

Interview with John Dee

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Interviewer: Philip Pogue – ALPL Oral History Program

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Pogue: My name is Phil Pogue. We’re here on March 16, 2011. We’ll be talking to John Dee regarding school reorganization, as part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library project on the topic of school district reorganization. At this time, John, could you give us your educational background and experience?



John Dee

Dee: I’ll start at the beginning. I graduated from Elkhart Schools, Elkhart Grade School and Elkhart High School, in 1952, the University of Notre Dame with a degree in sociology in 1958, from the Illinois State University with a degree in educational administration in 1962 and from the University of Illinois with an advanced certificate in school administration in 1972.

I decided to go into teaching after graduating from Notre Dame. I applied for a newly organized district in Lincoln, Illinois. Five one-room schools had consolidated into a new elementary district and passed a referendum to build a new building. They hired me as their first superintendent. [I] taught the first year in a one-room school building, out at

Burtonview, Illinois, and then supervised the building of the new building and the other teachers in other one-room school buildings.

The second year, we moved into the new building. After three years there, I moved on to Elkhart Grade School, my home town, in 1961 and became their superintendent. I was there until 1966 when I moved north to the Linden Schools in '66 to '69 as superintendent of a dual district, an elementary district and a high school district, two boards of education and all that goes with that.

I became a superintendent of the Prophetstown Linden Unit District in 1969 and was there until 1981. [I spent] a couple of years out of education, and then in 1983 I joined the State Board of Education and worked there. After being there from '83 to '96, I went to work for FGM [Architects] on a part-time basis in marketing, visiting the schools in Illinois, talking about buildings, new construction and so forth. [After] a couple of years there, I joined the consulting and resource group as a consultant. We did feasibility studies for school district reorganization around the state. I did that until about 2002.

Pogue: What role have you played in school reorganization with the State Board of Education?

Dee: When I went there, from '83 to '87, I worked in the Program and Development Section, helping develop the Illinois Principals Academy and then later, the Illinois Administrators Academy. Then in 1987 I was appointed manager of a section in that agency, titled School Organization and Facilities. I worked there until my retirement in 1996.

Pogue: Was there a division tied to reorganization, or did that fit in with other State Board departments?

Dee: Well, there was a section in the Finance Department called School Organization and Facilities. That's the division that dealt with school district organization.

Pogue: What role did the State Board play in school reorganization when you were working for them?

Dee: The State Board was always at the table. Sometimes they developed legislation; sometimes they were the recipient of legislation that had been developed. They were always involved in school district reorganization and always carried out and implemented and facilitated and so forth, not always in agreeing with what was being proposed, but sometimes, yes.

Pogue: During your time, did the State Board of Education have a position on school reorganization?

Dee: The board, I think, kind of had reservations about taking positions. When they did, it seemed to be a problematic issue for them. So, yes, they supported reorganization, but they often didn't push it. They avoided things like the number of districts we should have, size of the high school and so forth. Although, in 1985 those issues were propounded by the governor's legislation, and they had to deal with whatever came to the table for them.

They supported unit districts, I would say, as the best type of district organization. But other than that, they kind of went with what the district might need and what the district might want in the form of reorganization.

Pogue: In 1985, there was a School Reform Act during the administration of Governor Thompson and, at that time, State Superintendent Ted Sanders, to come up with the requirement for county-wide studies, a high school of 500, a district of about 1,500. That caused a lot of problems and controversy, and eventually got rejected by the legislature, after they had considered it before. Did that '85 experience have any impact on the State Board operations when you were there?

Dee: Well, the '85 Reform Act...Of course, I didn't get there until '87; I didn't become involved. I was in the agency, but I wasn't dealing with school district reorganization. But what it did—and where they came up with those numbers, I don't know—but the research department at the State Board, the ones who did the researching...I am sure they studied a lot of studies and looked at other states and so forth. The name I would give would be Sally Pancrazio. She was the head of the research department during the time of '85 and on down to '87, '89 and so forth. Sally went on to the Illinois State University as the dean of the School of Education, ISU and now is retired.

But anyway, following the '85 act, when it was killed, there was a lot of interest developed in the state. When I got there in '87, there was just a lot of interest. Some of the regions went ahead and did the studies. They went ahead and did what the law required and tried to carry that out.

When I got into the section at the State Board, I was on-call. I was out lots and lots to school districts that wanted to talk about school district reorganization. They would be talking with the neighboring district. There might be two or three districts there. But there was just an awful lot of interest, and all I was doing was explaining what the law said, how you would go about it, forming the steering committee, the committee of ten and all that sort of thing. So I would explain all that to them.

Anyway, I would say that the law had an impact at that time. I don't know that it resulted in a lot of reorganizations. And then in about 1990-91, somewhere in there, it seems like it slowed down a lot then, too.

Pogue: What seemed to hinder school reorganization during the time period that you worked for the State Board?

Dee: That's always an interesting question. First of all, I think that if the state doesn't mandate reorganization, there will be none and that Illinois has not done so. So, we have not seen any rampant reorganization.

Going back to '45, I believe there was a lot back in there. They had all these one-room schools and, boy, they consolidated a lot of them. But [from] '85 on, it didn't result in too much. Local control...people want to keep their schools as close as they can. That's a strong feeling. We're an agricultural state; [there are] a lot of local, small areas in the state, and they just want to hang on to their school district.

There's a desire to keep the elementary children at home. There's a fear that the high schools will get too big. And there's the attitude often expressed, if this school was good enough for me, it's good enough for the kids today.

Pogue: What incentives were in place to consider reorganization during the period you served?

Dee: Basically the four, as I remember, the deficit fund balance difference, state aid difference, teacher salary difference and then the \$4,000 for certified staff member. Those are the four that we used.

Pogue: Could you explain a little bit what each of those four were?

Dee: The deficit fund balance difference dealt with...If districts were in debt or had a deficit funding, [it's] the difference is between them. So, let's say one district had a positive balance—and usually one district did in a consolidation effort—then that became a figure which all the others were compared to. So, if the district was zero and another district was \$100,000 and another one \$200,000 and another one 300,000, add those up, and that's the deficit difference.

State aid difference, then [is], if you are going to get less state aid as a unit than you would get if you stayed separate, they'll make up the difference, calculate it once; pay it three times.

The teacher salary difference, when placing teachers from a lower schedule to a higher schedule, then there's a difference in what they would make. That was added up, calculated once and paid three times for all the teachers.

The \$4,000 per certified staff member, that's just a plain outright \$4,000 for every certified staff member you got. They figured that every

year, at the end of the year, whatever staff was in that new district and then times 4,000.

Incentives were lucrative, but they weren't the deciding factor, as I decided. It just didn't do what you think it would do, because all these other things still were playing.

Pogue: Were there any key leaders on the State Board or in the General Assembly that were what you would call the promoters or real leaders, tied to the topic of school reorganization?

Dee: Well, the guy I was most familiar with was John Maitland from Bloomington. He was definitely a leader. Back in '85, Governor Thompson got involved, but he wasn't an education type leader. I was told that that '85 law was a result of the U.S. secretary of education—I think his name was Raley—had told Illinois that you need to reform your educational program in the State of Illinois. He was kind of the impetus, what the governor picked up on, and then they developed the Reform Act.

People like Phil Rock, Art Berman, Gene Hoffman, these were all in the legislature, and they were kind of leaders in this early impetus. As I said, I worked mostly with John Maitland when I was in the office there. Now at the State Board, Ted Sanders, of course, he was the lead guy, and Bob Leininger worked with him.

But Gail Lieberman, who worked for the State Board, I understand was the lead. She had to put it all together; she had to manage the whole thing. They kind of dumped that on her. Sue Vance was involved, because of certification, teacher dismissal and that kind of things. Brenda Holmes was involved because of her lobbyist position, or you know, governmental relations. And Gordon Brown, top staff, just kind of sent out... You know, they had that road show, and Ted Sanders was leading the road show. But they had legislatures on that show, I guess, and... But those names lingered on until when I was still there. They were still in the legislature and still on the State Board.

Pogue: We'll just pause it right here.

(pause in recording)

Pogue: Alright, we'll kind of pick-up with question eleven. Did the State Board superintendents, when you were working, have the same view on school reorganization as the governor or members of the General Assembly?

Dee: I would say, in general, they did. They didn't agree with everything, all of the tenets of the bills being proposed, but they were at the table, and they had a say. A lot of what they said was implemented then into the development. They did all the research for the research department. Gail

Lieberman was the staff member who... So yeah, I would think, in general, they were on board with it.

Pogue: Was there a State Board position on dual unit districts? You said that maybe you had a sense that they favored unit districts, but was there an official position?

Dee: I'm not sure there was. I just don't recall that there was, because they were real cautious about positions. This consolidation thing is a sacred cow, and they're just real careful. But I know that was the position of the staff; that's the best route to go. We were careful when dealing with school districts, to kind of look at who they were and what they were and maybe what they wanted, before we said... You know, we didn't go out there and bang on them that they should form unit districts. That's just kind of an implied thing that we felt.

Pogue: Were you ever involved in school reorganization as a member of the State Board of Ed [Education]?

Dee: As a member of the State Board of Ed, yeah. Well, yes. I was out there all the time, as a matter of fact. And I did have an involvement before I came to the State Board.

Pogue: Alright, do you want to explain that?

Dee: Yeah, I might tell you about that. When I was at the Linden schools, Linden elementary and Linden high school, they had a **very serious** financial problem, and they just really couldn't continue. So they talked to the neighboring district, Provincetown. They [Provincetown] didn't have a problem, and they had an up-and-coming district. Thank gosh, they were up-and-coming thinkers also. They looked at it. Sure, their towns were three miles apart. This would help us, you know, in programming, program offerings and so forth. They were very eager to talk about consolidation.

So we worked up a petition to form a unit district with the Linden schools, Linden grade and high; Provincetown was a dual district, grade and high, and then Centerville and Crestview, two rural elementary districts. All of them came together and formed a new unit district.

I know my experience was a little unique in Linden. Linden, I felt, just **had** to pass this issue. I couldn't talk about Provincetown, but I could talk about Linden. I visited every home in the Linden school district, with one or another board member, every home at night. We did it, and maybe six weeks went by, trying to convince those people they should pass it. And they did. So that was my experience with the formation of a unit district. Then I was named superintendent, when it was formed in Provincetown.

Pogue: How big a district did that end up being?

Dee: Well, about 1,200 students, K-12 [kindergarten through high school]. And we had maybe 150, 160 staff members.

Pogue: As to the State Board, if there were any reorganizations that were brought forth as either detachments, annexations, consolidations, did you play any role in that?

Dee: The State Board, as to efforts being made in the state, you mean, in general?

Pogue: Right.

Dee: Yeah, yeah. And we formulated some of the possibilities by listening to the people in the field, like the cooperative high school came up. Then there came up the idea of dissolving a unit district and forming dual districts. These ideas came from the field, and then we looked into it. That's one we didn't approve of. We went ahead, and it became law that you could dissolve a unit district. I don't think it ever happened, but I think you could do it.

[There were a] lot of the attachments or dissolutions. That was the biggest thing, I think. We formed some unit districts in the state, but dissolutions became the big picture, because nobody wanted to do anything until after they were out of money. Then nobody was interested, at that point, because they were taken in...So they would dissolve them and be attached to another district.

Sometimes the regional superintendent had to do it; there were occasions like that. Then sometimes another board was willing to take them in. I think now dissolutions...Annexations have to go to a vote, if I'm not mistaken. That wasn't true then. That was all by petition. (laughs)

Pogue: Were there any hot button reorganization issues that came up during your time at the State Board?

Dee: Hot button issues?

Pogue: In other words, were there any areas that were really looking at mergers but became very emotional?

Dee: I don't know that I can single any out, but there were a number of them, yeah. I used to say, when I'd go out and talk to the school districts, and they'd have these meetings...They really weren't shooting at me; I was a referee most of the time. The locals, battling each other, We want it; we don't want it and that kind of thing. I don't remember...I can't really put my finger on any hot button issue, any issues that I remember, because they were all, more or less, you know, so I don't think I can, yeah.

Pogue: Were there any studies done by the State Board of Education, tied to school reorganization? Since that has been brought up again in 2011, they have been citing some studies about size of schools, and you mentioned Ted Sanders' era. There was some basis from the U.S. Department of Education. Were there any studies that really were being promoted by the State Board as something school districts should look at?

Dee: No. I don't really remember studies since back to the time of '85. There wasn't much going on. After they killed the '85 bill, then new impetus was kind of laid aside, I think, for a while. So, no, I don't know of any. The research department would have done them, if any were done. They might have done some; I just don't know.

Pogue: Why does Illinois have so many districts? We look in the 1940s; there were over 11,000. That is now dwindled to 868 districts, but compared to other states, we still have many more and many more, smaller districts.

Dee: Well, we said earlier, basically we're a rural state, and they want the schools close to their communities. So, local control is a big word that they use. Now again, no mandating has ever been done and until they do—that's my opinion—there's not going to be any reorganization of any account. There will be little by little.

My experience is, when they can't go on any longer, you know...Although there's examples. I'm not saying it's all that way. It's generally that way, but there are some real good examples of school district reorganization where the people want better schools and got them through reorganization.

Pogue: Why weren't school construction or school buildings part of the incentives? You mentioned four, but you didn't mention school construction and school buildings, because often times, perhaps, if a high school was built in the middle of a corn field, between two towns, that might lead to improvement.

Our neighboring Indiana, the state, with their consolidation effort built schools to encourage consolidation. Right now it is a separate program in which you get a rank because of merger, but you don't necessarily become automatic. Was there a feeling that this did not belong in—

Dee: No, as a matter of fact, my staff felt it did belong there, and we kind of pushed that effort, because buildings became very important in this process. Sometimes two districts wanted to merge, and then maybe two high schools, and neither of them were really high school desirable to this new unit district, so there would have been an ideal situation. We did talk about that and promote that concept to the State Board.

I think the State Board's feeling was, We don't want to go too far with these incentive things; [there's] a lot of money involved. This is just

more money, and we don't also want to go overboard. They were kind of wanting to hold the line on the incentive picture as much as they could. So I think that's the reason school construction... Even though there was a school construction bill passed, it wasn't tied to the school district reorganization.

Pogue: Did school reorganization legislation originate with the State Board, or did it just develop in the General Assembly, and they came to the State Board for advice?

Dee: In '85, it was the legislature. It came through the governor and the legislature to the State Board. Generally, though, it's the other way around. Generally, even if a legislator had an idea, he would usually—when I was there—take it to the State Board to be developed and tell them what he thought. Then we would develop the concept and then feed it back. So usually State Board, I thought, was my thinking.

Pogue: Was there any major legislation on school reorganization that took place during the term you were there?

Dee: The cooperative high school concept came about. I think there is only one in the state, too, by the way, I've heard. There wasn't any when I was there. But that's the only big change I saw.

Pogue: Is that the Paris—

Dee: Yes, that's right. That's what I was told. It was after me, but I was told that took place.

Pogue: Since there was no action, what kind of led to even creating the idea of a cooperative high school? Did some districts think about that?

Dee: Yeah, they don't want to give their elementary; [they] want to keep control of those little kids. (slaps hand on a table) That was heard so much. High school kids were a little different. We could do the cooperative high school without losing our local districts... So, elementary schools. That was the only big thing I heard.

Pogue: What role did the State Board have with school reorganizations? Would you kind of explain the process that went on, either through detachments, annexations or consolidations during your term?

Dee: My section, what I worked with, worked real closely with regional superintendents. That's where they knew what was going on. They had the pulse of the people, and if there was interest in something happening, they knew. We worked with them a lot. I think we were always there at the forefront.

It seems to me we were deeply involved in anything reorganization, '87 on. We did it, whatever it was, whether it was information needed, studies needed, going out and talking to the people, helping them... We didn't push ourselves on them, but we would help them. I had a whole thing drawn up about how you do this, guys. We'd form a steering committee; we'd get a committee of ten and just work our way through that whole process, set up these committees on transportation, curriculum, finance and so forth. They were receptive to that. Then we'd have a steering committee with subcommittees... But it was all through the regional superintendents where we were. That's where we did our work, really.

Pogue: So you're talking about what needed to be done before the districts actually considered their options?

Dee: Yeah. Because they didn't know what to do, I found. They were just floundering. So, they'd get somebody like me come out from the State Board and just start talking them through it, give them the law, give them the incentives that would apply, and then, like I said, I liked to talk about... I thought they needed to do that more than they did. This idea of forming a steering committee and getting subcommittees and looking into all the various areas... We would help them as much as we could to develop, what do they talk about in transportation? Well, we would help them kind of know, that kind of thing. So, yes, that's how we did it.

And then we'd go back, if we needed to, and work with them again. They'd have a meeting, go off in their subcommittees, come back in two weeks, three weeks, a month, whatever, and talk again. Timetables were important. Elections were the key. You worked around election dates. That's one thing we gave them, was timetables. You have to start at this point if you want to end up at this point. In other words, when do you want to start your district? Well, then you are going to have to start the process back here, so you can make it work, because there are timetables.

Pogue: When you talk about going out and explaining options to the various schools that are considering that, today they do feasibility studies through an outside source, and then the State Board reimburses them. Is this what you were doing, in lieu of what we now do with the feasibility studies?

Dee: Yeah. My part was to lead the way and set up the... And if they wanted to do a study, we did one free. You couldn't beat our price. I had five staff members who did feasibility studies from our office. So, if they wanted one, we could... But the other was there. If they wanted to hire a consultant, they could do that, too. Later, our office got out of it. That's when the private consultants got in the business big time. (laughs) Nobody was giving them free anymore.

Pogue: Does the state superintendent have to approve any changes in school districts?

Dee: Only if a new district is formed. The regional superintendent must hold a hearing. The petition has to be filed. Then the regional superintendent has to call a hearing and make a decision and send it on to the state superintendent. He has to approve it or deny that petition, and it goes back. Then they set up the election.

[In cases of] dissolutions and annexations, no new district was formed, so, no, the regional superintendent took care of that. Now, whether that has changed today, I don't know. Since they now have to vote on annexation, I'm not sure what has to happen there.

Pogue: When it came to state superintendent, during your term, how would that be handled, when the state superintendent got this from the local district?

Dee: Well, it came to our section. It was channeled to us, and then we facilitated it within the agency.

So, we would review the whole darn thing and come up with a position. It would also be sent to the legal department and to the finance department, to make sure those areas were properly covered in that petition. So we would give the general approval and then, usually... Now, like Bob Leininger's who I worked with in this area. You would sit down with him and give all the reports, the finance, the legal... I worked real closely with legal when I was there, because there was just a lot of legal involvement. Then we convinced the state superintendent that this should go; this should be a go.

Sometimes it is not a viable district. Sometime buildings are going to be in the way. There's no place to put this new high school, because neither building will hold them all. Well, if you're going to have a new district, you need to put them... To still have two high schools, where did you go? You didn't improve anything. You still got two high schools, that kind of thing had to play.

And, of course, all of the legal steps had to be stepped through, so that was something... The legal department dealt with that more than us.

Pogue: When those requests came through then, did you have a timeframe that you were required to meet, so that this issue moved up to a priority, compared to other assignments that you might have?

Dee: Right. Because the state superintendent, I think it was thirty days he had to make a decision, once it arrived in our agency. So we had to get our work done and get it to him, so that he could make his decision and get it back to the regional superintendent.

Pogue: Were there any reorganizations that the State Board rejected during this time period?

Dee: Don't recall any; I just don't recall any. My notes didn't have any in them, so I just don't know if one ever was rejected. Usually they would get rejected before they got there. There was a big problem somewhere. If they're going to get rejected, there's got to be a legal problem, or like I mentioned... One thing they had to prove was that education would be better for the kids; they had to prove how. That's a grey area too, how do they prove that?

Well, they had to address it in the petition, how they're going to get that done, if the state superintendent didn't think that he could reject the petition. You know, we waived those things, but I don't recall any ever being denied. Maybe there were; I just don't recall it, I don't.

Pogue: How would a district show that this was an educational improvement? You mentioned that was a criteria.

Dee: Boy, I suppose course offerings, class sizes, opportunities for kids in the area of sports and activities other than curriculum that they might... I think those are the kind of things. Class size would be one, number of offerings at the high school. I think stuff like that, as I recall.

Pogue: From the reorganizations that took place during your time period, was there a specific geographic area where these took place?

Dee: You mean in general, where a number of them took place?

Pogue: Right.

Dee: No, I don't think so.

Pogue: Were most of them what would be called rural, as compared to suburban?

Dee: Uh-huh, yeah. I don't recall very many suburban going... They did studies, and we talked, but I don't remember any of them moving. I'm sure they have, but I don't remember any that did.

Pogue: Did you have many elementary districts deciding to go to unit?

Dee: You mean the elementary and the high schools?

Pogue: Right.

Dee: Yes. That was the most common that we dealt with. The **most** common, of course, was dissolution-annexation. But, in reorganization, they could also form... Two elementaries could make a bigger elementary, and two high

schools make a bigger high school. We didn't see as much of that as we did the one district formation. I think that was the biggest one.

Pogue: Could you kind of walk through when you went out to do this feasibility study, how that handled through the regional office? Could you give us some sense of how you handled the meetings or your role at meetings?

Dee: You mean when they were getting into the thing at the start?

Pogue: Right.

Dee: Usually, it involved an explanation. You mention the regional office. The regional superintendent was usually always present. They were very involved, and they were at those meetings also, and they could answer questions if they needed to be answered.

The presentation might be to explain the laws and not go too far into it. If I knew that they could really only do certain things, there is no use explaining the whole thing to them, explaining every law, because they couldn't do them anyway. So, if it was unit districts, what they should be doing, that's what I stressed. I would mention the others but not go into [detail], and then [I'd] mention the incentives and how they worked.

At the beginning, I didn't know numbers—those had to be developed later—but to tell them that it could be lucrative, that they could get some good numbers, and then get into the steering committee idea and the committee of ten. The committee of ten is key.

I might digress here just a minute, because anybody can start the petition process to form a unit district. And I don't remember where it was, but we once had a lady in a committee...I think she was an airline stewardess; she was gone a lot. But she decided that her district should merge with a neighboring district. So **she** listed a committee of ten, got a petition drafted, carried it in both districts, got it accepted as a valid...and then the Board of Education, nobody knew anything about it. Even the committee of ten didn't even know they were on, as a committee of ten. They didn't even know it. Now a lot of people signed it, of course, because it seemed like a good idea. This thing went quite a ways down the road.

I only say it to show that one person can start the process for a unit district, and if everything falls in place, they can go all the way to the state superintendent and be put on a ballot. Anyway, I just thought that was interesting, but that did happen. And we were scrambling to try to catch up with her and what she was doing. I digressed; where did I digress from?

Pogue: Did that district merge?

Dee: No. No, it didn't pass in the end. They did catch up. (laughs)

I was talking about the process. How you form the steering committee and the committee of ten is a major part of that steering committee. They, seven of those ten, have control of that petition. They can make changes in that petition. And they're usually the first ten signers of the petition. The petition states what's going to happen here. What are we proposing be done? I always told them that the committee of ten should be proponents and not opponents. Now there should be opponents on the steering committee but not on the committee of ten, because what they do is they're proposing something. Well, if you're against it, you're not proposing it.

So then, that steering committee then, you got your committee of ten, which is the core of the steering committee. Then you form subcommittees on curriculum and finance, transportation, buildings, that kind of stuff. You get people who are interested in those areas to get on those subcommittees. Then they do the study of that particular area, and they come back together. Then they would report back to the central committee, the steering committee, what they found out.

And this, you know... Transportation, maybe they found, hey, we got problems here with the transportation thing. They could show that, you know. Curriculum, how is it going to be improved? That's where [they present] that impetus for how [are] we going to improve these schools by doing this? Well, the curriculum committee's going to have a lot to do with that. Basically, that's it.

Then we'd culminate in a petition, which would be carried in that state of the proposal, which would be submitted.

Pogue: Did the State Board help at that time with determining potential tax rates?

Dee: Yes, yes. That was all done with the finance department. That is true. As we got into this then, they would do all the calculations, what the results would be as the districts merged, what the incentives would be. Yes, they had all that information before we went to the petition. That's right.

Pogue: As far as after the district was approved by voters, did the State Board have any additional role, other than making sure the incentives went out and the debt issues were handled? Did they have any role in follow-up?

Dee: Yeah, mostly through the regional superintendent. He's the one that really implemented and worked with the district. Finance department would be available to answer questions. We didn't go out too much afterwards, but we were there to answer questions and give them direction if they needed it. But, the regional superintendent was the key, at that point.

Pogue: Did the State Board of Education have a goal of a certain number of districts in Illinois? We're hearing, maybe we should have 300 districts in the state. Did the State Board have any target number at the time you were there?

Dee: No, not at the time I was there. No goals were ever set. I don't even know if we did the research. You know, Iowa mandated unit districts, and they formed them all over the state. It was a bombshell over there in that state, but it was done. And then they had to live with it. They did.

Bob Leininger lives in Kentucky, and he tells me they have county units in Kentucky. They mandated them, and that's what they got down there. And other states have done the same kinds of things. But it's always dangerous. Illinois's never had, I guess, the guts to hit the nail on the head and say, "Here's what we should do." So we never have. (laughs)

Pogue: Were there any issues about multi-county mergers that were more problematic during your time period, where you had districts that might be equally in three or four different counties?

Dee: Geography was a big thing, so many miles. That gets to be a problem in a normal... How long's that kid going to be on the bus? And then, if you're going to keep him on there over an hour, how many buses are you going to need to make this thing work? If you go even to a county-wide, you can get a pretty big district, and if you go multiple county, you get into other... [Do] you mean multiple county formations, or are you talking about parts of different counties coming in?

Pogue: Let's say, like a district that might be in two or three different counties. Today we might think of Indian Prairie, which—

Dee: Okay, parts of them are in here, yeah. That was problematic, yeah. That took a lot of legal thinking, and we worked on that a lot. I used to put out position papers, answering questions when they'd come up. Just develop the questions and the answers and then send them to the regional sups and my staff and superintendent and whatever. That helped answer those questions as they came up, because you're right. That's a good point. They did come up.

Pogue: Now did you ever have any districts that weren't bordering with one another request a merger?

Dee: Yeah, but that, more or less, [was] a dead issue, in my time. You just had to be contiguous, or you couldn't do it. (laughs) So, we just told them, "You can't do that," and they were going to have to find another way, if they wanted... We didn't work with them in that case, because that just won't work. (laughs)

Pogue: Do you have any suggestions for current policy makers, regarding school reorganization?

Dee: I would say, it needs to happen. I was always concerned about the small high schools. And today, even when I was still working at the State Board, they do a lot of cooperative programs together. I think of one, and Michelle [Henniger] mentioned this to me, Neponset.

I was in Neponset. It's a little school, eighty high school students. Kewanee is the district they should merge with. But these people were so adamantly in favor of keeping it, they even wanted to build a new high school, for eighty kids. But they had so many cooperative programs going on with Kewanee, they were almost in Kewanee. But they're still operating up there in Neponset. She says that's an issue again. It looks like maybe they're going to merge, finally, with Kewanee. (laughs)

So, I think reorganization ought to be on the table. They ought to be talking about, I think. We need to reduce the number of schools. I wouldn't have any idea how many, because all of these things come in to play, geography, size of the high schools, and all those things.

You know, we used to think... My office had a position that you didn't need a high school of 500 to have a good high school. You could have 350 to 400 and have an awful good program. We came up with those kind of thinkings, because of logistics, because of the mileage, you know. To get 500 kids in a high school in rural Illinois, you've got to probably have a big district to get that done. But I still think, back to your question, yes, it ought to be on the table; it ought to be pursued; it ought to be looked in to. It won't be easy, because the governor is going to find out. (laughs)

Pogue: As far as incentives, you mentioned that the four have been pretty stable for the last, what, twenty years?

Dee: Well, since '85 anyway. They came in after '85, so, yes.

Pogue: Are there any other incentives that you think should be on the table as policy makers look at school reorganization today?

Dee: Buildings. Buildings should be on there. Facilities have to be considered, and a lot of times, there is just a need for a new facility. It could be part of the incentive package, maybe, to help get that done. We do have school construction grants and so forth. However well they're paid out, I don't know today, but it could be coupled with that somehow. The grants, that should be a priority. School consolidation should be a priority for a construction grant, I think. It's a valid, viable proposal.

Pogue: Well, in closing, you talked about your own experience with Linden and Prophestown? Then you talked about your own role in the State Department

of Education. Were there any significant changes that took place on this whole business of school reorganization from that time at Prophetstown to when you finished at the State Board?

Dee: Highs and lows, it went through. There would be a lot of interest. Things would happen to cause the interest, and then there would come the lows. From '87 to '90, '91, somewhere in there, I was out all the time talking to schools. It just lulled off. So, what happens is the State Board...

I moved my staff to life safety code. We moved out of reorganization. We have one guy dealing with reorganization. The rest of them are working on this life safety code. We wrote the code and that kind of thing. So, I think it lived through highs and lows. I don't know where it is now, but it's not high enough for the State Board to have more than one person dealing with it, it looks to me like. That's the only change I see. But that's true from way back, I think. It just goes through those cycles, you know.

Pogue: Now you mentioned that you worked with Bob Leininger as a state superintendent. Were there others that you worked with?

Dee: Him mostly, yeah, Ted, you know, Don Gill. I usually worked with Bob. I didn't get to the State Superintendent. I didn't even work with Ted Sanders. It was Bob I worked with, and then he became the superintendent. But that was part of his domain, you know. Nelson Ashline was the inside guy, and Bob Leininger was the outside guy. Reorganization was outside, and so he just kind of handled that.

He went through one, also in Fulton. They formed a unit district up there in Fulton the year before we did. So he had the experience too...He was interested in it, too. Other superintendents, Ted Sanders got thrown into it, or I don't think he would have been as involved as he was. The other superintendents, I don't think they were very involved. It was staff that did it, and that was Bob.

Pogue: Well, I want to thank you, John, for providing us some insight on school reorganization through your own experience and being involved in one at the district level and then your role at the State Board of Education. I appreciate your insight.

Dee: Well, I thank you for getting me—

(end of transcript)