

Interview with Senator Dave Luechtefeld

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Interviewer: Philip Pogue

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Pogue: It's May 22, 2012. We're in Springfield, Illinois, at the capitol building. My name is Philip Pogue. We're talking on school reorganization with a member of the Classrooms First Commission, Senator Dave Luechtefeld, and we're going to be covering his role with the commission, as well as his work in the Okawville area. So, Senator, it's certainly enjoyable to have you as a part of our discussion.

Luechtefeld: Good to be here and good to be part of it. As you know, most of my adult life was in education. [I] spent thirty-three years as a teacher of history and government at Okawville High School and have been fairly active here at the capitol with higher ed and with secondary and elementary education.

Pogue: How long were you teaching at Okawville?

Luechtefeld: I taught for thirty-three years there. I was the head basketball coach, head baseball coach, athletic director and taught history and government for those thirty-three years.

Pogue: Where had you done your degree work?



Senator Dave Luechtefeld

Luechtefeld: Well, actually, I went to Okawville High School and lived in that area most of my life there, as we grew up there. [I] went to St. Louis University, got a bachelor's degree in arts and sciences. My major was history and government. [I] then went to SIU-Edwardsville [Southern Illinois University], got a master's degree in, actually, counseling, and never really used that, you know, as a counselor, but did have a degree in counseling.

Pogue: And could you describe where Okawville is?

Luechtefeld: Okawville is in southern Illinois and not as far south as a lot of people in Chicago think. If you go to St. Louis, which is about two-thirds of the way down the State of Illinois, and go east about forty miles, we would be right there. It would be right there on sixty-four [Interstate 64].

Pogue: What types of districts are found in your region?

Luechtefeld: Well, actually, I have southwestern Illinois, and it is really quite diverse. The largest community in my district is Carbondale, which is a university community. Then we go all the way up into the metro-east and have some of the metro-east schools, such as Cahokia and Dupo. So it is quite different. There is a much higher minority group in the metro-east area. Much of the region, though, is simply rural, small rural schools in southwestern Illinois.

Pogue: So, therefore, do many of them fit the reorganization standard that the commission was looking at?

Luechtefeld: Well, I think any school would, unless they have maybe reorganized or consolidated, up to that point. But, you know, I think it is something that certainly the governor put forth as actually a goal of his to consolidate many school districts. That did not happen, necessarily, with this commission. I think this commission originally was designed to try to look at consolidation, but it soon changed.

Pogue: Have there been many reorganizations in your districts over the last twenty years?

Luechtefeld: You know, there has been, In fact, some twenty years ago, or maybe a little before that, many schools went from... Almost all schools were dual district schools, which basically [is] high school, grade school, separate school boards and a separate school district. Many of the schools in Southern Illinois went to the unit district system. There were financial incentives given by the state in order to do that. In my district I think only five schools still remain as a dual district system. The rest are all unit district systems. So there was quite a bit of consolidation, back at that time. Not a lot since that time.

Pogue: Has Okawville itself looked at reorganization?

Luechtefeld: Yes, we did. In fact, I was part of that. We were a dual district system. And back in the—I would guess the eighties—we did decide to go to a unit district system. I think there were financial incentives at that time in order to do that, but those financial incentives sort of went away.

I think the other school districts took it to court and said that this was not constitutional, that you shouldn't be able to use financial incentives to force schools to do this, to consolidate. And, actually, the court basically said, you're right. That sort of put an end to the unit district reorganization.

Pogue: What have been some of the obstacles for reorganization in southern Illinois?

Luechtefeld: You know, it always boils down to small communities feel like they lose their identity if they lose their school. And even with going to unit districts, you'll find that there were small communities [that] did lose their school. As you go to the unit district, they may do away with one of the grade schools, and in the process, some small town may all of a sudden find itself without a school. There just is a strong feeling, and it makes some sense. As these small communities struggle to be viable, the school is a large part of that. And when they lose their school, it's a huge blow to those small communities.

Now, maybe this was something that was going to happen, and it was inevitable, but it is...I don't blame small communities for fighting to hang on to not only their pride, you know, what makes them exist, and also, in the process, hanging on to their small school.

Pogue: Why was the commission formed?

Luechtefeld: I think the commission was formed because the governor made, in his address to the state, that he believed we needed to consolidate a lot of school districts. We do have a lot of school districts in this state, compared to other states. He wanted to consolidate those districts. The lieutenant governor took this up as sort of a goal of hers to help do that.

I think she found, and we found, as a commission, that there just wasn't a lot of interest, in all of the hearings, to have some sort of forced consolidation. Whether the governor had forced consolidation on his mind, I don't know, but it didn't take too long for, I think, the commission to find out that there was no real desire to have in this state forced consolidation.

At all those hearings, the thing that kept coming up over and over and over, most of the people who testified said, "Fine, we don't mind consolidation, if we choose to do that on our own. If there are financial incentives, great, that might help some of us. But we do not want to be forced." So I think very early on, this commission really changed its focus from consolidation to basically trying to find more efficient ways, financially, for schools to exist by cooperating.

Pogue: How did you get named to the commission?

Luechtefeld: I'm one of the few people in the state senate who made a living as a teacher in the classroom. There are people who are in the senate who, maybe, have taught for a few years, but that was really my profession, and I did that for a long time. So I know a little bit about education. You know, we all come to Springfield with certain backgrounds. That doesn't mean we're an absolute expert. I know enough about education to know... I know what the problems are. I don't have the fixes a lot of the time, because fixes are always very difficult.

Many legislators come to Springfield thinking they've got a fix for education. In fact, that seems to be what comes out of legislator's mouths, "Let's do this to education; we're going to fix it." First of all, it's not all broken, and secondly, the fixes for education are much more difficult than people realize.

Pogue: What were your responsibilities while being on the commission?

Luechtefeld: Well, basically, just to listen to the hearings—many times these were done by a conference call—to listen to what people had to say, their suggestions, for instance, some sort of efficiencies that we could come up with by, maybe, school districts buying certain things together, certain ideas that school districts had that other ones might adopt, those sorts of things.

Pogue: When you went to the fall hearings, and there were four of them in southern Illinois—I think it was Carterville—what were you hearing from the people that testified?

Luechtefeld: Well, it was one main theme, do not force us to consolidate, period. That was a theme that I think they made very obvious. I think from that hearing on, the direction of the commission seemed to change, away from consolidation and more to what efficiencies can we develop to make schools be able to operate financially better?

Pogue: What were you hearing from the school districts, as well as constituents of those school districts, while the commission was functioning in the fall?

Luechtefeld: One of the things was, we wouldn't mind consolidating, if we could have construction money to do that. Quite often, you know, a new building would have to be built or maybe added on or whatever, and that costs money.

The school construction fund has a certain amount of money, but was very obvious that the present school construction fund could not and would not accommodate more schools, because we already have more requests for money than we have money. Unless there would be another school construction grant program, it was obvious that many of these schools, in

order to help them consolidate, would not be able to access state money and could not pass a referendum to get that done.

Pogue: Did many of your school districts participate in the hearings?

Luechtefeld: I was surprised that as many schools were there as possible. I mean, the first hearing I went to in Carterville was an extremely long one. There were an awful lot of people, but again, coming with the same theme, "We're willing to look at consolidation, if you can help us financially, but do not force us to do this. We would like to do this, if we decide to do it on our own."

Pogue: When you had these public hearings, were there any differences because of geography or size of the school district or the type, unit versus dual, or tax rate issues that came up?

Luechtefeld: Those issues are very obvious, depending on the size of the school. There are school districts, for instance, that consolidation is not necessarily something that they are even interested in, or maybe they have already gone to, for instance, the unit district. They are a large district; they don't really need to consolidate. So you hear different things from them than you do from the small schools, who might look at consolidation, if it would be financially possible or advantageous for them.

Pogue: After the public hearings, the commission broke into sub-groups, and there were four of them. What group were you on, and how were you selected for that one?

Luechtefeld: Again, it boils down to, what is your background, I think. I think I dealt with more of the efficiency area, of what can be done in schools to maybe make new ideas that other schools might be using to [affect] your ability to save money, to make it more efficient.

Pogue: Did Okawville become more efficient when it became a unit district?

Luechtefeld: That depends on who you talk to. At the time, it looked like Okawville would be able to access money. It certainly looked advantageous that we would get more money from the state. But as the court dealt with this issue... These other districts took it to court, and basically the court ruled that, no, you couldn't get extra money because you were a unit district. So that part sort of backfired.

Now, is it better that we went to a unit district? I don't know. I really don't know. It depends on who you talk to.

Pogue: There were some recommendations from within your group that have been submitted, and you had a second round of public hearings with it. What this budget efficiency?

Luechtefeld: (chuckles) Well, it really boils down to practices that the schools use, maybe consolidation on buying products that you need, that all schools need, maybe districts can get together to do that. Many schools are doing that already; in particular, the unit district schools are doing that. But you could do this on a regional basis, where schools would get together, buy products and get, maybe, some discount. Also, I think the idea that you've found out what other schools were doing to save money that you might adopt. That, mainly, was the main focus.

Pogue: Another area was mandate flexibility. The state has a lot of mandates. Each year the legislature increases that number. How actually would mandate flexibility work?

Luechtefeld: I think it would work very well. It does seem that almost all legislators who come to Springfield, they want something that they think schools ought to do. And so we see, coming through the education committee, all kinds of ideas. These people mean well, but they don't understand that all of those ideas usually cost the school time and money. Many times these schools are already... They're doing more than they can with what they have already. To force them to do something else usually costs them money and time and personnel.

Legislators don't fully grasp that. I guess that's one of the things that I have tried to do as a legislator, is basically get across to those legislators, who come with ideas on mandates that... You know, you may have an idea that's okay, but schools simply don't have the time or the money to do what you want them to do. We've mandated all kinds of things over the years that I think, sometimes, schools really just give lip service to. They would like to get rid of a lot of those. But those legislators think what they did has really... That solved education's problems, and they're not about to give it up.

Pogue: Another area that was listed, was having the general assembly have a two-year budget. Is that something that is feasible?

Luechtefeld: Other legislators may have a different view of that. I don't see that being a bad thing, but I don't really see it actually happening. Each year is a different year, especially since we are, each year, just kicking the can down the road. Until we become more... have a much more balanced budget and a budget that doesn't look like it's headed to bankruptcy, I would be very surprised if we go to a two-year budget.

Pogue: Another area was creating statewide databases. What was that about?

Luechtefeld: Well, all of that is... I think that is good, where schools can go to those databases to look for ideas, to look for help, to look for efficiencies. You know, that makes some sense and hopefully that will be done.

Pogue: Another recommendation dealt with professional development. There are some basic requirements, that all schools have to have training on a variety of topics, whether that's sexual harassment, whether it's blood borne pathogens, whether it's toxic products. How did you see your commission group, your sub-group, working on that?

Luechtefeld: Well, I think with that group you have to be careful you don't create a lot more mandates. It does make sense that there are certain working groups. There are always new things happening, obviously. Right now, a big issue is the bullying issue.

But we do, again, have to be careful. All of this sounds good, but we have to be careful that we just don't overburden those teachers, who already are probably not able to do what is already mandated.

Pogue: Now these recommendations... Three other sub-groups had recommendations tied to realignment, operational shared services, educational shared services, and these then led to a second round of public hearings. How were those hearings different from the ones in the fall?

Luechtefeld: Well, the ones in the fall, in almost every area, dealt again with, I think, the issue of don't consolidate. In all of those early fall hearings, that's what the commission heard every time out. Then the whole focus of the commission seemed to change, that this is not something that you can get enough legislative support to do, basically forced consolidation. So now, what direction does the commission go? The commission went towards more efficiencies.

Pogue: What were the hardest recommendations to develop, from what you've seen so far?

Luechtefeld: Well, that's a good question. I certainly did not work on all of those, so I can't tell you. Coming up with economic efficiencies was maybe the easiest one of all, to be real honest with you.

Pogue: Did the commission members hear anything from the second round of public hearings that hadn't been considered in the first round?

Luechtefeld: Oh, I think they did. As I said, the first round of public hearings dealt with basically, don't force us to consolidate. That was the general theme of what we heard. As the focus of the commission changed, obviously the questions changed. Once the idea to forced consolidation wasn't going to be a recommendation of this committee, then they looked for other purposes for the commission.

Pogue: Now you do have commission meetings scheduled for May and June. What will be their purposes?

Luechtefeld: I would guess right now that the commission would like to have something put into practice, some of their findings, either through the State Board of Education, mandates from the state board, or by laws. What they will be, I don't know yet.

Pogue: Now, the 1985 Educational Reform Act was probably the last major effort at reorganization, prior to this one. It called for public hearings; everybody had to submit plans; the goal was 500 enrollment high school or 1,500 student district, and unit districts were kind of recommended as the preferred one. That led to a lot of revolt and actually got to be involved in the governor's race between Jim Thompson and Adlai Stevenson. Did the commission have any historical look at that period, when reorganization was tried?

Luechtefeld: Other than the fact that some of the people who testified at the commission brought that up, that this was something that was tried once before, and it really wasn't met with a lot of popular feeling. I think, at that time, finding enough votes to make certain forced consolidation happen was a problem. It was very obvious that was going to be the case again, that you simply would not have the votes to do that sort of thing.

Pogue: The 1985 Reform Act also had about a 120 other pieces to it. It included the learning goals, the state assessment, pre-kindergarten, at-risk, tech prep, increased science literacy, reading initiatives. There was a lot of money that went with 1985.

In 2011 and 2012, the commission was dealing with issues, such as districts picking up pensions, transportation costs being passed on to the local district, regional offices being potentially closed, decline in state aid., So you had less than a positive financial situation. Did any of those impact the discussion?

Luechtefeld: I think all of those impacted the discussion. The idea of schools saying, "We would like to consolidate with so and so, but we will need a new school." That's money. Let's face it, these referendums were simply not passing. Unless you could get another school construction program going, that simply was not an option.

And you are right. The financial problems of the state are so bad right now that we're just sort of trying to hang on. I think we also are taking a look at some of the mandates that have been made in the past, that schools should do this and this and this and this, and basically say, "You know what, we're already doing more than we can do. We don't have the time to do what we're doing right now."

So, yes, there is no doubt about the fact that the financial restrictions that are, right now, on state had an awful lot to do with the fact that consolidation wasn't going to happen at the present time, in particular,

because of the financial situation of the state and the state's ability to help schools do that.

Pogue: You talked about the school construction issue, and there is a proposal by one of the groups from the commission to have a pilot school construction project that's kind of separate from the current formula, which does give some priority to school construction for those that are reorganizing, but it's not a priority over other issues, like buildings that are falling apart and environmental issues. So what else, in your region, is school construction one of the biggest hindrances of reorganization?

Luechtefeld: I think there are schools that would reorganize, if they had the ability, for instance, to build the schools that they'd like to build. Without a new school construction proposal, that's simply not going to happen. The school construction plan that we have right now is simply... There are a lot more requests than there is money.

In the process, unless there would be a new one, I just don't see that happening, nor should it happen, because there are schools that are counting on this money, who've had their request in for probably ten years now. They should come before something new, like this new pilot program that you're talking about.

Pogue: As the commission did its hearings, reviewed material, looked at other states, what seemed to be the major obstacles at both the local and the state level?

Luechtefeld: The main obstacle for consolidation, certainly, was just, I think, the ability to get the votes to do something like that. Schools, almost to every school I heard in the commission, said, "We do not want forced consolidation. Now, if there is something financially that would help us, then we'll look at it." So, that simply was not an option.

Pogue: At the state level, what seemed to be the obstacles?

Luechtefeld: Again, the lack of money, at the state level; it is a big obstacle. Does the state have the willpower and the votes to make some sort of consolidation take place? There weren't enough votes to do that. I don't see a lot of legislators out there, demanding that we consolidate.

Pogue: You are representing the Senate Republicans. There is another member that represents the Senate Democrats, the House Democrats and the House Republicans. Do you keep your colleagues informed as to what the commission is doing, or are you just going to be contacting them once a final recommendation is done?

Luechtefeld: No, I think the commission itself, the people who work for the commission, have attempted to do a good job of informing us of what's going on in the other groups, the working groups that are working together. We have not had

a lot of personal contact, because a lot of us are from different regions of the state and did not make all the meetings. But, certainly, the commission itself has attempted to do a good job of informing all of us what's going on. You just had to be able to read it and follow it and then try to listen to some of the conference calls.

Pogue: Once the draft proposals are adopted by the commission and it becomes a final report, what is the next step? Under House Bill 1216, I believe, it calls for a certain kind of action, within a certain time period.

Luechtefeld: Well, I think there could be two ways of going at it. I think I mentioned one earlier would be that maybe the State Board of Education would maybe have the ability to put certain reforms in place, or it may be necessary to have some legislation, in order to put some of those reforms in place.

Pogue: Do your colleagues, from talking to them, seem positive about the approach of not having forced consolidation?

Luechtefeld: I think the ones I've talked to have no problem with that. I think, certainly, the goal of the commission, I saw diminish a lot in its ability to do some of the really big things that maybe the governor had in mind, to start with, and, sort of, that scope of what we could do certainly narrowed.

Pogue: At the beginning, there were a lot of editorials in papers calling for reducing the number of school districts. Then the lieutenant governor and the commissions put out the report of how expensive reorganization could be with the salary differential and construction matters and transportation costs. Did that play a role in and also the idea of, perhaps, in not having forced consolidation?

Luechtefeld: I don't think there's any question about that. Even if you would have the money, I'm not real sure that you would find a lot of votes in the legislature for forced consolidation, even if the money's available.

Now if the money is available for such things as handling the salary differences between schools that want to consolidate and also maybe the building of buildings to help them consolidate, I think schools will do that in their own good time. But, again, I'm not real sure there's the stomach for forced consolidation or the votes, obviously, to get that done.

Pogue: Did the issue of property tax extension limitation levies, or PTELL, get discussed?

Luechtefeld: It did, to a certain extent, because certainly schools are limited without it, a referendum. They're limited as to what kind of money they're going to have for that next year. That was talked about, but I didn't see a lot of interest in changing the PTELL rule.

Pogue: As far as the suburban area, those hearings had a lot of talk about how costly it is to go from duals to units. In your area, you said there are only five duals that are left. Are those smaller entities or are those fairly large?

Luechtefeld: They range from the largest to some of the smallest, yes. I would say that the five range from the largest to more of a medium size. There are no real small schools that are still the dual district system.

Pogue: As far as the state budget, Medicaid, health and human services and the amount of unpaid bills, did those items also come up during your commission hearings?

Luechtefeld: Well, they sure did. I think finally the leaders of this state have recognized, at least publicly recognized, that the state is in almost bankruptcy and that it better be dealt with. It should have been dealt with eight, ten years ago. It was put off each year. Try to get by; steal from the pension fund, the road fund, other special funds; borrow the money or simply not pay the bills.

I think the leadership in this state have finally said, "Oops, we have a problem." And it was a huge factor, obviously, in all of this.

Pogue: From looking at, so far, what the commission has come up with, how do you feel trying to work together would operate in a cooperative fashion in your part of the state?

Luechtefeld: Well, you know, any commission starts out with these glorious things that they're going to accomplish. Quite often they find that they're not able to do a lot of those things. I think this commission was no different. It found out that it certainly could not and was not going to go for forced consolidation. Then it had to have another purpose. I think there will be some good come out of it.

But quite often we have commissions that are formed with all kinds of lofty goals that maybe don't get there. I think this was one of those commissions. I think the lieutenant governor, you have to give her credit for simply hanging in there and trying to make this commission one that was worthwhile. We'll see what comes out of it.

Pogue: As we close, are there some good models in southern Illinois of sharing of curriculum, sharing of teachers, sharing of athletic programs?

Luechtefeld: I think most of what I could say is sharing is still done within the unit district system. There are some sports programs that are shared, outside of the unit district system between school districts, but most of what I see of cooperation is usually within the unit district school system.

Now there may be some recommendations come out of this committee that can change that and allow school districts, dual or unit, to simply

cooperate better in purchasing products or in also the use of personnel. That is also a possibility.

Pogue: We want to thank you for explaining more of the operations of the Classroom First Commission and your role, representing the Senate Republicans. We thank you for your time. Also, good luck with all of the other educational activities that are going on.

Luechtefeld: Thank you.

(end of interview)