together, everything from the primary, pre-school grades, up through grade 20, involving the universities and community colleges.¹¹ As a lawmaker, how do you feel about the progress of some of the tasks that they've been trying to do?

¹¹ The Illinois P-20 Council was established by the legislature in 2009 to foster collaboration among state agencies, education institutions, local schools, community groups, employers, taxpayers, and families, and to collectively identify needed reforms to develop a seamless and sustainable statewide system of quality education and support. (<https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/P20/Pages/default.aspx>)

Currie: I think we are making...I'm a member of the Council...We're making progress. It's a very tough row to hoe. There is a lot of resistance on the part of the private school community, the parochial school community, a lot of uncertainty about participation. And there certainly are fears from others about the level of privacy that will apply when we get a better handle on how curriculum, how individual classroom experiences actually affect the outcome at the end of the day. It's a major challenge, and there are some major hurdles, but I think that we are making progress.

Pogue: What have been some of the group's more recent accomplishments?

Currie: I think that the...For example the new report card, which I think is going to be very helpful in helping parents understand better how their school does and how that compares. And I do think that we are beginning to do the tracking that will not cover the waterfront but will begin to give us a handle on what educational experiences are effective and which are less so.

Pogue: Representative Currie, I want to thank you very much for giving us the time to talk about that exciting period of 1985, your role in that early childhood movement that began in the seventies and got fruition with eighty-five...

Currie: That we're still working on because we still need to increase funding.

Pogue: ...and also all of the other educational issues that you've been involved with since.

Currie: Thank you. You really need to talk to Art Berman too.

(end of transcript)