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An Interview with Benjamin (Ben) Wolf

Part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library
Education is Key - Public School Funding Oral History project

Interview #EF-A-L-2019-051

Benjamin Wolf, an employee of NCLU in Illinois, was interviewed on the date listed below as part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Education is Key—Public School Funding Oral History project*.

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Interviewer: Philip Pogue, ALPL volunteer

Transcription by: _____

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The interview is archived at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois.

Interview being
processed

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Abstract

Benjamin Wolf, Education is Key, EF-A-L-2019-051

Biographical Information Overview: Benjamin (Ben) Wolf was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1953. He graduated from Evanston Township High School in 1971, and then attended college at Washington University in St. Louis, majoring in philosophy. After graduating in 1975, Ben moved to Washington D.C. to work for the Social Security Department. He attended law school at Boston college, earning a J.D. in 1979, then became a clerk for Judge James B. Moran in Chicago, later joining the firm of Jenner and Block in 1980. In 1984, Ben joined the Americans Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), where he still worked at the time of this interview. Ben has been active in the Roger Baldwin Foundation, which focuses on advocacy for children, individuals with disabilities, and incarcerated inmates. Ben has been active in efforts to improve Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) guidelines and procedures since 1988. He has also been the Director of the Institutionalized Person Project since 1984. He received the 2010 Morsch Award and the 2011 Public Citizen of the Year Award from the National Association of Social Workers.

Wolf discusses the *Lewis v. Spagnolo* lawsuit, which argued that students in East St. Louis School District #189 were denied a minimum basic education as required by the Illinois State Constitution. Issues such as unsafe schools, mismanagement of finances, lack of qualified teachers, closed schools, lack of equipment, high dropout rate, low test scores, lack of due process, and required compulsory education were argued before the Circuit Court, Appellate Court, and Illinois Supreme Courts. The case was dismissed at the Circuit Court level. The plaintiffs won at the Appellate Court level (2-1), but the decision was reversed (5-2) by the Illinois Supreme Court. Wolf explains why the case was selected, the court proceedings and preparation at all levels, and the final ruling by the Illinois Supreme Court. he also describes how earlier state and federal school funding cases were considered along with the 1993 and 1996 School Funding Task Force and Governor's Commission. Wolf also discusses the history of school funding, including challenges in East St. Louis which preceded the litigation. Finally, Wolf reflects upon overall equity and adequacy issues and the national movement to achieve more equity. Ultimately, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that these issues should be corrected by the legislative and executive branches.

Subject Headings/Key Words: *Lewis v. Spagnolo*; Article X of the Illinois State Constitution; Illinois school funding; East St. Louis schools; minimum education; *Rodriguez v San Antonio*; School Funding Commission and Task Force; Illinois Supreme Court; Illinois Circuit Court; Illinois Appellate Court

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