

Interview with JoAnn Desmond

Interview # AI-A-L-2011-062

Interview # 1: JoAnn Desmond

Interviewer: Phil Pogue

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Pogue: It is December 8, 2011. We’re in Bannockburn School District. We’re talking to Dr. JoAnn Desmond. She testified recently at the Des Plaines hearing on school reorganization before the Classroom First Commission, so we’re going to be talking a little more about her experiences with reorganization in two of the districts that she worked in. We’re happy to have you as part of our School Reorganization Project through the Presidential Library.

Desmond: Thank you.

Pogue: Could you give us a brief overview about your family background, educational training and work experience.

Desmond: Yes. I happen to be proud of being a first generation American citizen from an Italian family. They helped me develop a very strong work ethic and value for education. It was the way that new immigrants were able to better themselves through education. I have one brother that’s a retired gastroenterologist and another brother who is a retired stock trader. My parents have always been, and continue to be, a great inspiration to me. At ages ninety-one for my dad and eighty-eight for my mother, they live very independently.

My husband and I have been married for over forty-three years, and we are blessed with two married daughters and three grandchildren, ages five, three and two. Although I was married while in undergraduate school—

apparently it seemed the thing to do at the time—I made a commitment to my parents that I would finish school and become a teacher.

Women had options at that point in time to be a teacher, a secretary or a nurse. Teaching seemed a very good match for me. When I finally finished my doctorate in 1988, after almost continuously attending college to grow personally and professionally, my father agreed that I had fulfilled my promise by achieving a terminal degree.

When I earned my undergraduate degree in 1969, it was during the Vietnam War era, and my husband and I both became teachers upon graduation. I started out as a high school and junior high math teacher, and I loved it. After our first child was born, and I was taking graduate classes at NIU (Northern Illinois University), I was offered a wonderful opportunity to teach and do research at the laboratory school at NIU and to also be allowed to continue my graduate studies. During the next few years, I not only taught middle school math, but also all subject areas from kindergarten through eighth grade in multi-age settings.

By the time the lab school closed, I had completed a master's degree in special education and was offered a job in the DeKalb Public Schools. For the next nineteen years I continued my education at NIU and worked for the DeKalb School District in a number of teaching and administrative capacities.

Since I definitely believe in a growth mindset, I constantly sought out opportunities to learn new skills and take on new challenges in the school district. Although I was the only female administrator in a good sized unit district, I was fortunate to have been mentored by some excellent superintendents. During my six years in central office in DeKalb there were three superintendents. It was after the last superintendent was hired that I became aware of how poor character and ineffective leadership impacts an entire school district.

Without knowing a single female superintendent as a role model, in 1988, I began my search to be a school superintendent. I admit to initially being surprised at the reluctance of board members to hire a woman as their superintendent. I can certainly share many amusing anecdotes, related to my interviews. The good news is that I was often included in the slate of candidates, as a token woman, so I did get lots of experience interviewing for jobs.

Fortunately for me, I found a great match for my skills in my first superintendent job in Frankfort School District 157-C in Will County. Frankfort was a fast growing community of professionals and hardworking people, with high expectations for its students. It was a wonderful place to raise a family, and our youngest daughter received an excellent education at

Lincolnway High School. Working with the board, staff and community, we were able to make significant accomplishments in the district, including passing a referendum to build a third school.

After five years at Frankfort, I was approached by a consulting firm about a professional challenge to apply for the superintendent position in a newly consolidated North Shore School District in Highland Park and Highwood. Although I was not eager to leave my position in Frankfort, I was persuaded to explore this opportunity, because my family lived in neighboring Lake Forest, and my husband's family also lived nearby. Furthermore, my husband and his siblings all attended school in one of the former school districts that was District 111, because my father-in-law was a career officer in the Army, and they lived at Fort Sheridan on two separate assignments.

After a thorough vetting by the board, staff and community, that included extensive interviews and a site visit to my district, I was offered the position of superintendent in North Shore 112. I held that position for seven years, until my retirement in 2002. During that time we worked very hard to take the legal school consolidation to a level where the three districts could become a truly consolidated district, from finance to facilities to curriculum and educational opportunities.

Since 2002, I have served as the part-time superintendent of Bannockburn School District 106, which feeds into the same high school district as North Shore 112. Bannockburn School, on the other hand, is a small, one school, K-8 district of fewer than 200 students. Our students achieve at the highest academic levels, and we consistently receive awards for our financial status. So, here I am.

Pogue: Had you had any experiences with school reorganization prior to North Shore?

Desmond: My experiences in this area were limited. While I was living in DeKalb and my children attended the Malta School District, there were several unsuccessful efforts by some citizens, including myself, to either de-annex from Malta or to consolidate the rural Malta District with the DeKalb School District. It was not accomplished during my years in DeKalb, including our personal home, we had attempted to de-annex from Malta and annex into DeKalb.

Actually, we took it through the courts, and it became a landmark case. We were not successful. But eventually consolidation was accomplished by action of both respective boards of education. So now there is no Malta School District, and it is all DeKalb. But that was really my only experience with school consolidation prior to joining the North Shore School District 112.

Pogue: When you use the term de-annexation, what does that mean?

Desmond: Well, it means ending a relationship with one school district and basically changing the boundaries, realizing it has to be contiguous. In the case of my personal home, if you're referring to that, our property was contiguous. Our backyard was contiguous with the DeKalb School District. But, when the original school districts were formed, our community that was very rural at the time was kind of notched out to accommodate the farmer who lived there, so his children would go to Malta School. At the time, that school was closer.

So, development came in, and we had a subdivision there of, I'd say, probably thirty some homes. Just about all of the families that lived there were professional people, and they wanted their children to go to the DeKalb schools. It was difficult because Malta would not allow the residents to de-annex. We were one of the larger tax bases for the school.

Pogue: How long did the court proceedings go?

Desmond: Actually, it started when my daughter started high school and didn't end until after she graduated. We paid tuition for her to go to DeKalb High School.

Pogue: You testified at the Des Plaines Classroom First hearing, and you provided written testimony. What were the points that you were covering?

Desmond: Actually, I did not provide written testimony, but I did speak to notes. Basically, I spoke to my experience with consolidation in District 112. The end result in that situation was in the best interests of the students, all of whom attended the same high school, and who previously had disparate elementary experiences.

But the commission was looking at all of the ramifications, and I wanted to make it very clear that this was not a cost savings to the residents of that community. It may ultimately have been in the best interests of the education of the children, but even with the elimination of two superintendents, additional administrative level support staff needed to be hired to oversee curriculum development, personnel and student services.

There was a high cost to consolidation for the local taxpayers. All of their tax rates increased. Teacher salaries had to be equalized. When I made the statement before the Commission, there were teachers that received 30% increases in salary.

Facilities were very disparate and maintenance had been neglected for many years, during the conflicts that preceded the consolidation vote. Materials and resources had to be addressed, as well as inequalities of staffing. In spite of millions of dollars that the state provided in incentive funds that

followed that consolidation over the next few years, it was still necessary to pass a significant referendum, a few years after consolidation, to address the buildings and the infrastructure. But all taxpayers paid more for that consolidation.

That was essentially the point I was trying to make. Even after seven years in the district, there still remained lingering, unresolved issues that resulted from the consolidation. It takes a decade or more to really unify a school district. This happened because of a close majority vote of eligible voters. Now, if the entire community did not support it, I believe that that would have been very, very difficult, even more difficult than it was. That particular consolidation resulted in a lawsuit anyway. My comments basically stated that that was a difficult consolidation, but ultimately, it was better for children, not a cost savings.

I am now in Bannockburn, and from Bannockburn School District's perspective, if our community wanted consolidation that would be fine. It would work, but only if they wanted it, because they would, in fact, lose their local school. It is unlikely that somebody would maintain the school for 200 children and not a K-8 school. We have the lowest tax rate of all of the feeder schools that go into District 113, which is our high school district. So, our tax rate would go up, our class size would go up, and we would lose the local control of our school.

Our students are very high achieving students. We not only make AYP [adequate yearly progress], but we always perform at the very highest academic levels. Furthermore, our school finances are in excellent shape. The other points that I mentioned, which I know the Commission was interested in hearing about, were basically how we seek as many opportunities as we possibly can to do cooperative arrangements, in terms of health insurance, in terms of purchasing utilities, in terms of shared services with our neighboring school districts, and in terms of purchasing of materials. We regularly meet with area superintendents, and I try to identify ways that we can be more efficient. So, we are constantly seeking that.

One of the things our school board did, here in Bannockburn, also is that I am a part-time, retired superintendent, and this is my tenth year in Bannockburn. I haven't had to have a raise in almost all the years I've been here, because I do have a pension. Prior to my arrival, they had a full-time superintendent and a full-time principal. They had, at one point, tried to have a superintendent-principal to run the school. Basically, the board and community concurred that things that needed to get done could not get done, because the building principal needed to give full-time care to the operations of the schools and in supervision of the staff.

So, many things were neglected, during that period of time. Furthermore, they could never keep anyone very long, because as soon as they hired someone, when they learned the job, for a year or two, they would go off and have a full-time superintendent job somewhere else. It was really a difficult kind of position to be able to fill. So, that model didn't work. They believe that they've got a model now, with a part-time superintendent that saves them a considerable amount of money and brings experience to the district and stability.

We all are concerned about administrative costs, so it was something that the board looked at, and the community supports. My concluding point was, since our community is basically paying for its schools, our taxpayers believe they should have the right to the democratic process, to decide whether or not they wish to pursue consolidation. Any forced consolidation would be met with significant opposition, I believe, at this point.

Pogue: Going to the creation of North Shore 112. You were not in the district when it reorganized. You had come in later. Who were the three K-8 districts, and why did they decide to have a ballot question?

Desmond: Sure. I will talk a little bit about that because, although I wasn't here during or preceding the vote or immediately after the consolidation, basically the district was still three separate districts when I arrived. The existing superintendent was one of the superintendents from the previous districts, and there wasn't really a commitment there because of the acrimony.

I'll talk a little bit about the consolidation of districts 111, 107 and 108, which was not the result of a unanimous decision that they should merge as a single district. In fact, prior to the decision to hold a vote on consolidation, District 111 was headed into bankruptcy and appealing to the Regional Board of Trustees to dissolve and force annexation into the adjoining District 107. District 111 was faced with serious financial problems, primarily as a result of declining federal reimbursements from educating the children of military personnel that resided at Fort Sheridan. One-third of the children attending School District 111 resided at Fort Sheridan military base that was exempt from paying property taxes to generate revenue for the cost of education.

At the time of consolidation, District 111 was comprised of twelve hundred and fifty two students from Fort Sheridan Highwood, which is a small community known as a settlement for new immigrant populations, the most recent being from Mexico. The northern portion of the more affluent Highland Park District 107 that could be forced to annex District 111, had only 818 students and was located in the center of Highland Park, with its vibrant downtown district and Route 41 business corridor, adding to its very strong property tax base.

As one might expect, the residents of District 111 very strongly supported annexation into District 107, but residents of District 107 realized this was a financially disastrous alternative for such a small district. This situation gave rise to the urgency to resurrect previous consolidation discussions that included District 108, which was the furthest south portion of the district and still within Highland Park.

District 108 was the largest of the three districts, with 1,854 students at that time. It had a strong residential property tax base, largely from affluent homes. The overwhelming majority of its residents wanted no part of consolidation. After years of pre-consolidation acrimony amongst the three districts, with District 111 desperate for consolidation and District 108 desperately opposing, it was decided that, if the public was allowed to vote on consolidation in a binding referendum, then District 111 would withdraw its request with the Regional Board of School Trustees for dissolution.

The vote for consolidation took place in March of 1992, and the new school board was elected in November of 1992. The new district did not become official until July 1, 1993.

The advantages to consolidation were strongly promoted by the residents and board in District 111 as equal access to education for children that share a community of interest with the other Highland Park school districts. They will all attend Highland Park High School in District 113. Without consolidation, District 111 would be forced to dissolve as a school district, creating an extraordinary burden on District 107.

The disadvantages of the consolidation were strongly promoted by District 108 taxpayers and board. The most significant of all was that the taxpayers of District 108 would experience the highest increase in their taxes of all three of the districts, and they would see no educational benefit for their students for such a merger. Furthermore, there were many forecasts of educational gloom if the consolidation were to take place.

The question about building issues was definitely a problem. You asked if there were any building issues. During the years the consolidation was a topic for discussion—and I emphasize heated discussion—with the exception of District 107. The other two school districts chose to not invest in any building infrastructure improvement, District 111 because they had no money and District 108 because they were uncertain about their future. In fact, after the consolidation was passed, District 108 gave away two of its school buildings that were not currently being used for educational purposes so that they would not be passed along to the newly formed North Shore District 112.

Westwood School went to the park district, and Kennedy School had a long-term lease to a non-for-profit. These actions were opposed by the new 112 board, but because there was a long transition period before the new board had any authority, the former boards made some decisions that were not in the best interests of the new school district. After consolidation, the buildings were found to be largely in disrepair.

Some schools, especially in the eastern section of the district, were so crowded that there were mobile classrooms on their site to accommodate growing enrollments. Other schools in the west had small class sizes and plenty of space to accommodate additional students.

As for problems with the tax rate and bonded indebtedness questions, it is important to note that any bonds that were issued before consolidation remained the responsibility of the former taxpayers. Consequently, there were variable tax rates, due to bond obligations. Specifically, District 111 had substantial bonded indebtedness, and District 108 had a small amount of outstanding bonds from earlier construction projects. District 107 had no outstanding bonds. Although the previous districts each had a prior responsibility for paying its outstanding bonds, if there were any, the new North Shore School District 112 did not have any outstanding bonded debt when it was constituted. The challenge, the absence of previous bond debt for 112, created a problem when I became superintendent.

We wanted to issue bonds to address some of the capital needs. Under PTELL [Property Tax Extension Limitation Law], the tax cap legislation, a district could issue bonds up to the level of debt issued prior to the enactment of this public act. If a district did not have any outstanding bonds when PTELL was enacted, then it was not allowed to issue alternative revenue bonds. Obviously, a newly consolidated district did not have any previous bonded debt and was not allowed to consider the debt of its predecessor districts.

Although the issue of consolidation was a hot topic in the Highland Park community for several years, it began primarily with the decline in federal funding and the financial decline of District 111. The districts never considered consolidation with other districts because these are the only school districts that feed into Highland Park High School.

Pogue: When you talked about dissolution, what does that mean?

Desmond: It means basically that district goes away, and the area that comprised that district becomes part of the new district.

Pogue: And that would be done by the Regional Board of School Trustees?

Desmond: In the case of 112, it would have been done by the Regional Board of Trustees. In fact, District 111 would disappear, and all of its property would then become a part of District 107.

Pogue: When the new district was created, was the money coming in mainly from local sources, as compared to state?

Desmond: The money to support the new school district came primarily from increased taxes to all of the taxpayers of the three communities. From my recollection, there was about \$5 million more revenue collected from the new North Shore District 112 than would have been collected from the combined revenue of the three former districts. District 108 had the highest tax rate increase, then District 107. District 111 taxes went up the least, because they had the highest tax effort, prior to the merger.

Fortunately, the state provided some incentive money to get the merger started. That was several million dollars over the first few years following the consolidation. When the new district, North Shore District 112, was formed, it had a tax base of \$1.1 billion. Per pupil spending was about \$9,000. Local property taxes were 90% of the district budget at that time.

Pogue: You've talked about the major differences between the three districts, 107, 108 and 111. You indicated that Highwood/Highland Park 111 was the neediest district and had a demographic population that was different from the other two, plus the military situation that would compound the issues of that district. District 108 was the smaller district.

Desmond: Actually, 107 was the smaller district.

Pogue: District 108 was the larger district. Were there any other significant differences between the three, other than what you've outlined so far?

Desmond: I believe that that was essentially it. The 107 and 108 were more homogenous in their representation of affluence. They were more affluent. District 107 did have a tax base that also benefitted from some corporate business. District 108 was primarily residential. But in terms of demographics, they were relatively similar, very similar, in fact. District 111 was the most diverse of all the districts. The Latino population was a very rapidly growing population also, at the time of the consolidation.

Pogue: The referendum question was to consolidate the three districts. Did it also deal with the election of the board?

Desmond: No. It did not deal with the election of the board, at that time. First, the referendum was a question of consolidation. I don't know the exact wording,

but it called for a binding referendum on consolidation of the three districts, 111, 107 and 108.

It carried overwhelmingly in District 111, overwhelming. It carried by a very slight majority in District 107. Although people in District 107 didn't support it, they preferred consolidation to the requirement that they would have to absorb District 111, completely alone. So, it did pass by a slight majority. It was widely defeated in District 108.

Pogue: Therefore, how close was the election?

Desmond: It was very close. I don't have the exact numbers, but it was very, very close. Obviously, the total outcome of the votes indicated that the question narrowly passed by the combined voters.

Pogue: And did this lead to a change in state law?

Desmond: Yes. The results of the election were a great disappointment to the voters in District 108, who worked diligently to defeat the measure. Immediately after the election, there was a court case filed to overturn the election results by District 108 residents, because the outcome of the election did not represent the wishes of all three communities. This case went all the way to the appellate court before the plaintiffs dropped it, knowing that they would not prevail.

At the same time it was in the court system, State Senator Grace Mary Stern (she's now deceased) was a resident of District 108. With pressure from her constituents, she sponsored legislation that would require a majority of voters from each of the respective school districts to approve the consolidation question before it could be approved. Senator Stern was able to get passage of her bill, but it was too late to change the outcome of the North Shore School District 112 consolidation question.

Pogue: How long did the court case last?

Desmond: It was dropped. At the local level, it failed. So, they appealed to the appellate court. It probably went on for most of the time, until the new board took over, and they agreed to dissolve their school districts. Each of the boards agreed to dissolve their school districts, right before the July 1 date. So, they did not transfer any authority to the new board of education that was operating as a board, without basically any authority, any budget, any revenue.

Pogue: Did this court case delay the start of the new district?

Desmond: It didn't delay the official starting date. It just delayed any planning that could have taken place to facilitate a smooth transition.

Pogue: You came in as a new superintendent. What major challenges did you have in dealing with these three different districts?

Desmond: From the perspective of a new superintendent, I was sincerely surprised about the depth of emotions. There was so much acrimony that still existed around the issue of consolidation that legally took place two years before I arrived. There were so many people not accepting it nor wanting it to succeed, so they could go back to the way things were before consolidation. To be honest, it was a bit chaotic when I arrived. There was anger toward the existing superintendent, who was associated with one of the predecessor districts.

The board had just completed a forensic audit, because it was believed that a recently discovered \$1.5 million shortfall might be the act of a crime by the business manager that they just fired. The board meetings were packed with angry people, and these meetings were televised to the entire community. In reality, there was no theft of money, but the merger of three business offices and different bookkeeping systems resulted in financial errors being made that were not to the benefit of the district.

The challenges in bringing the three districts together were numerous, starting with creating a sense of community across the three districts, as well as addressing the inherent inequalities that existed in all aspects of educational programming, curriculum, facilities and resources. The lack of any long range plan or strategic plan was apparent, along with a major need to bring the communities together.

It was also apparent when I arrived that the three former school districts continued to operate as three separate districts, with a few exceptions. There was now one school board, one central office and one teachers' contract. Those were the things that were accomplished, during the time before I had arrived. In fact, I believe that most of the efforts in the first year or two were spent in working through the logistics of creating a new collective bargaining agreement and having all teachers and support staff become unionized.

There was no union in former District 107 and vastly different bargaining agreements in the other districts. Also, time was spent in selecting central office administrators and moving administrative offices. This was clearly in the development stages. They had already had two business managers in the first two years and had not yet found a business manager who was capable of dealing with the complexities of handling the financial merger of three districts.

Pogue: The issue of the military property, you've talked about. Did that continue to be a problem?

Desmond: I have a little history about the establishment of Fort Sheridan, because my husband's father was an army officer who was stationed there on two occasions, and my husband did attend school in the former District 111, during that time.

When Fort Sheridan was first established as a military base, Highwood residents were very eager to have it established in their community. Military impact aid for its students was higher than the district's per pupil expenditure, at the time. As time passed and federal money became tighter, the amount of money for impact aid to the highly impacted school districts began to diminish. Because no property taxes were generated by Fort Sheridan, the residents of District of 111 increasingly subsidized the education of military dependents living in their school district. With one-third of the students from Fort Sheridan and very little support from the government, District 111 taxpayers could no longer bear the burden of this expense.

In the spirit of trying to come to the aid of her constituents again, Senator Grace Mary Stern successfully passed legislation that made Fort Sheridan its own school district. School District 100 was the new Fort Sheridan school district. However, the legislation also required District 111 to continue to educate the children of District 100, until such time as a school board was either appointed or elected to serve the new School District 100. The purpose of this legislation was to "force" the military to pay tuition to District 111, to educate its students that they send to the public school, or to build its own school.

Unfortunately, there was never a school board appointed or elected, because, in spite of efforts made each year, the Regional Superintendent was never able to find anyone from the military that was willing to serve on the school board. (laughter) In fact—this is an interesting anecdote—I was told that the military made it very clear that no one would ever volunteer to serve, because the one time that it was announced in the Pioneer Press Newspaper that a person had come forward to be on the school board, he was immediately transferred to another base, before he even had a chance to be on the ballot. (laughter) He learned in hindsight.

Consequently, Grace Mary Stern's efforts to save District 111, through this legislation, did not serve the intended purpose. It was a few years later, when a portion of the military base was developed into residential property, that this legislation eventually became problematic. When the Army abandoned a good portion of the base, the Navy bought it from them and sold off a section of that base—that they were not using for military housing—to a developer.

As District 100, the property taxes generated from the residences built on this property could not go to the new North Shore District 112, and yet District 112 would have the responsibility to educate the students. The developer also knew that it would be difficult to market his property, unless they were in the highly acclaimed North Shore School District 112.

With new legislators serving our community, we needed to pass legislation that would dissolve District 100. Fortunately, this was ultimately accomplished. North Shore School District was receiving about \$400 per military student for impact aid, when I left in 2002, still many thousands of dollars less than the cost to local taxpayers. But, at least that cost was shared by a much larger taxpayer base than just those residing in District 111.

Pogue: You talked about the new district having to deal with building repairs and construction issues, because some of the buildings had not been able to be kept up, and you indicated that a referendum had to be run. Were the buildings' costs, although now they're spread among the three entities, more located in one or two of the old entities?

Desmond: Well, that is a very good question. Most of the eleven schools were in serious disrepair, following consolidation. Some buildings were over a hundred years old. So, every school needed something. The school in our fastest growing Latino neighborhood, Oak Terrace School, needed to be torn down and rebuilt to more than double its size. Boundaries needed to be redrawn; additions needed to be made to some of the buildings, and all schools needed major infrastructure repair.

After an exhaustive year-long study of existing facilities and demographic patterns, involving public hearings with all the stakeholder groups, the board accepted the recommendation to adjust attendance boundaries. That was really a very, very difficult issue, because people buy their home to be in that school. They also created a dual language immersion magnet program, which would help bring Latino families into some of the other schools, for a strong educational purpose and to seek a \$40 million referendum.

It is my belief that the referendum, so soon after the divisive consolidation, helped to bring the community together for a common cause of making all schools better for our children. Indeed, we had to do something for all of the schools to get all the community support. Parents who fought intensely over the consolidation, worked side-by-side to pass the referendum to build a new Oak Terrace School in Highwood and to improve the other schools.

So, it turned out that the referendum, as difficult as it was in the climate of the post-consolidation, actually was a way to build bridges.

Pogue: How did the students and staff work together in the new district?

Desmond: Well, they did not work together, initially. It was very, very difficult because they felt like they still were aligned with their former district. So, that was a really important part to build a unified district. That took time, and that took trust.

Eventually, everybody was there for the children, so that was the positive part. They had to relearn how to work as a group. Now that they were all in one teachers' union—at least the teachers were in one teachers' union, and the support staff was in another union—they did have more commonalities than they did previously.

Pogue: Did the district receive state incentive money at that time?

Desmond: I don't recall the exact amount, but there were several million dollars that was received from the state as incentive, during the first few years of consolidation, and it did come in while I was there. We still had some money that we received. Because the costs related to consolidation were very high, it did help with the transition, but local taxpayers still assumed the major costs of the merger through higher taxes.

Pogue: Were there some additional costs in creation of the new K-8 district? You talked about having to run a referendum for the building issues. Were there other increased costs?

Desmond: There were definitely new costs, associated with the merger. The most obvious was over \$1 million in increased salary cost, to bring all employees up to the highest levels of the predecessor districts. Even though only one of the superintendents was to remain for those two years, the boards of the other two districts gave generous buyouts to their outgoing superintendents and other administrators. Some benefits, like insurance and other benefits, continued to be paid, well into the creation of the new district.

The other fiscal impact of the merger was that the Military Impact Aid was even more significantly reduced, because the percentage of military children no longer represented one-third of the total enrollment, like it did when it was solely District 111. Consequently, the new District 112 was no longer considered a high impact district, and federal aid was reduced from several thousand dollars per student to, at that time, \$400 per student.

As I previously mentioned, additional costs were also related to addressing inequities related to programs, resources, staffing, materials and facilities.

Pogue: You talked about the fact that the three old boards didn't work extremely well with the newly created board. How was the newly created board selected?

Desmond: As I mentioned, the three old boards didn't work collaboratively, primarily because of the litigation from District 108 and the divisiveness created by the campaign. The new board was elected in November, 1992. That was nine months after the vote to consolidate, and they were elected, at large, from the whole community. So, there were representatives that came from each of the three former districts, even though they were not elected in a regional manner.

All four boards continued to operate independently, during the next eight months, after the school board election, with the new board not having any authority until July 1, 1993, when the other three boards officially relinquished their authority. The new board did not have members that served on any of the predecessor school boards, not at least during this time.

Pogue: Currently, how are the board members elected for District 112?

Desmond: They're at large. At the time, they also had a caucus system that helped to select board members.

Pogue: So, were the board members that you were hired by, board members from all three?

Desmond: They were board members for North Shore School District 112, but they were individual members that resided in each of the predecessor districts, yes.

Pogue: What long-term planning was made to have the districts go together? Many districts now use feasibility studies and hold hearings. Were there any major studies to help plan this, before it was voted on?

Desmond: As I mentioned earlier, the unfortunate outcome of a contentious consolidation is a refusal to plan for what many people rejected. They did not want consolidation, so there was no plan in place. It was a consolidation, out of necessity. I would have to say that, even though there was a very, very contentious election, the failure to plan for this merger or to utilize the opportunity, after the vote and before the official consolidation, led to significant confusion and chaos in the system, once the new district took place.

Pogue: Were there any complications on the contract salary schedules and support staff? Again, you would be coming in after those were done.

Desmond: They were just done, though. It was all just done. It was all very fresh, and yes to all of the above. There was even a lawsuit that was still going on when I was there. It was filed by a custodian, who was not rehired by the new district.

He contended that the former district failed to give proper notice for support staff reduction.

The lawsuit and other staff issues required a significant investment of time and resources to address, for the first few years. The school district did win that lawsuit, but it still took a number of hours and financial resources. In addition, there was the \$1 million additional cost of creating an equalized, new salary schedule.

Some individuals received raises of more than 30%, and then, some of those people complained that they should also receive back pay for the many years that their salaries were much lower than their colleagues. So, it wasn't enough that their salaries were now equal. There was resentment that, for years, they had been depressed. There were some schools that were asked to reduce staffing levels to create a fairer distribution, and this was initially met with significant opposition. Basically, I would say, there were unrealistic expectations of how things would instantly be better for everyone on the part of District 111.

There was the opposite sense of gloom and doom that never was realized on the part of people from District 108. They believed that the consolidation would, in fact, destroy their educational system.

Pogue: You were at the district then for seven years. What do you feel was accomplished during that time period?

Desmond: I always find it difficult to talk about the things that I've accomplished, and that's why I'm going to give you some letters, here, from other people. In 2002, my last year, I did receive a *Those Who Excel Award* from the state. A number of people came forward, asking to write letters of recommendation.

One of the letters, obviously, is from Michael Lipsitz, my board president. Another one is from Linda Feinstein, who was a mother that was very, very much against the consolidation in former District 108. She worked very hard to fight the consolidation, but then, once the consolidation was over, she was one of the strongest proponents for building the new district and going up for the referendum, an amazing woman, who, I think, helped very much to bring the spirit of the school district from the parent perspective, because District 108 was so adverse.

She worked on the referendum, side-by-side with someone from former District 111, who was in total contention with her over the consolidation, but they got past that. So, I think that it speaks to what could be accomplished when people really have a mission for children and can find themselves in a position where they really are able to look past their personal issues and focus on what's best for kids.

So I'm going to submit these letters, as testimony to some of the things that people felt were accomplished, during my tenure in the school district. I would like to say that I left the district in a better place than it was when I found it. I would also like to say that consolidation was much more challenging than I ever envisioned it would be.

When I left the district, I believe the buildings were much improved; a beautiful new school was built; our budgets were balanced; the staff and community were finally working together and beginning to feel a sense of pride in being a part of a new school district. So, I think, in that respect, I felt positive about what was accomplished, positive about the fact that the North Shore School District 112 now had equal opportunities for learning for all the children that we served. It was a fast growing district. It did grow several hundred students, during the time that I was there.

Pogue: The State Board of Education has a document that lists school reorganizations, from 1983-2012. Most of those deal with downstate Illinois and northern Illinois, with very little in the suburban area. Why is that? Why are there more complications? You've somewhat outlined some of the difficulty that was created here.

Desmond: I can only speculate about the specifics, but, after my experience in North Shore 112, I realized that it takes more than just a mandate or a vote to make consolidation succeed. I believe that the more a merger is desired by the residents, the better the chance of an effective outcome from that consolidation.

Clearly the reasons to consolidate have to be significant enough for the community to be willing to experience the higher costs and the discomfort of changes that are likely to result from a merger or a dissolution. Things like boundary changes and school closings were very, very difficult for people. However, if the motivation to consolidate is in the best interests of the children, and the communities can work together in that spirit, then I believe it can be very effective. I also think it is imperative that it be well planned, if there is to be a smooth transition.

Pogue: The suburban area generally has more dual districts than unit districts. Was there ever any talk of making a unit district in Highland Park?

Desmond: No, there was never that discussion. I live in the neighboring area, here in a dual district that shares a superintendent—the elementary district and the high school—and many of the services serve both. A careful study in that district, Lake Forest, was given to consolidation, and the result was to not move ahead with the concept, because it would not be in the financial best interests of the community.

In most cases, the salaries of high school teachers are much higher than their elementary counterparts, and that would make a merger fiscally undesirable. Having worked in a unit district, personally, for nearly twenty years, the high school teachers often complained that they were underpaid, because the elementary teachers were holding their salaries at a competitively lower level. I do think it's largely a fiscal issue.

Pogue: You indicated that the current district that you're in has concerns about reorganization, due to the fact that it has high achieving students. You have a low tax rate, concern about the building closure possibility and the fact that there would be little to gain by the community in a merger. Are there any other issues that would come up for a small, elementary district?

Desmond: I think you mentioned many of them. I do believe that there needs to be a significant motivation to consolidate. Bannockburn School District 106 does not currently have such a motivation. This school's the center of our community. Our students achieve, as you said, at the highest levels. We're in a strong fiscal position. Consolidation with our neighboring elementary district may seem like a logical thing to do, since there is some inefficiency that naturally occurs with our smallness.

But, upon careful review, there are only disadvantages for this community to reorganize, starting, like you said, with higher taxes, larger class sizes, the likely loss of their community school and local control of education.

At this point, our community just doesn't see any advantage in a reorganization. The board has, in fact, worked hard to implement efficiencies, through joint cooperative, shared services, whenever it's financially and educationally in the best interests of our school and our students. So, that's their position right now.

Pogue: Has Bannockburn ever looked at reorganization in the past?

Desmond: Bannockburn has not, to my knowledge. I've been here ten years. If it happened, the most likely merger would be with Deerfield District 109, which basically did merge. There were two smaller districts. I would say that was probably thirty years ago. It was that long ago, because I remember talking to the superintendent at the time, who said it took more than a decade to bring those two Deerfield school districts together.

But Deerfield is the most likely district, because it also feeds into Deerfield High School, which is also part of the community consolidated high school District 113 that North Shore 112 also fed into. They fed into Highland Park and Deerfield High Schools. Those were the two high schools that

represent that secondary district. I think that District 109 would likely welcome our merger, because we have a higher per student fiscal capacity.

But most of the people who come to our community come here because they want to go to a small K-8 school. They could choose to purchase a home in our school district or Deerfield School district. They choose to purchase a home in our school district. So, that's a matter of choice for the people who seek to be residents here.

Pogue: Your eighth grade students, right now, what do they number?

Desmond: I believe we have twenty-three.

Pogue: If they went to public high school, would they all go to Deerfield?

Desmond: If they went to public high school, they would all go to Deerfield, yes.

Pogue: What is the square mileage of the district?

Desmond: I actually cannot tell you that. I do not know the square mileage of the district. I know that we encompass the Bannockburn community and portions of Riverwood and Del Mar. Riverwood is a village adjacent to us, and Del Mar Woods is an unincorporated area of Lake County, which is adjacent to us.

Pogue: Do you provide busing?

Desmond: Yes, just about everyone.

Pogue: One of the concerns about some districts, for school reorganization, is that they have trouble finding teachers that are qualified. Is that an issue for Bannockburn?

Desmond: (laughter) Quite the contrary. We have many, many people who would like to come and work in Bannockburn. We have thousands of applicants for positions, and people that come here generally stay, unless they're moving away. They don't usually go to another school district, after being here. That's not the case.

Our population's a pretty stable population, but I do want to mention that we also educate students from Trinity International University, that's located within our school boundaries. Most of the students from Trinity are children of international students, living in married campus housing, where one of their parents is attending graduate school at Trinity. They remain enrolled for three or four years, before they return to their home country. We have between one-third and a quarter of our students from Trinity. They provide us with highly valued diversity to our mostly affluent community. As

in 112, they educated the students from the military. We educate the students from Trinity.

That sometimes was an issue, when we were attempting to pass referenda in the past, because the community would say, there are children that we're educating that we do not get any tax benefit from. The University's a tax exempt property. We really believe we want to turn that around and make that a value, educationally, for our students, because they can be exposed to students all over the world. We believe it's a value for us.

Pogue: How much of the district's money, here, comes from local sources, as compared to state and federal?

Desmond: We're a flat grant district, and we receive 95.1% of our funds from local sources. We get 2.2% from the state and 2.7% from federal funds. We do have the low income students. We are a Title 1 school, because we do serve most of the students from Trinity University, who are on some kind of support.

Pogue: Could you explain briefly, what is a flat grant district?

Desmond: It's basically a district that receives a given amount of money—I believe it's \$217 per student—from the state, rather than any of the other formulas that would generate a greater state aid reimbursement for the school.

Pogue: Did you have any experiences with the last major attempt to have school reorganization, the 1985 Reform Act, which required public hearings in each of the counties that talk of having unit districts of at least 1,500, or school districts with at least 1,500, high schools of at least 500. Was that the time you were over in the DeKalb County area?

Desmond: Yes, that was in the DeKalb School District. I was an assistant superintendent at that time. Yes, I was aware that it was a major topic of discussion, at the state level. It was widely opposed by local school districts, especially those from wealthier communities.

I have a newspaper article from 2002, the *Chicago Tribune*, where State Superintendent of Education, Mr. Robert Leininger, headed a governor's task force that was pushing for consolidation as a means to provide more equitable school funding. In fact, I'm actually quoted in here. They referred to the fact that those who have been through consolidation can point to both benefits and problems. They did go on to discuss our particular consolidation, in this article.

But the purpose then of the governor and the state superintendent was to encourage consolidation. That's been going on for probably as long as I can remember. There's been some progress, but not to the degree that these efforts

would like. However, my sense is that consolidating school districts, like Bannockburn, this doesn't save the state any money. In fact, if we were to consolidate into a large district and pick up some of the school districts that are not flat grant, then the state would perhaps be spending a lot of money on the school's state aid formula for our students. I believe that it may cost the state more money to have very large school districts, because everyone would be eligible.

This happened when we, in North Shore 112, had the military as part of our population. Although the numbers of students were about the same, we no longer were eligible, because the proportion of military students to non-military students was much smaller. Therefore, the military basically did not consider us a high impact district any longer.

Pogue: What do you hope the Classrooms First Commission will accomplish? It has been studying issues after they had their hearing that talked about cooperative arrangements and efficiencies. They are due to give a report in the spring with recommendations. There will be further public hearings on those recommendations before it goes before the General Assembly. Do you have any thoughts that you hope they can accomplish?

Desmond: Primarily I would hope that they would come to the realization that consolidation only works when it is supported by the local communities. Even then, it needs to be done for the right reasons. It needs to be done for education for kids. If that's the case, it should truly be about improving education for children because, from my experience, it will rarely save money, and it takes at least a decade to build a unified school district.

Pogue: What are the views of your local legislators about reorganization? You've indicated that the community has great concerns here, but how about your local legislators?

Desmond: I have spoken with our local legislators, and I do believe that they're strong believers in local control of community schools. They know that neither the Bannockburn community nor the students would benefit from a consolidation with the neighboring school district. Any possible savings and expenditures that might be experienced from the economies of scale in a larger district would be offset by the expectation to equalize salaries to the highest level, the loss of their school, diminishment of local control, larger class sizes and higher taxes.

Our students are well prepared when they enter Deerfield High School, and they excel academically in any and all measures. There's no motivation to consolidate. Our legislators have long been supportive of local control, and any forced consolidation does run counter to that philosophy.

Pogue: I want to thank you for providing us an insight as to the suburban area on a consolidation of three districts and what it took to put those three districts together, as well as the review of a smaller K-8 district that sees no benefit from reorganization. Thank you very much for being a participant.

Desmond: Thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts.

(End of interview)