

Interview with Steffanie Seegmiller

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Interviewee: Philip Pogue

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Pogue: This is Phil Pogue; today we're in Arthur, Illinois. It is June 19, 2013, and our topic is school reorganization. We're going to be talking about the reorganizations that have taken place in Arthur. At this time I will be talking to Steffanie Seegmiller about her involvement in that process. We want to thank her for participating in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Oral History project on school reorganization. Steffanie, to be begin with, could you give us your family and educational backgrounds?

Seegmiller: Absolutely. I'm originally from Arthur. My father was a farmer. I graduated from high school here in 1986. I attended Southern Illinois University and earned a bachelor's in elementary education. My first teaching job was in the Ball-Chatham School District. I taught fifth grade there. I went back to school and earned a master's in educational administration. Then we left the Springfield area to come back here and live here and raise our family, here in Arthur.

Pogue: Did you have any experiences with reorganization, prior to this particular merger?

Seegmiller: No, I didn't have any experiences.

Pogue: When you attended Arthur, what was it like as a student?

Seegmiller: I think, as a student in the '80s, Arthur was a great school district. I remember talks then about merging with Atwood-Hammond, merging with Lovington. So, I think that probably somewhere the leadership of the school districts had been talking about it for a long time, definitely a small high school, though.

Pogue: You started teaching at Ball-Chatham, which is a rather large district outside of Springfield.

Seegmiller: Absolutely, going from one to the other. When I was hired, I was the ninth classroom teacher, and our classroom sizes were in the twenty-seven, twenty-eight range of students. When I left, there were thirteen sections, and they just continue to grow there, so a little different world.

Pogue: What contact had you had with the Lovington area prior to the reorganization?

Seegmiller: As a board member or as a student?

Pogue: Either one.

Seegmiller: Probably very little as a student. We hadn't started co-oping sports there. As a matter of fact, I think we may have played there, played them in sports.

As a board member, just having children in the district, some of the co-oping of the sports, I'm traveling, having met some friends through there, so a small amount that way, not a whole lot on a professional level.

Pogue: You indicated that you are on the board of education here at Arthur. How long have you been on the board?

Seegmiller: I just started my second term, so just starting my fifth year.

Pogue: And what made you run for the board of education?

Seegmiller: It's a great question. (laughs) When we moved from Springfield to Arthur, I started staying home with our children. I think this was a way for me to still stay plugged in to education and being a part of that, the solutions that were coming, to face the problems, you know, working on those solutions, being in that leadership role there.

Pogue: At Chatham, did you ever attend a school board meeting?

Seegmiller: I did. It was part of my requirements for my master's work. (laughs) It's a little different on this side of the table.

Pogue: I think Chatham even broadcasts their school board meetings.

Seegmiller: Yes. Now, this was in the '90s when I was there, so it's a little different. I think they have the direct TV route. [I'm] thankful Arthur doesn't do that. (laughs)

Pogue: Is there anything about being a board member that has surprised you?

Seegmiller: Well, there's a lot of things that surprise me about being on the school board. (laughs) It's an exciting time though, to be a part of these decisions and this leadership. The shoes that the prior board members have left for us to fill are huge. They were very pro-active and did a great job financially and providing opportunities for our students. So, they set the bar pretty high for the current board.

Pogue: When did you learn about the potential reorganization with Lovington?

Seegmiller: Mr. [Travis] Wilson does a fantastic job of keeping the board up-to-date on conversations that were going.¹ I have to tell you, I think one of my very first phone calls from Mr. Wilson, after I'd been elected, was [to tell me that] we are just now starting these conversations between him and the superintendent, to see if we're even interested. So, April of...May of...not April, probably May of 2010, 2009, early 2010, yeah.

Pogue: As far as reorganization, what was the view of the members of the board of education at Arthur?

Seegmiller: I think we were always overwhelmingly excited about the opportunities that this could bring our students and our district, the opportunity to be able to balance good curriculum options for our students, try to keep our taxes as low as possible for our taxpayers and help our neighboring town that wasn't having much success in being able to do that, combining. I don't know that there was ever much conversation about not doing it. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

Pogue: A feasibility study was done by Bill Phillips and his group [Midwest School Consultants (MSC)].² What information did you learn from that study?

Seegmiller: A lot of different variety of reorganization strategies. They did a great job of presenting why—it's been several years ago, so I don't know if I could quote him exactly—but why annexation would be better than a deactivation [shut down] or a consolidation. Those were good meetings for us to be educated, as board members, as to what the law says what our options were. They made it clear and easy for us to see which route we should go.

¹ Travis Wilson was, at that time, superintendent of the Arthur Community Unit School District #305.

² Dr. Bill Phillips is a retired superintendent who consults for school districts on reorganization. He is co-author of *Exploring School District Reorganization in Illinois: Navigating Your Options*, a book that examines the myriad of issues and considerations that confront school administrators, school boards, taxpayers, and parents when this topic arises in their communities.

Pogue: What kind of information in that feasibility study was of interest to you?

Seegmiller: I think the incentives going with the annexation. The way that the annexation would be organized was definitely interesting. [It was] certainly important to the staff members that we would be able to keep all the staff members. It just really paved the path for us on how we were going to be able to make this happen for our students.

Pogue: Had any of the other board members been involved in reorganizations, prior to this one?

Seegmiller: [During the term of] the board that had been seated prior to my term, Lovington had tried to deactivate their high school. That wouldn't have been a vote on the Arthur School District's side, but they certainly would have been into conversations about accepting those students, had Lovington deactivated. So, yes, a little bit.

Pogue: Once the issue was being recommended to proceed with a referendum, what role did you have as a board member?

Seegmiller: My personal role as a board member was just attending meetings and listening, asking questions. We delegated two people on our board to serve on the Committee of Ten.³ That way we could also have people from the community serving on those committees, as well. I just didn't have that specific role, to serve in a leadership [role] on the Committee of Ten.

So, we tried really hard, as a board, to make sure that we got to as many of the information readings as possible. We tried to touch base with our Committee of Ten members, just making sure that they had all the information, supplies, whatever it is that they needed.

I, as a board member, helped canvas a little bit. I didn't organize any of that, but I helped pass out flyers and answer questions, those sorts of things. At that time, I had two children in high school, so I was attending a lot of sports events. There was always a lot of questions that people feel more comfortable asking just one-on-one, fielding those kinds of questions.

Pogue: What are some of the examples of the questions you were getting?

Seegmiller: "How many principals are we going to have?" "Where [are] our sports practices going to be?" I think probably the most popular one was, "What are our colors going to be? What's the mascot going to be?" those kinds of things.

Pogue: Were there any discussions on curricular areas?

³ The Committee of Ten was a working group of educators that, in 1892, recommended the standardization of American high school curriculum. Local Committees of Ten serve a similar function in school consolidations.

Seegmiller: Yes, there were some. That's probably my favorite area to talk about, is being able to enhance our curriculum. I think sports probably dominated (laughs), but curriculum was a part of the conversation also.

Pogue: Was there a two pronged approach on that, being able to maintain the current curriculum and not losing it, as well as perhaps adding some?

Seegmiller: Absolutely, absolutely. I think Mr. Wilson mentioned losing the hold harmless.⁴ I think the board, myself included, was afraid we were going to have to start making some of those staff and curriculum cuts. We certainly didn't want to be a school district that only was able to offer the core curriculum. We liked to have options for students. So, when I would talk to people, I would always mention that was one of the reasons we needed to seriously consider this option, being able to maintain what we had, not cut what we had. Then, by the adding of students and more staff, we would be able to enhance and offer more options.

Pogue: Were you specific on what might be enhanced, or was it more general?

Seegmiller: I would mention things, but then I would also remind them that there was no guarantee that what I was saying would actually come to fruition, depending on enrollment and the staff. Students, if they're interested in it or not, one of the classes that we had not offered was photography—I had been pretty certain from our meetings that photography was going to be able to [be] offered—chemistry II, some upper mathematics.

I was thrilled and was fairly certain that we were going to be able to offer a dual credit class, because we were bringing a math teacher from Lovington that had that, those credentials, to be able to teach that. So I would talk about students being able to leave high school with anywhere between four and eight hours of college credit.

Pogue: Were there any talks about transportation?

Seegmiller: I did not have very many conversations about transportation.

Pogue: And were there any questions dealing just with the elementary age student?

Seegmiller: I think the biggest concern about the Lovington annexation and elementary students, on both sides, was regarding if we would close the Lovington Grade School. I would never want to speak for the entire board, but I felt pretty confident that the board was pretty clear; we would need the K-8 building at Lovington Grade School. We didn't have a place to house those students, so that, for at least the somewhat near future, Lovington Grade School would exist, and Arthur Grade School would exist at the same time.

⁴ A hold harmless clause is a statement, most often in a legal contract, stating that an individual or organization is not liable for any injuries or damages caused to the individual signing the contract.

- Pogue: How much time was spent at board meetings on just this topic, as you were heading toward the election?
- Seegmiller: The Committee of Ten did a fantastic job of handling the majority of this work. So, at our board meetings the board members that were on the Committee of Ten meetings would just give us an update as to what was happening or what was the latest. The board members did a fantastic job of attending the majority of the meetings, so that we had our fingers on the pulse of what people were saying and what people were talking about.
- Pogue: The referendum passed rather overwhelmingly in Arthur and had the majority vote in Lovington. When you learned about that that night, what were your thoughts?
- Seegmiller: I was excited, very excited, just extremely pleased that we were going to be able to go forward and looking forward to all the opportunities that this was going to bring us.
- Pogue: This new district would not be established immediately; you had a lengthy amount of time to plan for it. What involvement did the board of education in Arthur have with that?
- Seegmiller: This is probably the easy part for the board, because all we had to do was approve the calendar that allotted the time for the districts, the Lovington staff and the Arthur staff, to work together. Then it was really up to the building principals and the teachers to do the work and figure all of that out. Of course, under the guidance of, at that point, two superintendents, the Lovington School superintendent and the Arthur superintendent.
- Pogue: And did they give you reports on how things were going?
- Seegmiller: Absolutely. After the referendum had passed, during our board meetings, that would be addressed, versus how the progression was coming for the vote. It would be updates on how things were going. Mr. Wilson always did a good job of inviting the board to any kind of faculty meetings that they might be altogether to talk about it. [They] welcomed us to stop by to listen and see. [They] also planned a great kick-off for the two districts to combine on their first day.
- Pogue: What topics were being discussed that had to be planned for, for a successful reorganization?
- Seegmiller: I probably don't know all of the details of that that were covered. I think that the K-8 buildings worked hard to make sure that they were doing things that were aligned, that were similar, so that when they flowed into high school, say for example, all of the students in Algebra I were coming in with almost the same background from their eight years prior of math.

I believe the high school teachers were working on kind of meshing their curriculum. "What did English I teach here? What did English II teach here?" those kinds of things, to make sure everything was kind of aligned and flowed. That was probably done after the administration had made the teaching assignments, so picking and choosing, figuring out where everything was going to fit in.

Pogue: Were there any board policies that had to be changed because of the merger?

Seegmiller: That's a great question. I'm trying to think about any board policies that we had to change because of the merger. I don't believe anything, specifically regarding the annexation.

Pogue: July of last year, a new district was being formed. What took place at that time?

Seegmiller: Well, at our first July meeting, we had an open seat, which was interesting, at our board meeting. The Lovington Board, as of June 30th, would have been dissolved. Then at our regular meeting, we had had a member resign, effective June 30th, so we had a seat open. We were able to ask a former Lovington board member to join the Arthur School Board, which was a great opportunity for us to have instant representation from the Lovington side of things. That had been a concern.

I believe the school code provides for, at the next regular school board election, anyone from either district can run. But we didn't even have to wait for that. We were able to seat somebody in July. Then we had another Arthur school board member resign in January, and we sat a second representative from Lovington.

Pogue: And currently your board elections are based on the school code?

Seegmiller: Yes, they're based on the school code. It is not at-large. We are not an at-large district; we are a township district.⁵ [There may be] no more than three board members from any one township, and we have seven, I think, townships.

Pogue: As this year's school year went, what were the most difficult issues tied to the reorganization?

Seegmiller: Probably making sure that we were communicating was the most difficult. Change is hard for everybody, whether it would be transportation, as to what time my bus is picking me up for a practice, or where does this practice happen? Everybody was just busy, and I think sometimes people forget that people are new and maybe [do] not know exactly what the routine is. So, I think communication was probably the toughest.

⁵ Elected at-large, would mean that each board member represented the entire township, rather than one of the townships.

Pogue: How did the Arthur school board communicate with the residents, who are now found in what was the old Lovington School District?

Seegmiller: We have another reporter that represents, I guess, the paper that the former Lovington School District reads. I think they are regularly communicating the board news and board reports, and I know that Mr. Wilson communicates with them as well.

We've also upgraded our website to help communication.

Pogue: What proved to be the easiest part of the reorganization, at least from the board perspective?

Seegmiller: Absolutely the students. Even just how excited they were after those first day nerves were over and how smoothly things ran. The staff did an outstanding job of making sure everybody felt welcomed; everybody knew where they were going and connecting. I think that was probably not really a surprise but absolutely the most positive part.

Pogue: From the student perspective, what were some of the activities that helped with the feeling of working together?

Seegmiller: In the spring of 2012, one of the very last things that we did, we brought the entire Lovington High School over. Mr. Wilson provided a guest speaker. We had a guest speaker for both high schools, like all in one place in the gym. Then they were paired off with another student and walked through, like a mini day of the classes, just to kind of get a lay of the land, a feel of where everything was.

Then the start was a big kick-off, as well. We had a brand new high school principal, and I think he started things off with a good inspirational speech, getting everyone excited, on the same page and then carried that theme throughout the year.

Pogue: What programs were helped because you now have more students?

Seegmiller: Everything, probably absolutely everything. Class size is more, more options for students, as far as regular curriculum, but also more students able to fit those things into their schedules. Our band program, our choral program have all grown. We've been able to offer academic extra curriculars. There's a WYSE⁶ Program here now; you'd have to ask Mr. Wilson what WYSE [Worldwide Youth in Science and Engineering] stands for. I know it's for the W-Y-S-E. It's for the exceptionally smart math and science students.

⁶ "Fostering excellence in mathematics and sciences among the youth of the United States and the world." Worldwide Youth in Science and Engineering (WYSE) is an International program, headquartered at the University of Illinois, offering the annual Academic Challenge competition, summer camps and other programs.

Scholastic Bowl, our sports programs have all grown, gone from having enough for one squad, maybe a few extras, to holy-cow (laughs) there's a lot of people over. Cheerleading was probably one of the biggest growth areas.

Pogue: Now you're in year two. As far as challenges for this upcoming year, let's not focus yet on Atwood-Hammond, but just with the current merger. Are there any new issues facing the board of education just in dealing with Lovington-Arthur?

Seegmiller: I think probably just continually communicating. Making sure all our constituents know what's going on and hearing what they're saying and that kind of response is probably...I don't want to say status quo, but I think it's probably just another regular day.

Pogue: You said that, during the referendum, you were asked a number of questions. Were you asked questions about the merger during the year?

Seegmiller: You mean from Lovington? Absolutely. I always tried to also hear how things were going, how people were feeling about it. Again, that role was more when I was at a ball game and people were talking and had positive response.

My daughter was so nervous; she didn't think she could go the first day—I was a parent of a senior this year—and after an hour in school, she loved it and wished she had been able to attend Arthur High School her whole four years, all kinds of conversations.

I think, again, transportation was probably the trickiest for us. "Where is this practice?" that kind of conversation. "Is the bus bringing them? Is the bus not bringing them?" And again, I think we probably didn't know that was going to be tricky, going into it.

Pogue: As to the current situation, in April there was a referendum and a reorganization was approved, including Atwood-Hammond. It was also going to be an annexation. How was that received in both districts in the April election?

Seegmiller: I think it was received well. I think it was hard for both districts, again, Atwood losing, like Lovington losing, a high school losing that heritage, concerned about what that was going to do to their town. I think Arthur was tired, maybe, from the Lovington annexation. What did that really mean? And did we want that big of a high school? So, I think it was work and, again, communicating why this would be the best for our students.

Pogue: They used the same model. What were the types of roles of the board of education during that election?

Seegmiller: Well, whether it was good or bad, we felt we had had success with the Lovington, so we stuck with the same model. We appointed two board members to serve on the Committee of Ten. They would go to their meetings and communicate and come back and give the board a report. That kind of facilitated any discussion. Any issues that they felt were coming or that needed to be addressed, we would address them then.

But again, the Committee of Ten was built with great people from our communities—from Atwood and from Arthur—that really worked hard. There were very few issues that came our way that anybody felt like the board needed to address. Again, it was just listening and being there, being supportive at those meetings.

The Committee of Ten offered—almost every other week, starting January through March—some kind of informational meeting for someone in the community to attend, to hear about it. It ended with a meeting during the day for anybody that couldn't get out in the evening that came to a coffee. That was essentially the role of the board.

Pogue: This would increase the square mileage of the district considerably from the original Arthur. Were you getting any questions about the size of the district and the distance from where people might be living?

Seegmiller: I did not receive any questions about the distance. We started co-oping with sports, with Atwood-Hammond this year, and I think that helped eliminate some of those concerns. It's just...It's not that far, and we're going to be able to do a lot, provide a lot of opportunities for our students.

Pogue: Concerning the election, it again passed in Arthur, and that included Lovington. Were there any issues you were hearing from the Lovington area?

Seegmiller: I thought that that would be a concern, and I did not have any...I don't think I had any questions about it. I think that, maybe when we were working on the Lovington annexation, it was pretty obvious that this went so well, and this was the right way to go. I wouldn't be surprised if, in the back of their minds, they knew that we needed to also take Atwood, in order to be able to survive.

Pogue: At the same time, there was a sales tax vote. Was the board of education involved in that one?

Seegmiller: The board of education is very excited about the sales tax vote. We weren't allowed to have a very active role in that process, but we were certainly listening and encouraging people to find information about it, even guiding them to where that might be. (laughs) But it's definitely a great way for us to be able to maintain some of our buildings.

Pogue: Did you go to any of the meetings regarding the sales tax?

Seegmiller: You're going to think I'm a slack-off board member. I did not go to any of those meetings. Someone else from the board was assigned those meetings (laughs) and would come back and tell us about those.

Pogue: What did the local paper say about that vote?

Seegmiller: I believe the local papers were excited about the opportunities that that was going to give us, that it passed. It passed so overwhelmingly outside of Tuscola; that was exciting, I think, for all of the districts. And the people that were working on behalf of the board to have that pass, were excited about that.

Pogue: So, election night you learn about two successful referendums. What did that mean for you, as a board member?

Seegmiller: Well, I was doing a lot of pacing that evening. It was pretty exciting. (laughs) I think I was texting Mr. Wilson quite a bit. I was just thrilled, surprised and thrilled that all of it went through. We asked a lot of our voters.

Pogue: Now, there have just been a few months since that election; what has that meant for you as a board member?

Seegmiller: Again, it means exciting times. It's much more exciting to talk about where we're going to house the preschoolers than we can't have preschool anymore; we can afford that. That's a much better conversation. Those are the kind of problems that I think our board likes to tackle.

Pogue: What other kinds of topics, as a board, will you have to deal with, regarding that annexation?

Seegmiller: Well, it will be different for us to have two different bussing contracts for two different bussing companies. I'm excited that we're going to be able to utilize both Millers [Miller Bus Service, Arthur, IL] and Egan's [Egan Bus Service, Atwood, IL], but that'll be a little bit different for us.

We're going to work really hard at making sure our staff stays excited, that they're not exhausted from the last annexation work and stays motivated, knowing that they have our support in doing what's best for kids.

Pogue: Are there going to be any major challenges that you have to deal with because of adding another new district?

Seegmiller: I think the challenges is, it's all how you frame it. I think the things that we're going to face are exciting. Having twenty-five girls out for high school basketball is way better than only having five or six girls. Being able to offer enough programming for our fine arts and our scholastics, I think those are the things that we won't see as problems but will be challenges.

Pogue: As a board member and as an individual, did you have any contact with any of the members of the Illinois General Assembly regarding reorganization?

Seegmiller: Not regarding reorganization.

Pogue: And how helpful were the state incentives?

Seegmiller: State incentives are always helpful. (laughs) When they come through and are able to provide what they're saying they're going to provide, that makes a big difference.

Pogue: My final question is, what has the current reorganization meant to the Arthur School District?

Seegmiller: I think being able to do what's best for our kids, adding instead of subtracting. We certainly want to be good stewards of our programs and our money, but being able to continue to offer what's best for our students at all levels, whether it's academically high or academically low, extracurriculars. It's just exciting times.

Pogue: Well, I want to thank you for sharing your information as a board member and as a longtime resident in Arthur and as a teacher yourself, on the reorganization process that included Arthur and Lovington now, and in the future will include Atwood-Hammond, plus the issue of the sales tax potential for the district.

Seegmiller: Absolutely. Thank you.

(end of interview)