

Interview with Joseph “Joe” Turek

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Interviewer: Phillip Pogue

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Pogue: This is Phil Pogue. I’m going to be talking to Joseph Turek about the 1985 Educational Reform Act, and in particular, the alternative schools and truant intervention programs that were started by that reform.¹ We’re interviewing at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield. It’s October 1, 2014. This project on the topic, “Education Is Key.” Thank you, Joe, for being a participant in this project. To begin with, could you review your family history and your background?

Turek: Well, I’m one of the original baby boomers. I was born in 1946 in the city of Chicago. My father had just returned back from the Second World War. And then, once he returned, we moved into federal housing in Chicago, while he was saving his money to purchase a home. About the time I turned five years of age, he had enough money, and under the GI bill was able to purchase a home in the western end of Chicago.²

There, we were only a block away from St. Eugene’s Elementary School. Being Catholics, that’s where I attended elementary [school]. After St. Eugene I attended Notre Dame High School in Niles, Illinois. And after graduation from Notre Dame I went to St. Bede Junior College in LaSalle,

¹ The 1985 Educational Reform Act, Public Act 84-126 consists of 169 educational reforms and changes, (Volume 1 of the Laws of Illinois for the Eighty-Fourth General Assembly, 1985 session, pp. 1351-1470.)

² The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the GI Bill, was a law that provided a range of benefits for returning World War II veterans. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G.I. Bill](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G.I._Bill).)

Peru, [Illinois] for a couple years to try to figure out exactly what I wanted to do.

At that time, I decided I wanted to go to Bradley University [Peoria, Illinois], where I graduated with a BS in 1969, and I stayed there while I was teaching school at the Spalding Institute [a former high school in Peoria]. I took classes at night and received my master's in 1971.

My father was a printer. He had dropped out of school when he was in eighth grade. And my mother was a college graduate who was a fashion designer. She came to Chicago to work for *Vogue* magazine.³ After having her children, she decided to stay at home and be a stay-at-home mother, and my father worked for the *Chicago Tribune* for forty years as a linotype operator.⁴

Pogue: How did you find your experiences at St. Bede and at Bradley?

Turek: St. Bede really helped me get my head on straight. I was trying to figure out what exactly I wanted to do. Was college right for me? Was it not right for me? Did I want to go out and work in the workplace, or did I actually want to stay around and pursue a clerical vocation? At St. Bede we had the choice of doing both. We could've gone on to other colleges, or we could've stayed there and gone through the monastery and become Benedictine monks.

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

Turek: After I graduated from Bradley, I started working at the Academy of Our Lady and Spalding [Institute]. I would teach at the all-girls school, which is the Academy of Our Lady, in the morning and Spalding Institute in the afternoon. I did this about the same time... When I graduated, it was about the same time I got married, and after a while, with raising a family, I decided that maybe I needed to move on from education to something that might offer a little bit more income for the family.

So, I applied at the Department of Finance at the State of Illinois, where I became an information systems executive.⁵ I worked there for, I think, about six or seven years. Then I spent five years in the Illinois Department of Corrections as an employee, where I was the manager of the Support Services Section.

³ Vogue is a fashion and lifestyle magazine covering many topics including fashion, beauty, culture, living, and runway. It began as a weekly newspaper in 1892 in the United States, before becoming a monthly publication years later. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vogue_\(magazine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vogue_(magazine)))

⁴ The Chicago Tribune is a daily newspaper based in Chicago, Illinois, owned by Tribune Publishing and founded in 1847. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago_Tribune)

⁵ The Department of Finance consolidated with the Department of General Services around 1978 to become the Department of Administrative Services, later, in the 1980s, consolidating with the Department of Personnel to become the Department of Central Management and Services. (information provided by Joe Turek at a later date.)

About that same time, I decided to run for the local school board and was elected to that position. That renewed my interest in education. I then was on the board for probably about two years and decided I really wanted to get back into education. That's when I applied to the State Board of Education, and I started working at the Illinois state board in 1984. At that time, I was a business education and civil rights consultant.

Pogue: How long did you work at the state board?

Turek: I was there for twenty years, from 1984 until I retired in the year 2004.

Pogue: When you were talking about the elected school board, where was that?

Turek: That was at Petersburg PORTA [Petersburg, Oakford, Rock Creek, Tallula, and Atterberry Community Unit School District 202].

Pogue: What were your experiences as a school board member?

Turek: It was interesting because I'd always been on the other side of the fence, and the various things that came up were very interesting. We talked about closing some outlying schools, which wasn't a very popular thing for those outlying communities. We had just all the different things that school board members get involved in, finances, the students who are excelling, and are we offering enough programs? And those students who aren't excelling, are we offering them enough to keep them interested in school? We had dropouts. We had truants. And I really didn't get heavily involved into those until after I started working for the State Board of Education.

Pogue: When you said that you worked for five years with the Department of Corrections, what kind of responsibilities did that involve?

Turek: I was a manager of support services. We had, I believe it was four different sections that worked within that division. We had the Workers' Compensation area. We had property control. We had the vehicle fleet for the Department of Corrections, all the cars and trucks and everything for all the institutions. We were responsible for keeping track of all those properties.

I mentioned Workers' Comp. We also had Court of Claims.⁶ If an inmate or an employee had a claim against us, we worked with the Attorney General's Office and the Court of Claims in getting those resolved.

Pogue: And your responsibility with the Department of Finance?

Turek: That was just when I was starting out. I worked with another individual who was responsible for consolidating the Cook County Public Aid Office and

⁶ The court of claims is the court of exclusive jurisdiction for all claims filed against the State of Illinois, (https://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/court_of_claims/file.html.)

consolidating and converting their computer programs to work off the State computer. At one time, all agencies had their own computers. It was the thought, around 1975, to try to have one major computer and then everyone being able to hook up into that computer.

An interesting thing is, after I finished that assignment with him, my next assignment was to convert over the Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE] to the statewide computer. At that time, the Illinois State Board of Education had a Univac 9400.⁷ We had to change the programs that they had. Then we also had to have it so it was compatible with what we had with the Department of Finance.

Pogue: Were you living in the Chicago or Springfield area during those assignments?

Turek: When I was working with the Chicago program, I traveled three nights a week for about nine months, and then when I was doing the conversion/

consolidation with the State Board of Education, I was able to stay right here in Springfield, because I lived in Petersburg. It was only twenty miles away.

Pogue: You were at the state board for twenty years. What kinds of tasks were you involved in?

Turek: When it first started, I was what they called a civil rights consultant. We would go around to various districts within the state... I guess this all came about through federal mandates as part of the of Department of Education Organization Act of 1979, that along with giving the funds out to the vocational programs throughout all the different states, they also added this additional item of civil rights reviews, where we would do desk audits of all the different school districts in the state, reviewing their vocational education programs and checking their gender enrollments in various programs, the disabilities enrollments in the programs, and the minority enrollments in the programs.⁸

For example, if 25 percent of your students in a school district were of one special minority, then we would expect to see 25 percent of our students in all the different vocational programs for that same minority. If there was a standard deviation away then we would mark that as a hit, and whoever

⁷ The UNIVAC 9000 series was introduced by Sperry Rand in the mid-1960s to compete with the low end of IBM's System/360 series. With the same restricted 16-bit subset of the IBM system, UNIVAC implemented a subset of the full 32-bit System/360 instruction set, roughly equivalent to the IBM 360/30. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UNIVAC_9000_series)

⁸ Through the Department of Education Organization Act, Congress established the United States Department of Education, with the mission of strengthening federal commitment to equal education opportunity, enhancing other efforts to improve education quality, encouraging involvement in federal education programs, promoting educational improvements and increasing accountability of federal education programs. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Department_of_Education_Organization_Act)

happened to have the most hits within the desk audit would receive a visit. It's not that there was any discrimination going on at those locations, but it was always wondering, why do you have 25 percent of a certain minority—let's say, for example, Asian—but you don't have any Asians in vocational education. Well, when we go and review those it turns out that most of those Asians were in Math IV and physics and chemistry, and we didn't have a lot in vocational education.

Pogue: And did you stay with that assignment throughout?

Turek: Believe it or not, for the full twenty years I did those civil rights reviews. At one time it was a full-time job. Towards the end of my career, it was always like 25 percent of my responsibilities.

Pogue: Well, going back to your teaching experience, what do you remember as a challenge?

Turek: Well, I think like any young teacher it's kind of interesting because you have a lot of students—or some of your students, anyway—who look at you as an older brother who's trying to help them out, and then you have other students who look at you as what you might really be (laughs), and that's a young person wet behind the ears, you know. And because of that you had a lot of people who tried to test you and see how you would handle things, and I think that kind of made us all a little bit more well-rounded.

Pogue: What experiences did you have with alternative schools, the issue of truancy, and dropout?

Turek: Well, when I was teaching school I had students in my classroom who would maybe drop out of school. I'm sure I had students who were truants. When I was on the school board we discussed truants and dropouts, but I really didn't get heavily involved into the truancy and dropout era until I took over the oversight of the truants alternative optional education program, which would've been probably about 1995.

Pogue: And what was that? Could you describe that program?

Turek: Back under the Educational Act of 1985, the legislature ... And I have not always been a big fan of the legislature, but I've really got to hand it to them that they came out with a great opportunity to put some money into the State Board of Education in the area of truancy and dropout prevention. For about nine years I oversaw this program, and I would go to the annual National Dropout Prevention Conference, and I was always talking to other state representatives. And Illinois was far and above all the other states regarding funding for the truancy programs.

Pogue: When the booklet, *A Nation at Risk*, came out, did you have any experience with that or contact with those ideas, based on your assignment at the time?⁹

Turek: I think *A Nation at Risk* really put education on the front page of the paper. It displayed our educational shortfalls and various suggested changes. After *A Nation at Risk* came out, I think all the states have since adopted learning standards.

But I think one of the major findings that was addressed in *A Nation at Risk* was to increase teacher salaries. Unfortunately, that's one of the items that has really not been heavily addressed.

Pogue: When the Educational Act of 1985 was passed, what were you doing at that time?

Turek: I had just started... I started late in October of eighty-four at the state board. When the act came out in eighty-five, there was a lot of movement going around into the entire agency on what we were going to do to address the act.

One of the things we did—and at that time I was in vocational education—one of the things we did within vocational education was we developed what we called “education for employment,” where for years we had home ec [economics] classes, which you just kind of teach people how to prepare foods or how to sew clothing or something like that. The industrial arts... We used to call those home ec classes “Becky Homecky classes,” kind of a sexist term, but that's kind of what we called them back in those days.

Then in the industrial education classes, we kind of called those “condo birdhouses,” because people were just... They were just kind of teaching the basics of woodworking skills and things like that.

What we wanted to do with education for employment was to increase the amount of work and knowledge that students would be receiving. So, when they finish high school, they might be able to go out and get jobs within those areas.

One of the things that I saw that happened that I thought was really impressive was homebuilding. Before, you would be doing these supposedly condo birdhouses, but then after that, after the Education for Employment came out, a lot of the vocational programs would take students out to a jobsite or to a home. They would see the foundation being poured. They would work on putting in the studs, the windows, the roof, and the plumbing. They would learn all these different activities. Then maybe when they graduated and decided to look for jobs on their own, they'd have a basic idea of plumbing or electricity or carpentry or something like that.

⁹*A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* is the 1983 report of Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Nation_at_Risk.

- Pogue: You said you came into the State Board of Education in eighty-four. Was Don Gill the [state] superintendent [of education] at that time?
- Turek: He was; Don Gill was there. He had come up from Florida to take over the position as state superintendent. I think he was there for maybe about six to eight months while I was there. He was just a really nice individual.
- Pogue: And then Ted Sanders came in during the legislative session that led to all the changes that took place in 1985. Being new to the state board, did you feel that there was some significant movement that was coming?
- Turek: Oh, definitely. If I'd been there longer, I would have seen a lot more of the movement, but it seemed like just about the time I came in, things were really starting to move. It was an exciting time to be there. A lot of interesting things were taking place, and it seemed like Illinois was kind of out there as, not in the total lead of things, but certainly up there amongst those leaders and shakers in the country.
- Pogue: Who was your direct supervisor at the time?
- Turek: When I first came onboard it was Louise Daley. She left probably a little bit before Don Gill did. I don't know if it was because I'd hired on, or if she had just reached the age of retirement and wanted to move on after that.
- Pogue: What do you remember about the passage of that act? In talking to some of the other folks, I know there were state board people at the legislative session where that was passed. What do you remember about that particular week?
- Turek: Actually, I was probably out on a civil rights review during that time, and unfortunately, I probably wasn't around the office very much for...I'd say, about the first year-and-a-half. It seemed like I was on the road an awful lot.
- Pogue: What do you remember about how the state board was organizing, how they were going to meet these 169 reforms that had gotten passed and divvied up to various groups?
- Turek: I remember that we had a meeting over in Champaign; it was most of the vocational program over there. Jim Galloway was our assistant superintendent at the time, and he was explaining to us the various things we were going to be doing in vocational education.
- Pogue: Part of the reforms included vocational equipment. There was also a Build Illinois Ag Academy sponsorship. Were you involved in any of that?
- Turek: No, but the people within my section were. Bill Schreck was an agricultural consultant, Ron Rice and Tom Wiles. They were working closely with anything having to deal with agriculture.

Pogue: Why do you think that the Educational Reform Act dealt with truants and alternative programs and concern for dropouts?

Turek: I think that someone, or a group of people, really reviewed what needed to be done in Illinois. For years and decades we had overlooked students who had attendance problems and students who were dropping out of school.

I remember, in various meetings and everything, while I was on the school board, if we had a student who was causing a lot of problems within the district, there didn't seem to be any concern if that student would go ahead and drop out of school. It would cause less problems for the district; let society worry about that person. That was kind of the feeling that some of the people had regarding students who didn't fit in the round holes.

Later on, when I got into the program I started realizing more and more how I probably didn't have the right attitude, back when I was on the school board. I should've forced a little bit more to look into trying to assist these children or students into trying to stay at school, because once a person drops out of school, they've got...

I think the statistics show that, for a dropout, a dropout costs society like \$70,000 in services that they will receive, over the amount of money that they will bring back to the state in taxes, where a high school graduate will bring into the coffers around \$236,000 and not cost the state any money. That's a \$300,000 swing from a person who drops out of school and a person who continues and finishes their high school.

Pogue: You talked about kind of a philosophical change to keep students in school, to try to find alternative ways to keep them in school. When you were doing your vocational trips on civil rights, did any of those get exposed to you, or were you not really involved with any of that?

Turek: No, I wasn't involved very much with students and truants and dropouts at that time. That didn't come really until the mid-1990s, as far as... I was more concerned in the civil right reviews, to make sure that the districts weren't discriminating against students on the basis of their race or their gender or their disability.

We'd go into a school and find out if they had handicap accessible restrooms, if the drinking fountains were accessible. We were looking at things like that. Why do you have so many...? Why do your classes have all females in the health classes, as opposed to having males in the classes? Were they blatantly discriminatory, or was it just something that people weren't aware of?

It seemed like, back when I was in school, we always had boys in industrial and girls in home ec. But nowadays, we've got a lot of great male chefs who could have very easily made it through the home ec programs, and

we have some fantastic welders and plumbers out there who are female. But it seemed like, for a long period of time, those options weren't available.

Pogue: Prior to the 1985 act, did the State recognize high-level programs that dealt with these topics?

Turek: With the topics of...

Pogue: ...of alternate ed, truancy, dropouts?

Turek: From my perspective, I don't think there was anything that was really available out there. I think there might have been, at one time, a truant alternative program, before the Educational Act of eighty-five. But it was very lightly funded, and it was left up to school districts to handle their truancy problems, without any additional help from the State.

Pogue: What kind of legislative support did you sense existed for such programs? They're not the elite programs, such as the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy or the gifted or the bilingual programs.¹⁰

Turek: In the Educational Act of eighty-five, they actually put some money with the program. It was about \$10 million to start programs that would address those issues. At the same time, they put \$10 million into early childhood education. And then, by the time I was involved in the program, in the mid-nineties, we at the truancy program was receiving around \$17.5 million, where the preschool for all program, or the early childhood program, was probably receiving close to \$75 million. We used to always say that their kids were cuter than ours.

Pogue: When did you start moving into the alternate ed program?

Turek: Probably around 1995, I believe it was. There was a reorganization that was going on within the agency. At the time, I was to a point where I was ready for something different, and I was looking at different positions available throughout the agency. Right about that same time, with this reorganization, they said that the Truants Alternative Optional Education program was going to be moved into the section that I was in.

I went to our supervisor at the time, a division administrator, and I said that I would be interested in applying for that position if it was available. If not, I was going to continue my search to find something else within the agency that I would really enjoy. She surprised me by saying, "Well, we'd really love for you to take over this program." After that it was truancy history, I guess.

¹⁰ The Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, or IMSA, is a three-year residential public secondary education institution in Aurora, Illinois, United States, with an enrollment of approximately 650 students. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illinois_Mathematics_and_Science_Academy)

Pogue: You talked about it being put into the division, what other programs were already in the division?

Turek: We were still in a section of vocational education, so we had the various business education, agriculture education, health education, industrial education, and did I mention home economics education? So there were five basic areas. We had that going on, plus we had the regional vocational administrators who were working with various regions within the state.

We had gone from individual school districts, and we kind of put them into a bigger pool. We called that the Regional Vocational Section. They would have a vocational director within their area to work with them and give them more support within their area than just [having] people at the state, which is kind of another layer of assistance.

Pogue: Projects for the alternate programs probably had to write planning grants and get started in the eighty-six, eighty-seven, eighty-eight period, and you said you came in in 1995...

Turek: Into the truancy program, right.

Pogue: Oh.

Turek: Tom Grayson, I think, was handling the program from its inception. Then Tom stayed with the state board for a while and decided to go back to the University of Illinois to get his PhD. They then brought in Jean Lewis and Paul Kren to run the truancy program.

When they reorganized and moved it into my section, then I was very fortunate, because I had Jean that I could ask all my questions to. She was right onboard there, within the same building and was able to answer all my questions. She made my life so much easier than trying to take it over by myself.

Pogue: What had you learned about those early days, when the alternative programs and the truant programs first began?

Turek: I started with the state board in 1984. I believe it was like 1986, they were asking... They had sent out a memo to the employees, "Who would be interested in reading grant applications for the Truant Alternative Optional Education Program?" I volunteered. Then I sat down, and I read quite a few of these grants.

You could certainly see the difference between people who had an idea of what they were going to do and people who were just writing a grant to see if they could be funded. Of course, we had to rate the grants and everything. I remember sending Tom Grayson an email...not an email, a note, a memorandum I think we called them back in those days, saying that once he

decided who was going to be funded that I would be interested in hearing, because I had taken some notes, and I wanted to see if the ones that I had thought had done a real good job of writing were the ones who were funded and the ones that I didn't think had done a very good job, if they had not been funded. So I was involved a little in the beginning, but very little.

Pogue: These grants that you read were competitive grants that the districts were competing for, so not everyone in the state would maybe apply, not everyone would receive grants, and then they might not receive what they requested.

What was in the grant applications, and what were you looking for?

Turek: Tom had it listed out on the different things that he was asking for in his request for proposal. These were the things that he felt were very important to be addressed. The writers, then, the people who put together the proposals, would try to answer the questions of what he was looking for, or at least you would hope that's what they were doing.

As a reader, we were taking what Tom wanted and seeing what people wrote. If people covered the topics very well, we'd give them a higher score than someone who didn't cover the topic well or just ignored the topic altogether.

Then I would hope that when Tom received it, when he was deciding on who was going to be funded and who wasn't going to be funded, he might have said, "Well, these people didn't even get 50 percent of the questions correct. I find it very difficult to give them funding. But these other people did such a great job, and they were only asking for maybe \$50,000. Maybe I can give them a little bit more, \$75,000 or something," so they could get their programs up and running.

I think that might have been what the case was, because I noticed later on, when I took over the program, there were some programs that were funded very well, I'd say probably more than what you would normally fund a downstate school for. But my guess is he wanted to put it in an area where he thought the money would be best used, as opposed to a location that maybe wrote and wasn't funded.

Pogue: So if you were writing a grant application, would only one reader see it? Or would there be two or three?

Turek: There usually were three. When I ran the program, quite a few years later, I tried to have five, because you could have a reader who read something, who maybe had missed something, and now you've only got two readers who are on the same page. I always felt that five readers would be the best, to give you a real good idea of what was being presented by the proposal writers.

Pogue: Could you give our listeners an overview of what the Truant Alternative Optional Education Program meant?

Turek: What it consists of?

Pogue: Yes.

Turek: There was a wide range of what was offered. What we allowed was, people could write for truancy intervention. Some locations, that's all they wrote for, was truancy intervention. They were going to have counselors or truant interventionists talk to the students who were truant and try to get them to kind of change their ways or find out why they were truant.

We had one real simple situation. There was a child who I think was in the eighth grade and had a hard time getting up. Dad had worked night shifts, and Mom didn't get up early in the morning with him and everything, and he was kind of responsible for getting himself up and going to school. He said that he didn't have an alarm clock. You would think that that would sound like a pretty farfetched, reaching idea, but the program bought him an alarm clock, and he didn't miss another day of school the entire year. So that was just a simple little fix that worked things out.

Other students were saying that, if they miss the bus, they wouldn't get to school on time. They'd have to walk, and then if they walked, they'd miss the first period of class. I think the truant interventionist talked to the bus driver and said that sometimes this kid would come out of his house and wouldn't get to the bus soon enough, so beep the horn an extra time or two, and then that would work.

Sometimes these students had drug addictions. We would try to work with them on getting them into some type of rehabilitation, or they would work with somebody else to try to overcome their drug use. One of the things that I found real interesting... One of the last few years I was working, I was looking over the statistics. I noticed that chronic truants...

We'll probably be talking about chronic truants, but I need to give you the definition of a "chronic truant." A chronic truant is a truant who misses 10 percent of the school year within the last 180 days. It's not on an annual basis, but it can be calculated at the end of the annual basis. How many days did the student miss during such-and-such a school year?

We had 1,500 chronic truants in the state of Illinois, and they were kindergarten students. Obviously, kindergarten students want to go to school. At least, that's always been my impression, except maybe for the first few days, they're afraid to leave Mom or something. But after they get to school, they want to go to school. For a child to miss eighteen days within that kindergarten year, it's probably not the child's fault; it's probably more in the parental area.

Our truant interventionists would go out, and they would talk to the parents, trying to work with the parents on getting the children to school on time. That would carry over, up through, at lot of times, fourth grade. But after certain grades, like maybe after eighth grade, it's hard to blame the parent. You can't take a parent and put them in jail because their kid's not going to school, because maybe the mother is five-foot-tall and the eighth-grade boy is six-three and 200 pounds. It was always difficult, but that was one of the problems we would have with the truancy program.

Then the other thing was alternative education. If a student wasn't doing well in school and falling behind in credits and everything else, we had an opportunity with alternative education where maybe there was a chance for them to get together after school or during their study hall or something to try to pick up additional credits or to get tutoring for what programs that they're presently in. That was what we called the alternative education.

We had the truancy and the alternative education. Those could be two separate programs, or in larger districts, we had both of those programs, truancy and alternative education.

Pogue: You talked about the funding level with pre-kindergarten, how it started out the same, then ballooned and grew slowly. Pre-kindergarten has a set age, three, four, up to entry into kindergarten; then you were not eligible.

You discussed solutions that suggest the need for a variety of truant and alternative education programs, different types, based on the geographical nature of a school district, cooperative ventures. How difficult was it to kind of understand what was going on statewide, with so many and diverse types of programs that could be applied?

Turek: It was kind of difficult to keep your hands on everything that was going on. As you mentioned, in the early childhood program they wound up getting up close... Under the [Former Illinois Governor] Rod Blagojevich administration, they were pretty close to \$500 million. I think the maximum that the truancy program ever received was around \$20 million.

We had, as you say, students from the time they entered any type of school, even preschool, until age twenty-one, which is where we were responsible for them for. We had various types of districts that we were involved in, school districts. We had... Community colleges were involved, and we had the regional offices of education [that] were involved. Later in my tenure, we also allowed charter schools to receive our funding, area vocational centers, and...the other one kind of slips my mind right now. But yes, there were all kinds of programs.

I spent a lot of my time going around, visiting various sites to see what they were doing and to take the information of the ones that were doing a

really good job and passing it on to others. One of the best programs we had, which was an alternative education program, was in Peoria, Illinois. They would work with about 140 students per year, and they had a fantastic graduation rate for those students.

I kept in touch with the director of that program, and she's been telling me that not a month goes by that she doesn't run into one of her former students in the grocery store or clothing store or something like that, and they said, "If it hadn't been for you and your program, I probably wouldn't be alive today."

A lot of these students were involved in gangs. One of the saddest stories she told me about her program is that they had this one girl, one of those deals where you kind of had to spoon feed her throughout the four years that she was in the program. Then, the day of her graduation—she was going to graduate that night—that afternoon she got caught by the police, selling drugs out in the parking lot and wasn't able to graduate with her class. It's just... It's those sad situations.

Pogue: From your experiences with the alternative programs and the truant programs, what seem to be the reasons for kids dropping out? You've talked about issues, such as the busing and the start at kindergarten, not even attending school at the kindergarten level. Are there other factors?

Turek: From the students' perspective, sometimes they would tell us they felt the classes were uninteresting, the classes that they were sitting in. Now, you can look at that two ways. You can look at that as that they're just trying to find a reason, or maybe that was the situation. But when we listed the items that they had said, that was one of the things that came up, uninteresting classes.

Another one was a lack of engagement with the school life and classes. One of the things we always tried to pursue was to try to get the students involved in something other than just coming to school. If you can find a sport... You don't have to be the quarterback of the football team or the point guard on the basketball team; if you just sit on the bench, you have that interaction. It's some type of something you can be doing with your school. You can be in the school band. You can be...any of the other sports or extracurricular activities, but try to find something in the school that you could be involved in.

A lot of the students said that they were just unmotivated, that the teachers did not demand enough of them or that they didn't find that the teachers were very inspirational.

A lot of students told us the reason they would drop out of school is because of personal reasons. They had a job, and their job interfered with school, and they'd rather go to work than they would go to school.

Sometimes our students became parents. The males would drop out and get a job to support the family. If a girl was pregnant, a lot of times she would drop out. They might have had to support someone in their family or care for a family individual.

There were also the academic challenges. They couldn't keep up with their classes. They felt unprepared. They had to repeat a grade, and graduation requirements seemed out of reach.

There's some interesting statistics on students who drop out of school. It's like, of 100 students who start as freshmen, there'll be thirty of those students who don't graduate on time at the end of four years.

Pogue: Why should society be concerned about this?

Turek: As I mentioned earlier, one of the problems we have is, when we have a dropout we have... The statistics show that we pay \$70,000 to offer services to those students, either in public aid or something like that, and then that the high school graduate will receive and pay into the society \$236,000 in taxes. You can see after a while, the more people we have that drop out, the more financial strain it's going to be on the country.

One of the things that's really a concern is that 75 percent of the crimes that are committed in the United States are committed by dropouts. That's a sobering, sobering statistic.

Pogue: You talked about how the growth of pre-K [pre-kindergarten] was and the slow growth of alternative ed. When you talk about the impact on society, did you get much support for pushing more into alternative programs?

Turek: (laughs) We pushed the legislature quite a bit. It's funny because about five years in a row, the Governor's Office—I don't think it was the governor himself, but his Office of [Management and] Budget—lined out the truants alternative program, just totally lined it out.

Fortunately for our program, we had a group called the Illinois Coalition for Educating At-Risk Youth (ICEARY). That was kind of made up of all the different programs that we had. It was almost like our legislative arm. They charged dues, and then they used the money for the dues to work with a lobbyist. And, fortunately, the five years that the governor's office lined out the program, the legislature put the funding back into the program, so we received funding for it.

But over the last few years... I think right now [our] truancy program has gone from \$20,000, and it's down to about \$12,000. It's almost about where it started, back in 1985 or whatever. In the same situation, the early childhood program went up to about \$500 million, but I think it's been cut back now to about \$435 million.

Pogue: You said that your involvement came later. What did you learn from people like Jean or some of the others about those first years in the startup of the program?

Turek: Jean didn't tell me a lot about what happened in the years, because most of my conversations with her is, "What do I do now?" Here's a new job for me, and the actual transition between her running the program and for me overseeing the program happened from the time that an RFP [request for proposal] went out, until we had to have readers come in and read it and then refund programs for the next year. I was very busy, and I was very fortunate that Jean was there to help me with that and get me through that area.

She did tell me when... In one of our conversations, she said, "Make sure that you get out and visit as many of the programs as you can, especially the ones that receive any substantial amount of money." [That was] because, I guess—and this was a very unfortunate thing—she and Paul had gone to visit a program that had been submitting paperwork to him for two to three years. When they showed up at the door, to check out the program, they found out that the location was an empty warehouse and that they had been funding an empty warehouse for these years. They wound up getting the Attorney General's Office involved in the situation. But anytime you have any money, there's always somebody who's willing to take some of it away from you.

Pogue: What types of programs did you approve when you were involved?

Turek: We didn't have any set limit, as far as this would be the number of truancy programs, or this would be the number of alternative programs. A lot of the programs that we funded had been funded before; it was continual. As a matter of fact, I was there for about nine to ten years, and there were some programs that were funded before I got there, made it through my entire time there, and were funded after that.

There were some programs that had been funded for quite a few years before I got there, and something would happen where they weren't funded. Then we would also have new programs that would come in and be funded. It just depended on how the readers read the grants. And that's why I thought it was so important to have five readers, because you get one person for some reason who doesn't like the grant or something, it could really change the complexity and say that maybe it was a great program, but this one reader didn't like something about it, and now all of a sudden, those people aren't funded. That's really not too fair. We want to be as fair to these people as you can, because they put a lot of time and effort into what they do and especially into what they write, as far as their proposals go.

Pogue: You said that there was not much financial growth in the program. I would think that made it difficult to expand programs and add more. It would put pressure on those that were being funded, because salaries might be going up

due to contractual issues or wanting to serve more students or trying to maintain an existing student population. How did you deal with all of that?

Turek: It was very difficult. Unfortunately, I think a lot of programs, for quite a few years when I was running the program, were level-funded. They might have been receiving, let's say, \$105,000 when I got there, and they were receiving \$105,000 when I left. Some of these programs might have had two or three or four truant interventionists when I started, and by the time that I left, they had two interventionists. It was just...

Unfortunately the cost of living kept going up, but the program didn't keep going up. That was a decision that I had to make. When I started we had about seventy programs, and when I finished we had about seventy programs. I could've very easily said, "Okay, we want to give everybody a bump. Therefore, instead of having seventy programs, we're going to have sixty-five programs," and then cut five programs out. Then the next year, cut it back to sixty programs. It was a difficult decision. That was the one that I had to make.

Then the school districts, the community colleges and regional offices of education, had to decide what they were going to do with the level funding. Were they going to slow down their programs, or were they going to actually kick some more money in? That was one of the things that I always tried to tell people. I said, "If students are going to school in your school district, you are also going to receive an additional amount of money in State aid for having more students who are there, attending more days." You could calculate what that is, and you could put that into the program yourself.

Another thing that I'd always told people is, "If you're not funded this year for some reason, your district can pick it up." Well, I'll tell you what, from I've found is that, if we didn't fund them, the district didn't pick it up. That's a decision the superintendent has to make, and I'm sure it's a difficult one, a difficult decision to have to make.

Pogue: Did you have to have a map to know where your programs were located, as well as an idea of how many in a geographical region are being funded?

Turek: I never really had that situation. We knew we funded quite a few in the northeastern side of Illinois. Maybe [on] the far northwestern side there weren't as many, but for the most part it was pretty close to being evenly distributed throughout the state.

I wouldn't have wanted just to say, "Okay, we don't have enough in northwestern Illinois; therefore, I'm going to fund one and take funding away from downstate," just because they happen to be shorter up there than they are downstate. It was a difficult thing, but it kind of evened itself out really, for the most part.

Pogue: You talked about the Peoria one being a good model. For our listeners' benefit could you describe two or three of the different types of programs, whether it's the truant or the alternative education, that you thought were good models?

Turek: Oh, certainly. I was blessed with having...A majority of my programs were great programs. I didn't have the headaches of programs that weren't doing what they said they were going to do. That never came up.

But sure, in Peoria the Alternative Education program for the Peoria school district, District 150, was just an outstanding one. They had it located in the old YMCA building. It was away from all the individual high schools and junior high schools, and they had a dedicated staff of teachers, a dedicated administrator. They did a wonderful job of educating students.

Fortunately, in the same area, the regional office of education had a program. Theirs was a truancy intervention program, and they had about four or five interventionists who would go around to all of Peoria County and deal with students who were having attendance problems. They worked in concert and kept each other informed as to...If an alternative student was going to leave the alternative school and go into regular high school, they would inform the County people, so they could kind of keep track of that student when they'd get to their individual high school.

We had an excellent truancy program in Rockford. They had probably about four or five truant interventionists who would go out and check on the various truants. An interesting story that happened...

When you deal with truants, you never know what's going to happen. But one of the interesting stories that happened in Rockford area is, one of the interventionists found that a fourth grader was going to school, but the second grader and, I think, the kindergartener were absent that day. It turned out, what had happened is that the parents had gone to New Orleans for a week, left the three children at home alone in the house. The fourth grader was able to find out how to get to school, but the other two kids stayed at home. Because those other two kids stayed at home, that's how the interventionist found out that the parents had abandoned those children and, of course, called in the police and everything else. The parents were later convicted of child neglect.

Other great programs...We had a great program in Bond, Fayette and Effingham. It was through the regional superintendent's office, and Julie Wollerman was kind of the director of the program. She did an excellent job, hired fantastic people. It was another one of those alternative programs where kids could come, feel safe in the school, and participate. She had a high graduation rate.

Springfield had a good truant intervention program. I feel bad that I can't think of them all offhand right now, because if anybody else would be listening to this, they'd say, "What about mine?" But of the seventy, I'd say we probably had sixty-eight fantastic programs.

Pogue: How did those programs change during your tenure or from what you know? You've talked about the funding going up and now dropping down or being level, the types of service, maybe the rules from the state board, school code changes, or even the definition of chronic truancy.

Pogue: Yeah. The state board rules and regulations didn't change very much. I remember making one minor change to the rules, and I had to go through JCAR [Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, a legislative oversight committee], which is a division of [the] Secretary of State, involved in any types of changes to rules. It was such a long, complicated process that I had decided I wasn't going to make any more changes. It was just a minor change that we made, and I can't even remember now what it was.

I thought that, for the most part, that the developers and the initial people who wrote the rules did such a fantastic job, there wasn't much that I could do to make things any better. The programs remain the same. I'm kind of under the impression that, if it's not broke, don't try to fix it; just leave it as it is.

The schools, the districts, the regional offices of education, the community colleges all had to make the difficult decisions, what were they going to do with level funding, because it was like taking 3 percent away from them every year, when we level-funded them. I think they did the best they could.

I've heard recently that a lot of these programs have been reduced because, like I say, we went from the \$20,000 down to the \$12,000, instead of... In trying to keep the seventy programs, you've obviously got to cut your programs. So some of these programs that might've been funded for \$120,000 are probably now closer to \$60,000. They're just making it by bare bones. And with the financial straits of the State right now, I don't see a lot of additional money being put into these programs.

Pogue: You've talked about regional offices and community colleges also being involved. Did those entities have funding from other sources that could be pooled to try to deal with these issues through grant forms from federal sources or other state agencies?

Turek: That's a possibility, but a lot of them probably wouldn't want to tell me about it, because they might have felt, hey, if I tell him I've got an extra \$20,000, maybe he'll cut \$20,000 on my program. That might not have been (laughs) a wise thing to tell me.

However, I know that there was a push later on for the regional offices of education to put in a Safe School program.¹¹ That developed, and it was quite similar to what we were doing in alternative education, except our students were truants and people who were probably going to drop out; theirs were probably students who might drop out also, but they might have been some students that they were concerned about who might cause some type of problem within the school. A lot of these came about shortly after the Columbine situation.¹² But at some locations we had the Truants' Alternative program next door to the Safe School program. A lot of times, the students would just interact, and a lot of times, really, the students were probably the same kind of people.

The key to the whole thing was the teachers that they would have, that would teach the classes, the teachers that could deal with these students and keep the respect of the students and get the students to perform and graduate.

Pogue: From your work in the alternative programs, did you see a certain type of students benefitted most? What seemed to be the best methods for keeping students from dropping out?

Turek: I think one of the basic things, on a student who's a potential dropout, is just to let them know that there are people who care about them, that there are people that they can go to if they have a problem or a question, if something arises, [they have] somebody to contact. A lot of our truant interventionists were those kind of people.

A truant wouldn't come to school for a while. The truant interventionists would come and talk to them. Sometimes the student would actually call the truant interventionists, find their name in a phonebook or something, and say, "Mr. Groncki" (or whatever), "I'm having problems. Can you give me some direction on what I should do?"

Dealing with truants is... I've got the greatest respect in the world for the people who handle the truants. When I was teaching school myself, I always had the greatest respect for the special education teachers because they had students who they were trying to teach something to, but they [the students] also had various disabilities that they [the teachers] tried to overcome so they could teach them.

The same thing is true with the truant people. They had students who had major issues at home, maybe even issues at school, bullying or something

¹¹ The Regional Safe School Program (RSSP) serves expulsion-eligible and suspension-eligible students in grades 6-12. The statewide program began serving Illinois students in FY97 as established by 105 ILCS 5/13A of the Illinois School Code providing a system of alternative education programs for disruptive students. (<https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Regional-Safe-Schools-Program.aspx>)

¹² The Columbine High School massacre was a school shooting that occurred on April 20, 1999, at Columbine High School near Denver, Colorado, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbine_High_School_massacre.

like that. They [the interventionists] had to overcome those things before they could actually sit down and work with them [truants] on the regular classroom information. It was a difficult time, and I was just fortunate to have so many wonderful people that I worked with.

Pogue: Was there any key advocate in the General Assembly that supported Alternate Education? Early childhood had some key supporters, for example, that pushed things. Another group pushed bilingual and support for those programs. Was there a champion for Alternate Ed?

Turek: Offhand, I don't remember one individual. I know we had a lot of success from a lot of legislators with... I mentioned earlier about ICEARY, the Illinois Coalition for Educating At-Risk Youth. When they would start their lobbying, they would contact the local programs and say, "Okay, who's the legislator in your area?" I think that was one of the reasons we were so successful in receiving our funding back, was because no legislator wants to cut the funding of something in their area.

If all our programs were located in Peoria County, you could've had another 101 counties that say, "Let's cut the program." (laughs) But when you have a program in every, or almost every, one of the counties—we had seventy programs out of 102 counties—most people didn't want to cut the programs and then would put the money back into the programs. So, I think we didn't have just one champion. I think we probably had about seventy champions.

Pogue: In your work on Alternative Education, did you feel that there seemed to be a disjointed effort because there were so many entities also trying to deal with the same issues? You talked about Safe Schools, under the regional offices; community colleges were taking over GED [General Education Development], another step for the dropouts.¹³ Was there a uniform umbrella, much like there's a P-20 Council now, trying to coordinate everything at the levels of higher ed and K-12 ed and community college ed?¹⁴

Turek: We had our own program, and we felt that the number of students who could have been in our program, [in proportion] to the number of students we had in our program, that we were really only servicing 10 percent of the need. So, if somebody else wanted to come in and take over a section or do something additional, that was more than welcome because the number of students that were needing the services far outweighed the services we could offer.

¹³ The general education development is a group of tests that, when passed, provides certification that the test taker has high school-level academic skills, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Educational_Development.

¹⁴ The Illinois P-20 Council works to foster collaboration among various education stakeholders and to develop a seamless and sustainable statewide system of quality education and support. (<https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/P20/Pages/About.aspx>)

Pogue: You talked about the definition of a chronic truant being 10 percent of the last 180 days. That's eighteen days...

Turek: That is correct.

Pogue: ...that makes you a chronic truant. That seems to be a lot already, before they're considered chronic. Was that a problem that was...?

Turek: The definition of a truant is a student who misses any portion of a day, without a valid excuse. The concern with that is, what do you mean by a valid excuse? What you consider a valid excuse in your school district might be different than what the valid excuse is within my district, and maybe even different within your district. One teacher might say, "Okay, here's John Smith. He's been tardy. He's here an hour or fifteen minutes late." "Why were you here fifteen minutes late?" "Well, my dad's car didn't start." Okay, that's an excuse.

You go to the classroom next door, and they might not consider that a good excuse because they knew that John Smith had been absent five times last week, using the same story. It's kind of like, "The dog ate my homework," that type of thing. So the definition is kind of a scary thing.

When you talk about truancy, is it the child's fault? Is it parent's fault? Why isn't the child coming to school? That's what the interventionists get involved in.

When you get into chronic truancy, it's obviously not just a one-time situation, a two- or three-time situation, but you're really starting to show a pattern. The concern about truancy is, it's the number one indicator that a student will drop out of school. So, you've really got to deal with the chronic truant.

But the chronic truants are really the hardened... It's almost like in the situation of someone who's a robber or someone who's a murderer. By the time you get up to be a murderer, you're really in too deep. If you can break the cycle, back when they're truants, before they become chronic truants, it's a lot easier than to break the cycle when they become chronic truants.

Pogue: When they met the definition of "chronic truant," what did that mean? Did that mean the parents are brought to court or students are brought to court? Or does that vary in geographic location?

Turek: It's interesting [that] you bring that up because that was one of the things I wasn't sure if we were going to wind up getting into or not, but that was one of my biggest frustrations, working in this program. You say, "brought to court." So you're kind of thinking like I am, that here you have a truant interventionist, and they're working with a student, and they're saying,

“Johnny Jones,” (or whatever it is) “you’ve got to go to school; you’ve got to go to school.” Johnny Jones doesn’t go to school.

You try to break down all the barriers that keeps Johnny Jones from going to school. Obviously, you’re not getting anywhere. What’s the next step? And you mentioned the court. Okay, so you take Johnny Jones to court.

Now you have to take him to the state’s attorney. And the state’s attorney might say, “We’ve got a lot of things going on this month. We’ve got robberies; we’ve got this; we’ve got that. Truancy’s not on top of our list.” But in another county, you might have a state’s attorney who says, “We’ve got to nip this in the bud because in two years from now he might be here for a robbery or something. So, we need to work with this situation right now.” Then they say, “Okay, we’re going to pursue this.”

Now we go in front of the judge, and the judge says, “Okay, Johnny Jones, you’re not going to school. Why is that?” “Well, they don’t teach me anything. I don’t like being there and everything.” “But there’s a mandatory law in Illinois”—and I think they’ve changed it just recently from sixteen to seventeen—“You have to be in school until you’re sixteen or seventeen years old.” “Yeah, but I don’t want to go to school.” “Well, I’m telling you what, you’re going to go to school, and we’re going to monitor your progress, and you’re coming back here in three more weeks, and we’re going to find out how many days of school you’ve missed.”

Johnny Jones comes back in three more weeks, and the judge looks at the record. He’s missed five days, out of three weeks. What does the judge do? “I told you, you’ve got to go to school.” The judge has to have some type of stick. We’ve used carrots all the way up to here. Now all of a sudden, the judge has to use a stick. So he says, “Okay, Johnny, because you didn’t listen to what I had to say, I’m going to find you in contempt of court, and I want you to do three hours of community service on Saturday,” so he doesn’t miss school. “And I want you to come back in another week.”

He comes back in another week. Johnny hasn’t done the three hours of community service. Now what does the judge do? The judge is sitting there with a little bit of egg on the face. So, finally the judge says, “The only thing I can do to you, Johnny, to teach you that you’ve got to have respect for the court and that you’ve got to go to school, is I want you to spend Saturday night in the juvenile detention facility for contempt of court.”

There’s a lot of people who don’t think that’s a good idea. We had a situation; we felt that that **was** a good solution, to take it on and get the child’s attention. I’ve talked to people who have sent students to the state’s attorney, and the state’s attorney has sent them to the judge, and the judge has actually given the student a night in the county jail or county detention hall or something. From what I’ve heard, 50 percent of those students, a little

lightbulb goes on, “Hey, I finally have to listen to somebody. I didn’t have to listen to my teachers. I didn’t have to listen to the truant interventionist. I didn’t have to listen to the state’s attorney. But gosh darn, if I go in front of that judge, he’s going to make me do something I really don’t want to do, and I can’t keep from doing it.” So, we were having success with this.

Now, all of a sudden, something comes from Washington, DC, in the Justice Department, saying that they didn’t want juveniles incarcerated. They wanted them to bring down their numbers. So the [Illinois] Juvenile Justice Commission says, “What we’re going to do is, we’re going to keep judges from incarcerating truants and runaways.” The way they did this was...

The judges wanted to be able to work with these students, but they [the Justice Dept.] really kind of took it out of the judges’ hands by saying, “We’ve got \$1 million, and we give each county so much money. But if you put students into...if you incarcerate truants or runaways, we’re not going to give your county the amount of money.”

You take a small county, like maybe Menard County, which is just a little bit north of here, they get \$30,000, and \$30,000, they can use that money to upgrade a cell or the eating area in the county jail or something. Now, all of a sudden, they’re not going to get that. That puts a lot of pressure on the judge.

So, the judges are saying, “Don’t bring us truants. Don’t bring us runaways. You guys handle it yourself.” So that \$1 million program was actually wagging the \$20 million program because it was the last step on the road to getting the kid to pay attention to what was going on. Really, what it took away is mandatory school attendance.

As far as I’m concerned, the way this is, is there is no mandatory school attendance. We don’t go out and advertise that. We don’t go out and tell the students, “Hey, don’t go to school. There’s nothing anybody can do to you.” Which is true, there isn’t. You go through the whole thing, it’s all carrots, no stick. That was what I found to be the most frustrating thing.

Pogue: Recently the legislature had a dropout task force, a Truancy Task Force, and they were to give a report. Did see any of their findings?

Turek: No. When I retired I felt that the new people coming on had to be involved in all those kind of things. I kind of have a little question in the back of my mind, what the report was, but I haven’t seen the report. If you know where I can get my hands on it, I would like to read it though.

Pogue: How did you personally feel about the passage of the Reform Act of 1985? Again, you were just coming into the State Board of Education at that time. They had 169 reforms, and many parts of ISBE were working on certain segments on all of those. It was a busy time. Then you had changes at the state

board, new superintendents, new division chiefs. What did you feel about all that?

Turek: I was impressed when I heard that we were going to do some things new in education because I felt that ,through my high school career and even my first few years of teaching, that there hadn't been very much going on. It seemed like it goes back to the 1940s. Whatever took place in the 1940s was taking place in the seventies and early eighties. There hadn't been much change.

I was young and energetic, and I think I looked forward to a lot of the changes. I think the problem with change, though, is some people get set in their ways, and some people who might've been getting close to the end of their careers might not have been real excited about seeing all these changes taking place. I think a lot of people were in favor of them, and some people were brought along, dragging their heels along the way.

It's kind of like my situation right now. I just did something that I don't know if this was a good change in my life or not, but I went from Windows 7 to Windows 8.¹⁵ I don't think I have very many hairs left in my head after pulling them all out, trying to deal with Windows 8. just, again, change, something new. I wish I was back in Windows 7 (laughs).

Pogue: Were you able to compile data as to the number of students served by your program?

Turek: The research section, within the state board, compiled our things. We would send out an end-of-year report that all programs would have to fill out and send back to us. So the data was there on the number of the students that they were dealing with and the number of students within their areas and everything.

I tried at one time to set up some additional research. I wanted to find out what the difference was between people who were in our program and graduated and people who weren't in our program and didn't graduate, who were in our program but would drop out of the program. So I tried to get the various programs to send me Social Security numbers of the students. I probably picked a bad time to do it because there was a real pushback on Social Security numbers. People didn't want to give out Social Security numbers. There were also some districts who had a high immigrant population, who might not have even have had Social Security numbers.

¹⁵ Released in 2009, Windows 7 is a personal computer operating system produced by Microsoft as part of the Windows NT family of operating systems. Windows 8, released in 2012, introduced major changes to the operating system's platform and user interface to improve its user experience on tablets. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windows_8)

The school districts at the time were going into a universal student number, but the universal student number didn't do me any good when I would send that listing to the Department of Corrections and say, "Can you tell me how many of these Social Security numbers—without names, just Social Security numbers—have been incarcerated in each one of these two divisions?" and then do the same thing with the Department of Public Aid [Illinois Department of Human Services].

I wanted to find out how many students, both [those] who had received our services and those students who hadn't received our services, had been incarcerated and how many students had been on some type of public assistance. I was able to get some Social Security numbers. I was able to send those to the Department of Corrections. And it really showed that [for] a number of students who dropped out of our program, it wasn't long before they got into trouble and wound up being incarcerated. I was never able to get the information from the Department of Public Aid, and I didn't have enough really that year to make any statements. It was just me looking at it and saying, "Yes, for the most part, I think that's true," but I certainly wouldn't say it was a valid research tool.

Pogue: As programs gave you reports at the end of the year, what information did you receive? Let's take truancy, for example. Did they give you information specifying the number of students served; the days that they missed in attendance and any problems with their grades or their behavior? On the alternate programs, did they have to tell you how many credits the students earned?

Turek: They did list the number of credits that was earned, and they were supposed to say if it was a good situation with the student. But one of the problems I've always had is self-reporting. When you're dealing with statistics, and you're having a school self-report information, I don't think the validity is really there.

I think some school districts are; I think there are some superintendents who are very cognizant of what needs to be done and are very truthful in what they write down. But I also know that there's been other superintendents who have brushed aside things for their own personal good. What superintendent wants to come into a school district and find out that the superintendent before them had incorrect information, and now the new superintendent's going to change it, and it's going to make that [past] superintendent look really bad?

I know there was a large central Illinois school district that one of the truant interventionist administrators had told me that... When they were talking to the superintendent, they said, "Our dropout rate is a lot higher than what we're reporting." And the superintendent said, "Well, half of these students here are in transition. They're really not considered dropouts. They

don't go to our school anymore, but they might come back before they're twenty-one. Therefore, they're in transition and are not classified as dropouts." I find that hard to believe, that they're going to come back. It was just a way to move the statistics around.

Pogue: Were there other challenges that you experienced? Is there anything we didn't cover that was a challenge? You talked about funding. You talked about a variety of different types of programs that you were overseeing, the fact that your efforts targeted a segment that is difficult to deal with because they're already subject to some academic concern. You also talked about the changing approaches. Are there any areas, such as the courts, that could be covered? What other challenges exist?

Turek: Right. The [Illinois] Juvenile Justice Commission thing on the truancy and taking the availability of the judges to actively work with our truant students really hurt us quite a bit.

Another area... We were talking about statistics a few minutes ago. Statistics are so hard to review because they say, what is the nationwide dropout rate? And people will quote anywhere from 8 to 14 percent or something. I think the National Dropout Prevention Network says that it's pretty close to 12 percent. Yet, you ask them what the graduation rate is, which you would think would tie in pretty close to the dropout rate, and the national graduation rate is between 70 and 77 percent.

Let's take 75 percent. The graduation rate is 75 percent, but the dropout rate is 12 percent. Where's the other 13 percent? It just... I know that the definition of "graduation rate" is, you take the number of students entering a school as freshmen, and four to five years later, what number of those students have graduated?

Does anybody really think that we're going to have a lot of high school...[that]13 percent of our high school students are going to stay in school for more than six or seven years? I'm sure we have a death rate in there, too, where so many students might pass away within that timeframe. But I don't see the full 13 percent. I think the statistics show that really our dropout rate is probably higher than 12 percent, which is unfortunate, an unfortunate thing.

Some statistics—if I can remember how this goes—say that a hundred students who enter high school, seventy will graduate from high school. Of the seventy that graduate from high school, fifty will go on to college. Of the fifty that go on to college, twenty-five will graduate from college within five years. They give them an extra year to graduate from college.

So, you have twenty-five students, out of the hundred students, who graduate from the college, and a lot of our schools are dedicated to getting

students into college. But what are we doing for the 75 percent of kids who aren't going to graduate from college? What are we doing to get those students into areas where they will be able to earn a living?

I think tech prep was a real good idea, where they say, "Okay, we're going to have someone take two years in high school, and it's going to articulate into two years of the community college, with a possibility of articulating again into two years into college."¹⁶

So maybe in high school a student who's interested in the health occupations would take a CNA [Certified Nursing Assistant] program as a high school student, graduate as a CNA and go on to community college, take the first two years in there and become an LPN [Licensed Practical Nurse], and then go into a four-year college and finish up the LPN into an RN [Registered Nurse]. So we have a person who can go all the way through these articulated programs and become an RN.

We [the U.S.] have a real shortage of RNs right now. We have a shortage of plumbers, electricians, heating and air conditioning. We need to figure more ways of getting these students... Maybe it's the dropout students, get them involved in these things because not everybody can sit down in a classroom and listen to a lecture on whatever the case may be. We've had students who were in the top 10 percent of their class drop out of school because they just got bored with sitting in the classrooms.

One of the things that we have done in the Alternative Education programs is... I was real fortunate; I was at a conference one time, and a gentleman came up to me and said, "We'd like to use Illinois as a test. Would you be interested in receiving free, online computerized curriculum for your students?" We made that available to all the kids in the Truants Alternative Education program, where they were able to sit down and go through classrooms, class information, to pick up credits for the schools.

They were doing this all online. We see a lot of online programs nowadays, but this was when it first kind of started out. I thought it was a fantastic opportunity, and a lot of our students were able to avail themselves to that opportunity, so it was good. There's just all kinds of things. We could spend the next six days talking (laughs).

Pogue: Well, Joe, I want to thank you very much for talking to us about one aspect of the 1985 Educational Reform Act, which dealt with alternative schools, truant

¹⁶ Tech Prep, a school-to-work transition strategy, is a significant innovation in the education reform movement. It's a 4+2, 3+2 or a 2+2 planned sequence of study in a technical field, beginning as early as the ninth grade. The sequence extends through two years of postsecondary occupational education, following secondary instruction, and culminates in an associate degree or certificate. (<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cte/techprep.html>)

intervention, and the issue of dropouts, and for explaining how complex that subject was. Is there anything that you would like to add before we conclude our interview?

Turek: No, Phil, I think that's about it. I appreciate you inviting me in today and letting me have my say.

(end of transcript)