

Interview with Linda Chapa LaVia

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Interviewer: Philip Pogue

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This interview, by Philip Pogue, a volunteer interviewer for the Oral History Department of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, was conducted on Tuesday, June 7, 2011. The interview subject was Illinois State Representative Linda Chapa LaVia, chairwoman of the Illinois House of Representatives Education Committee.

Chapa LaVia: Hello, good morning. This is Linda Chapa LaVia. I'm the state representative for the 83rd District in Aurora, Illinois. That also covers North Aurora and, as well, Montgomery. [Grab your reader's attention with a great quote from the document or use this space to emphasize a key point. To place this text box anywhere on the page, just drag it.]

So, as far as my legislative career, that's your first question...I ran for office in 2001. Well, actually, it was 2003, because it was when the district was re-drawn. Prior to the 83rd District being formed, here in Aurora, Aurora was split up to five different House of Representative Districts. A Democrat hadn't won in the 14th Congressional District for twenty-five years to a single member district.



Illinois State Representative Linda Chapa LaVia

Being an Army officer, when people say you can't, I do. So, I had no legislative experience or elected office experience prior to my run. This is the ninth year I've been in the General Assembly. I have focused in areas like the developmental disabled, which is [the] special needs area, and education, ever since I've been in Springfield, as well as the veterans, being the vice chair of the Veterans Affairs Committee in the House. Presently, and to the date where I was elected, I still am the only sitting female veteran in the General Assembly at this time.

The district I represent is Aurora, parts of North Aurora, which is a different city, and Montgomery, in the center of the state of Illinois. The reasons that I wanted to run, and I did run for office, was the commitment to serve people and the basic needs in a community, that I felt were being neglected, especially prior to the district being in five different districts and not one legislator really representing Aurora. As of today's date, as we speak, we are now the second largest city, having a little bit fewer than 200,000 people in our city.

I have been privileged and honored to watch it grow and help move the progress of Aurora in every area. The legislative committees that I serve on, to-date, is that I am the chair of the Elementary and Secondary Ed Committee, which is a huge commitment, due to the fact that I'm now the longest standing Democrat, with the most education, if you will, on committees, which puts me into the policy chair for elementary and secondary ed [education] in the House.

I am the vice chair of environmental and energy in the House of Representatives. I sit on [several committees,] Financial Institutions, Public Utilities, Telecommunications, a special committee on bio-technology, a special committee on veterans' affairs, which is, once again, I'm the vice chair of that, and quite a few other legislative committees, such as the Illinois Legislative Audit Commission and quite a few task forces, when it comes to veterans.

Outside of the General Assembly, I hold no appointments, as far as elected positions. I am very, highly involved with a lot of non-for-profits in our community, so many I can't enumerate them, because there's so many of them. If it has anything to do with veterans, I try to be a part of it, regardless of where it is in the State of Illinois, because of my commitment to veterans and being a veteran and knowing that people died to give me the right to do what I do. And then, also, non-for-profits having to do anything from Christian organizations, maternity homes, helping the homeless [and] near homeless, the YWCA, reentry programs for ex-offenders, such the like, employment, housing and different areas. I am a real estate broker—I have not practiced full-time for the last eight years—with my mom's firm, here in Aurora.

I was born and raised in Aurora. I went to a parochial school as a child, until I had to repeat third grade twice and decided that Catholic school probably wasn't for me. So, I went from St. Joe [St. Joseph Catholic School], here in Aurora, on to Hermes, to fifth grade. [I] went to Simons Junior High School on the east side of Aurora in School District 131, graduated from there. [I] went on to East Aurora and graduated a year ahead of time. So, I went from a sophomore to a senior and was sixteen when I got into Northern Illinois University.

When I went to Northern Illinois University, it was '84, '85. I did not test to get into the school. I go in through a back door, called "Chance Program." That's where I got my first taste of politics, as far as an instructor saying the importance of Hispanics and the role they should be playing in the political arena. But, therefore, there wasn't enough leadership, and they're going to be a large population. So, I think that kind of spurred my interest.

After I attended Northern for one year, I went to Waubensee Community College and paid for my own college. So, of course, I got straight dean's list.

[I] wanted to finish my university life, so I chose to join the United States Army, went in as an E1 [enlisted, pay grade 1], received a scholarship to go to the University of Illinois at Chicago through the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] program. [I] became a commissioned Army officer in '91 and was a United States Army officer, full-time for two years in Annapolis. I was never activated. [This] was in during Desert Storm [Operation Desert Storm, January and February 1991]. [I] was one of the women who wanted to go in the field. They wouldn't allow me to go in the field, so I decided to go National Guard for seven years.

What I realized is that God put me in the right place at the right time. Wearing those three different sets, distinctive sets, of combat boots, being an E1, being an Army officer in the National Guard had equipped me for my positions I hold now in the State of Illinois, helping protect our veterans and our service men and women in the National Guard and Air Guard. [I] had no other formal training after that point, besides the armed services and getting my real estate broker's license.

We had gone through... Briefly, let me just... Currently Illinois has 869 public school districts. The City of Chicago school district makes up 299, has enrollment of 404,589 students and 611 schools in one district. There are eighty-two school districts in the state of Illinois, with an enrollment of less than 200. Students and the School District Realignment and Consolidation Commission, which I sponsored and which we are going to be speaking about today, is a sponsor initiative from constituents' concerns, throughout the state of Illinois.

The purpose of the commission was to find an ideal enrollment for schools and find where consolidation and realignment would be beneficial to making sure that we're providing every child in the State of Illinois the proper education. There was, in this year of 2011, a discussion with the governor, that said that he was going to consolidate 300—I want to say; I don't know; I think that's what it was—300 school districts, equaling X amount of savings.

As soon as he gave that address, my phone line started ringing like crazy. You cannot let this happen the way he'd like to see it happen, because there might be a chance of us doing more damage than good. Of course, we have a 174 superintendents that make more than the governor. We have prided ourself on a state as local control, and it brings up a lot of personal, emotional feelings on one side or the other or the middle of this idea.

So, based on your notes, it's reported [by] the State Board of Education, there was 141 school managers between 1983 and 2010. From 1983 to 1989, there were thirty-five, and from 1990 to 1999, there were sixty-six, and from 2000 to 2010, there were forty. Did that number surprise you, as far as schools that were considering consolidation? I'm assuming that's what you're talking about or had chose to.

Pogue: Right. And also that, from the period 2000 to 2010, it actually slowed down the concept of reorganization.

Chapa LaVia: That doesn't surprise me, because of the length of time in which it sometimes takes for schools to get that done by a referendum...not a referendum, but a resolution, passed by the school districts, starting to even negotiate that with another school district. It can take anywhere from a couple of years to ten years to complete the process of integration of different school districts.

In that mix, we also find there might be different terms that people are on, as elected board members on the perspective school district, which even causes another whole wrinkle in the process. So, it doesn't surprise me [that] it started to slow down. It neither shocks me that it started to speed up again, when the governor allowed the words to come across his lips of consolidating more schools in the State of Illinois.

Pogue: Of the 141 mergers, sixty-six were annexations; fifty-five were consolidations; thirteen were deactivations; four were kind of annexation conversions. Then, there were different types of hybrids and co-op high schools that were created. Why did the two methods of annexation and consolidation seem to be the most dominate way to merge?

Chapa LaVia: Well, in my opinion, the consolidation is just...It's the most frequent used method to start looking at efficiencies and coming up with programs to get things done quicker, especially in areas [in] which they're losing population, and one school district is hurting, compared to the other one. Usually, what I

find is those are done more in areas that are starting to lose kids, as opposed to gaining population.

As far as the annexations, interesting enough, I helped draft a piece of legislation this year that would not necessarily annex a certain section into a new district, but in the district in question, there was no board they could go to to even hear the petitions of those individuals, to even consider the idea, not give them the right, but consider the idea in whether that annexation should take place. So, I think that the annexation is more of a legislative... If the districts are willing to do about knowing about how to get into the legislature, talk to their prospective senators and representatives, it's a vehicle they can choose to do. That's just my opinion on those two. Consolidations, it's just easier. The mergers, if you will, because you're calling it mergers and not consolidation, because consolidation is kind of a general word. But that's the way I feel, is more so the mergers, having to do with the loss of population, and then, trying to work together with a local school district that they can actually share transportation, share teachers, etcetera, etcetera and be a little bit more efficient. And annexation, the way I look at it, is more of a resolve done by the General Assembly, helping to push the process.

Pogue: In 1985, there was a major educational reform package that had over a 150 pieces of legislation, all put together. Some of those allowed unit districts to raise their rates, so they'd be more equal to dual districts. It created the pre-kindergarten at-risk programs, created alternative educational schools, started the idea of state learning goals and state assessments. It even included Casimir Pulaski as a holiday.

But one of the big issues was the idea of trying to create 500 enrollment high schools, 1,500-sized school districts, with a unit being the preferred districts. And districts were required to have county-wide hearings and to submit plans. Governor Thompson [James R. Thompson] was involved with that, along with Ted Sanders. That led to meetings in all 102 counties. That part of the reform package was not successful as public policy, and the legislature quickly—

Chapa LaVia: Retreated.

Pogue: ...voided that from that.

Chapa LaVia: That wasn't talked about, and you know, I know I wasn't a legislator at the time. It really wasn't talked about. But the flavor that I get—as a committeeperson, and now as the appropriation chair at the last General Assembly, and now I'll be in the policy chair this year of elementary and secondary ed—is that there is a disdain for legislators at the 10,000 feet, coming down to tell the teacher in the classroom, at the time, what to do and what not to do. And it's progressively gotten worse, as far as, we keep on

mandating these ridiculous requirements on teachers and not really being a teacher ourselves. So, the experience of that, I could see why it unfolded.

Sometimes when there's too many elements in a bill, it becomes very, very heavy, and it drowns in its own weight, because of trying to explain it to so many people and getting them behind to push it uphill. In the last nine years, I find the most effective pieces of legislation are very...they're scaled down, and they're comprehensible to everybody, even if they've never been in the educational field. That way, you get buy-in.

I feel it probably wasn't successful, because of the fact that there were so many mandates within that, having some good things, you know, the evaluations. I think there is a correction, if you will, in education that happens every ten to twenty years of, "Oh, no, our test scores are going down; we have to try the newest and the latest."

The progression, over the years, since we've had statehood and since we started schooling as one of our platforms, as a state, I still don't think we've gone far enough. But there has to be an equation, where we can get the power back in the teachers' hands and the local hands to make those decisions on what they need for the districts, quick enough, fast enough.

You know, before, when we did have a more agrarian society, where it was smaller schools, and you had to work the fields, it was easier. It was more homogenous, if you will, because people all looked the same. Over the years, as people started influxing into the State of Illinois, we became this huge...I don't like to use the word melting pot; I like to say salad, because we keep our own identities—we really do—that we started seeing a breakdown of what used to work, to the point where it no longer works today.

So, I think you start seeing these corrections that happen in education, of not getting the results that we need and never, ever, as my opinion, seeing the dollars that should be tied to it, in order to be successful as an educational system, to make sure that our kids are provided what they need to provide. But, going back to your question for the 1985 major school reforms, I think the weight of the bill itself is what had its demise written all over it. That's just an opinion that I have.

Pogue: Why does Illinois have both dual and unit district types?

Chapa LaVia: Well, this is, once again, when these things were all developed, I wasn't around. As I look from it from the chair of where I sit, it makes the process even more difficult to accomplish any true educational reform in the state, if it's not very general, and this peg can fit into the hole of that puzzle piece in any school district in the state. So it's an extremely frustrating area.

It's frustrating. We don't have one uniform type of what a school district looks like. District 131, here in Aurora, and District 129 have

everywhere from the pre-school, all the way to the K [kindergarten] through twelve. Then you have some districts that are just junior high, and then some districts who are just grade school, and some districts that are just high school. It becomes quite confusing and quite onerous for someone to take up the call of trying to reformat all of these organizations. That's when you also had, you know, your district and your unit types, everybody has a school board. Everybody runs, and they win in elections. They're elected by the local control, once again. It's a very hard mold to break and say, "You know what, maybe we haven't done what we need to do. Maybe every school district should look like this, and we're going to help you over the next ten years to try to reformat your unit into a district." Or maybe we're not right on the districts, and we need to do districts like units.

But there has to be a really strong commitment from somebody, a stakeholder that's in this business for a long time, to start to look at that and which one's more efficient. Now, being an Army officer and being a small business owner, when I first came in, nine years ago, I knew the system was broken.

We do not live in an environment in Springfield of a quick solution to very long problems. There are problems that have been in the system for such a long time, because of the way we have set up our Constitution, people being elected in the House every other year and people being elected in the Senate on a lottery, four, four, two or two, four, four, whatever the combination is. Then, of course, the governor [is] being elected every four years. The last governor's focus could have been on education, and this governor's focus is on the environment. [I'm] not saying that's happening at this point, but all of us come to the table as elected officials with things we want to get done, locally for us, and we accomplish those. But long-term goals and [being] able to correct anything in any society, is going to take a long time and history to complete. What you'll find is, the founding fathers of any project might not be there to give that constitutional information to add to the plate, when the new people are around to make sure that things get completed.

So, we have tons and tons of task forces and white papers on everything you think of in the state. And once those are complete, what you'll find is rooms and rooms of shelves of shelves, with a lot of great information that we've never done anything with, because the genesis of... Let's just put into place, the House Bill 1216, that we're going to talk about, the consolidation, a piece of this, the Realignment Commission, if you will. I could be gone in my next reelection. So, I know the genesis of this piece of legislation. I know all the players that came to the table to help me produce this, whether Republican side, or whether they're shareholders in education in the State of Illinois.

But, when I go, and it's complete, what happens with the findings of the consolidation? Does it really, then, find its way into a legislator's hand

that's committed to making sure that they follow through with some of the recommendations, but producing the legislation that's needed to correct whatever inefficiency we see as a General Assembly, at the time, in education?

So, for long-term goals in any government, it's very hard to give you the information to say that we're going to get it done, because of that fact. And that's a huge fear, too. But, as far as a dual or the unit district types, that's something that hasn't been really revisited, on whether they work. And that's part of the issue. You have some school districts that are units that have 200 kids in it, and they're a full-functioning school district. Any school district is a multi-million dollar corporation in a state. So much money goes into those doors, in the units and the districts. Do we have the right people running those institutes, as well? So, it becomes quite a big issue, if you are business-minded, like I am.

So, those are two areas that I think we'll probably start diving into in the next couple of years, to have some kind of input on which one works. Why do we only have two? You know, I really can't get the genesis, where it started, but I know what it looks like now and what I can do to sit back and say, you know, "Superintendent, how can I help you?" or "Why do you feel this is the best form of a school district or school unit in the State of Illinois?"

Pogue: The state does give financial incentives for merging districts. What are those, and has the General Assembly ever considered others?

Chapa LaVia: It's not a lot of money. In the State of the State, the way we are with our debt, things are coming. We can put them out on the table, but, if we can't pay out, it doesn't do anybody good.

I would caution you this, though, in this whole argument of financial incentives, if you're a good steward of the dollars which taxpayers give you, then you should do whatever that means to make sure that dollar stretches. So, I don't want to punish school districts or units for not looking at merging and consolidation or realignment, whatever you want to call it. I think it should be part of who they are, to get this done for the kids of the State of Illinois, because once you lose one generation, you lose more than that. It's not just the child's generation; it's everybody that child's going to produce in life.

So, I'd like us to try to get away from incentives and just making those part of the charter, as they are as districts or units, to get this done, because it's in the best interest of the children of the State of Illinois.

Pogue: School construction is not part of the current incentive program, although it can hinder potential mergers, because two buildings may need to be built if the two high schools or three high schools are not adequate, unable to house that, or because moving students to one junior high, may require an addition.

That now falls under a different category. Do you see any changes in the issue of school construction?

Chapa LaVia: Other than paying out? No, I don't see any changes there. We still have applications that haven't even been opened. Most school districts did their parts, back in their districts, by running referendum and receiving overwhelming support from their districts or their units. The frustrating thing here, once again, is that the State of Illinois finds itself in such a large deficit that to fulfill on our commitment, seems to be going lower and lower on the level, especially when it comes to school consolidations and mergers.

[Regarding] part of the realignment commission, under House Bill 1216, I'm sure, brighter minds than me will be discussing some of that on the table. Now, I'm more interested in the incentives that we spoke about, but it's my opinion that a school district or unit should do what is in the best interest of the children of that district or unit, but also along the lines of this notion that, by doing these realignments, that they actually are going to save dollars to put back into the classroom.

As you just stated, about the differences, as far as the buildings and the years on certain buildings and upgrades and things like that, I think what you're going to end up finding from the realignment commission is that, to generally blanket and say, "I'm going to consolidate X amount of schools, and I know I'm going to save this much money," is not going to really come to fruition, that we're going to find that there's other unintended consequences that we dig up, or unearth, while trying to encourage certain movement to merge. So, that's definitely one area I hope that the commission looks at, under Lieutenant Governor [Sheila] Simon. I guess we'll cross that bridge if it comes up.

Pogue: Could you briefly explain the way schools can merge, and, in fact, some of them have been created, but have never been used. So, a second question might be, why were they, then, created?

Chapa LaVia: Well, things change. Population changes in the state. We're down this year. We're going to be down one Congressional seat, so we've lost a large population of people. People move. We live in a society that's very mobile and very transient. The population of kids that are younger might be lower at certain given times in different areas throughout the state. You might have to put in technology and manufacturing companies that close down, that once saw a boom in families and children in a different area. So, there are a lot of different reasons why they fluctuate, and they change over the years.

I've always been a proponent of home school, private schools, parochial schools, because, when I look at the big picture of education, I think it takes all. It just doesn't take the public education in the State of Illinois. It

really takes a whole group of other educational systems to support that, to make sure every child is educated and every adult is educated.

The only areas that I have been working in or found documentation on at the federal level and national level, are more so the unit and district consolidations and deconsolidation, because sometimes... Let's just take a case in point, Chicago Public Schools. That's rather a huge monster, as far as a school district and all of the different schools that are under that umbrella and how they manage that. We can all take into account, too, that sometimes a school district, like U-46, is so large too... probably an easier entity to realign and deconsolidate, and then, also, to the point, where sometimes, when you get these smaller school districts, that their testing is great, and the kids are all above average. You merge them into another school district, to find efficiencies, as far as dollars. We find, in the past, that sometimes you cut test scores of those great kids in that other school district go down.

So, I mean, you've got a whole litany of things, but the ones that I've basically been researching and looking into, are more so, is the deconsolidation and consolidation of school districts and units, other than a lot of the other areas.

Pogue: What process is used by the General Assembly to enact school reorganization legislation? What committees oversee it, and who have been some of the leaders in the General Assembly on this, since you've been in there and also, members of the state board that have been helpful.

Chapa LaVia: Well, one of the people in the General Assembly in this year, 2011, that I would have to tip my hat off and accolades to, would be State Superintendent Koch. He has been a phenomenal champion. He came in, in the arena of special needs kids, and worked his way through the system, got the schooling, and was chosen to be the state superintendent. Max McGee, with the Illinois Math and Science Academy, presently, he was a state superintendent. He's been a wealth of knowledge.

There have been a lot of legislators that have come in with me, or my class in 2003, that have been extremely instrumental. Karen Yarbrough, Representative Yarbrough, who is now a leader, has been very active in the arena. Representative Eddie Roger, Jerry Mitchell, Representative Mitchell, Representative Mike Smith, who's no longer here—he was the chair of elementary and secondary ed—has been extremely instrumental, at least in my education on school reorganization legislation and school reform education, in general. Senator Lightford and Senator Meeks have been extremely instrumental in pushing that football across the yard line, into the goal. And, in the General Assembly, what I find, especially with school reorganization—and I know it kind of falls under the Committee of Elementary and Secondary Ed—but school organization, there's so much stuff there.

There are educational reform groups that would like to see things like Race to the Top, which I was the lead sponsor of in the House, and Ms. Lightford and Senator Meeks were the leaders in the Senate of education being tied into teacher evaluation, and the teacher evaluation being 50% of the students' performance... Correction, the students' performance, 50% of that, based on how we evaluate teachers, which is something that's come about that's been in the works and will be completed, hopefully, this year, those evaluations, so we can get [them] out there into the communities.

But the process itself, of how we come about such big legislation, especially in the reorganization, there were some discussion on doing just a bill that would flat out put what a candidate for consolidation would look like in the State of Illinois, and then forcing it down the throat of school districts and units, was not one embraced by anybody in the state that I know of. Senator Schoenberg wanted to work on a piece of legislation like that. We started to talk, but it broke down, because there's so many education groups, whether it's the State Principals and Managers Association, whether its LUDA [Large Unit District Association], whether its Advance Illinois or even our newest, Stand for Children, everybody thought forcing this upon the units or the district was not a good thing. The last time it was tried to perform that—I want to say, we were talking earlier about that—the early 1990s, or was it 1986 or seven? I can't remember the correct date, when we tried to do consolidation, and it got turned over. Basically, they did all this hard work.

We thought the best way to go about this is putting together a task force, with a lot of members from education fields, all over the State of Illinois, making the lieutenant governor—since she has an educational background—Lieutenant Governor Simon, the chairwoman of this and getting information from each of these entities. They would have to take a vote on the recommendations they gave to the General Assembly. So, therefore, we have to vote on their finished product, up or down, to accept their recommendations. And then, based out of their recommendations, certain legislators that find themselves always in the educational reform area, would probably, then, take up different elements of their suggestions and try to run policy from that.

But, the State of Illinois has dug that line so deeply in local control that I find it extremely hard to do anything at that level from Springfield. Once again, 10,000 feet in the air, and they're back down to the dime in the district. I think, because we chose to produce education like that, I think it's only fair to make sure that locals do have a large say. It is their tax dollars. So, the approval is very important, paramount, and I'm looking forward to their outcomes.

Pogue: Were members of the General Assembly surprised that Governor [Pat] Quinn brought up the idea of school reorganization down to three hundred?

Chapa LaVia: Yeah, they were. In fact, even the state superintendent was extremely shocked. That was the first time, from the discussion I had, that he knew the governor was going to be stating that. So, there was some shock. Of course, because we're in such financial debt, eight billion and rising, I understand the governor's intent on trying to look for the dimes under the Coke machine. But once again, in our discussions, it's going to take somebody who has the knowledge of how we got where we got to in the educational system and experts, even outside of our state, to come in and consolidate with us and consult us on the best methods to produce the outcome of which the governor had stated.

Now, the governor, in his own realm, being our commander in chief of the State of Illinois, has the ability to do whatever he wishes to do, with the guidance of the State General Assembly. But, the voters have a strong voice in this state, as well. I think he heard very clearly, right after his address, how people felt about consolidations. Down south, you'll find it more. It's not just a school district; it's a way of life. The families are so connected with their schools. Sports is such a huge, major player in a child's life; it's like the Olympics. They have all their social gatherings at the schools. And now I'm going to say, "You're school's no longer going to exist. We're going to put it into a school district that's going to be thirty miles, you know, round [trip], and you guys are going to have to commute back and forth," doesn't work in certain areas. I think more so, the southern parts of the state, that he heard more of, "This is not a great idea. We tried this once. We fell flat on our face. Let's get back off of this. We understand what you want to do, governor, but let's go the route of a task force that comes up with recommendations," Because, just based on the fact that within... There was so much work that went into just constructing a task force. Usually it's a very easy thing to establish, but, just to make sure that each voice is heard in the state, on the way they feel about their local areas and how consolidation, realignment, deconsolidation, or whatever it is, would affect them, pros and cons. It's something that changes constantly, the ebb and flow of a sea.

Like I said earlier, companies might go out of business. You might have a new influx of immigrants into your area, because you have a large agricultural area and not enough people to farm the fields. Then, also, not only do you have an influx of new population, but you also have a seasonal influx of certain students. So, there's no one perfect solution on what it looks like. But, for the most part, coming back to the initial question, I think a lot of people were shocked by the address the governor gave, that he was going to forge on this avenue and try to get that done.

Pogue: Talking about House Bill 1216, for which you were the sponsor, could you give us a brief overview as to how House Bill 1216 came to be.

Chapa LaVia: Well, as soon as the governor was done with his speech, being the chairman of Elementary and Secondary Ed, not only was I getting calls on, "You've got to

make sure this doesn't happen," and then getting some calls, "We have to get it done." And then calling one of his chief consultants, Jerry Stermer, and saying, "Jerry, I have to be at the table on this. Whatever legislation the governor's thinking of, I have to be there." Representative Roger Eddy did the same thing, I want to say, and there were probably a few colleagues in the Senate, but I didn't know offhand who they were.

So, when we started going down this road of...and because I've taken on such momentous educational reform, like the Race to the Top, and this year, like Senate Bill 7, with the teacher tenure and all that stuff, I've already been at the table with all these shareholders of education in the state, and I've always worked as a consensus, to negotiate points and policy so its successful to get into the committee, how, with no opposition, and to get on the House floor, with a vote, knowing we're going the right direction for education.

When the words came out of the governor's mouth on the consolidation, I started getting all these calls. I just started to put my head together on who I needed to get around the table, start forming this house bill and this task force, and, all along, during the last election cycle, the governor was saying, "My lieutenant governor is going to be the lieutenant governor of education in the state." So, it made it perfectly clear sense to put her...Initially she wasn't the head of the task force. During discussion and when her staff started to get involved in this, we saw it best fit to put her there at the head of this realm, because of her experience in education. Then, everybody else kind of fell into place on who needed to be at the table.

It would amend the school code, establish the School District Realignment and Consolidation Commission to make up recommendations to the governor and General Assembly on the number of school districts in the state, the optimum amount of enrollment for a school district and where consolidation realignment would be beneficial.

And it provides that, within sixty days after the effective date of the mandatory act, the commission must vote on recommendations and file a report with the governor and the General Assembly. It provides the commission adopt the report by three-fifths vote—I think that remains in the legislation. We'll go through that—it must be filed within fourteen days after the report is filed by the commission, and we must vote on whether to accept the report by adoption or resolution or by record vote of [a] majority of the members elected in each House and Senate.

We did quite a few amendments, in the end, because we wanted to make sure that we had everybody added in on the commission that needed a seat or other members in the General Assembly that requested more downstate representation. I was the lead sponsor. Representative Carol Sente, Representative Ken Duncan, Representative Karen Yarbrough, Representative Camille Lilly, Representative Karen May, Representative Jehan Gordon,

Representative Roger Eddy, Representative Jerry Mitchell, Representative [Sandra] Pihos, Representative [Lisa] Dugan and Representative Monique Davis were House sponsors. In the Senate, the lead sponsor was Senator David Koehler, that's K-o-e-h-l-e-r, Senator [Linda] Holmes, which is my senator in my district, and Senator John G. Mulroe. I'll give you some information on their correct spelling. I'm sure you probably have that information.

So, it was a lot of work, sitting down, making sure that everybody was fully represented. And we make sure we get rural school districts, which would be appointed by the governor, one representative, a representative from a suburban school district, appointed by the governor. [It] limits ISBE, Illinois State Board of Education, to one appointee; adds a representative from a parent organization; adds a representative from an organization, representing high school districts; provides that the commission will hold hearings statewide; provides that the commission will meet, at the call of the chairperson, which is the lieutenant governor; provides that the report must have eleven members voting in the affirmative to send a report to the General Assembly; extends the reporting date to July 1, 2012. That's when we'll be receiving the report.

There will be one representative appointed by the Speaker of the House; one representative appointed by the minority leader of the House; one representative appointed by the president of the Senate; one representative appointed by the minority leader of the Senate; one representative of a statewide professional teachers' organization, appointed by the head of that organization; one representative of a different statewide professional teachers' organization, appointed by the head of that organization, one representative of a statewide teachers' organization that represents school board appointees and appointed by the head of that organization; one representative of a statewide organization that represents school boards; one representative of a statewide organization representing principals, appointed by the head of the organization; one representative of the City of Chicago, School District 299, appointed by the general superintendent of schools; one representative in an association representing school business officials, appointed by the head of that organization; one representative of an association representing school administrators, appointed by the head of that organization; one representative of an organization representing large unit school districts, appointed by that head of that organization; one representative of the Chicago Board of Education, appointed by the Chicago Board of Education, and a representative, representing administrators of special education, appointed by that head of the organization. I think that duly comprises all of those individuals.

The commission's recommendation will be focused on the following areas, and could be more, reducing money spent on duplication of efforts, improving the education of students, lowering the property tax burden,

providing recommendations as to what the net cost savings of realignment is to the state, and providing input to school districts on reorganization.

The main proponents of the task force in the House were LUDA, Large Unit District Association; IFT, Illinois Federation of Teachers, and the SMA, which is an acronym that I'm not familiar with. I think it's the State Management Association.

In the House, it went through two times, because there was a Senate amendment that was added before it went on to the governor's desk. In the House, the first roll call that was done on April 6...I'm sorry; I apologize; I digress. The first roll call was done on May the 17th...No, that's not correct; it can't be correct. The roll calls were thus that, on May 28th, it was heard in the House for concurrence on Senate Amendment 1, was 160 yeas, one nay and no present. On the Senate, on third reading, on May the 17th, there were thirty-nine yeas, sixteen nays, zero present. In the House of Representatives, on April the 6th, when it first matriculated over to the Senate, before the Senate amendment, when it came back, there were 104 yeas, six nays and no present. There was probably about twenty minutes of debate.

All my counterparts on my committees, whether Republican or Democrat, understand that I work very fairly, and I listen to everybody's sides. A very strong friend I have in Representative Mitchell and Representative Eddy, and we worked very hard on this legislation, so when it came up, they did speak to the bill and the concurrence on Senate Amendment #1 and were extremely happy to offer this as a solution to what the governor had addressed in his State of the State Address that year, in 2011.

Pogue: So, to kind of review what you indicated, the commission has roughly twenty members?

Chapa LaVia: Correct.

Pogue: And it would take three-fifths of those to have a recommendation?

Chapa LaVia: Yeah. The last adoption...let me look, make sure that we go through these, because there was one, two and three... Yes, three-fifths. I'm sorry. [reading] "The commission must be adopted by three-fifths of the General Assembly." Sorry—But at a point, I know there was some discussion on taking that requirement out, but I think it leads a lot of credibility to the report that, if those people can negotiate on that commission and give us that they are voting on the recommendations they're giving us and that they have a overwhelming majority, then it's good enough for us. That just leads credence to allow us to help us process any policy that we get out of their task force.

Pogue: So, it would take three-fifths of the commission and then a majority of the members of the General Assembly.

Chapa LaVia: It says, “On or before” in the text itself, “On or before July 2012, the commission must vote on its recommendations and file a report with the governor and the General Assembly.” And it says. “The commission adopt the report by affirmative vote of at least eleven of its members.” So, a majority of its members. Before, we had three-fifths, but I want to say, we lightened it just a little bit, because most people thought that was pretty harsh, because, even in a family of five, how often do you get four of the five voting yes on something? But it’s, the majority of the members must vote on the recommendations, in order that to come to the final version that we vote on on the House floor. It still gives a lot of credence and credibility to the weight of the recommendations, knowing that that many people were on-board on them.

Pogue: And the chairperson would be the lieutenant governor?

Chapa LaVia: Correct, sir.

Pogue: And the deadline for having a report?

Chapa LaVia: Would be, once again, July 1, 2012.

Pogue: Are there any public hearing requirements?

Chapa LaVia: Yes, and part of the piece of the legislation mandates that they hold statewide hearings. There is no indication, until it’s formulated, on exactly how the chairwoman will be doing that throughout the state, but it’s mandated, within the piece of legislation, that they are statewide.

Pogue: But that would be up to the commission, as to how the public hearings would be?

Chapa LaVia: Correct, sir.

Pogue: Now, one of the issues that had focused questions was, “Less obstacles between qualified teachers and their students.” What does that actually mean?

Chapa LaVia: What part of the legislation did you pull that from?

Pogue: I’m not sure whether it came from one of these summaries.

Chapa LaVia: Less obstacles between the teachers, as far as the different things the commission would take up?

Pogue: Right.

Chapa LaVia: I’m not too familiar with that. I really can’t speak to it, because I don’t know exactly who mentioned that in the legislation. As a small business owner, I know that I have gone into school districts in the state, and I’ve saved them—whether its health insurance or non-employee costs—millions of dollars. So, I

know it can be done in certain arenas. So I, as a businessperson, am more in line of, yeah, "What would a candidate look like to consolidate or be consolidated or whatever, realigned?" But also, here are a list of cost savings in which you can do into your school district, so you can provide more money into the classroom for the child's education and maybe better teachers, more money for different resources the kids need, to be educated properly. So, I don't know exactly what that's coming from.

Pogue: The lowering of the property tax burden, potentially, what are you talking about there?

Chapa LaVia: Well, I think, in certain school districts... In Chicago, which we'd really have to start if we're going to look at reformatting our tax structure in the State of Illinois, as far as ways properties are assessed and coming up with different ideas on how we can generate cost savings within a district. Like I said, that was a true life example. In one school district where I went in, they had two brokerages, and when we combined into one brokerage, they saved \$800,000. Eight hundred thousand dollars are no small beans, by any mean. If we can get these districts and the municipalities that house these districts to start being a partnership and helping together in collaboration, that's one way that we can show the citizens cost savings and not have to go up for another referendum for more taxing on.

We're so overburdened and so reliant on property tax to fund our educational system. I think we're at that point where we're breaking the bank with most citizens of the State of Illinois and their house and how they can keep it and not go into foreclosure. There are so many elements right now in the State of Illinois, as far as foreclosure and how school districts are losing out on those dollars to help support them in the school districts, too. So, when you're looking at highly populated, foreclosed areas, and then saying, "Hey, you'd be a really great candidate over here," I think you're going to start seeing some savings, too, as far as that arena, too.

But, being a real estate broker, I know that that's a huge issue in the State of Illinois. I'm hoping that maybe we can also, through this task force of realignment and consolidation, come up with some major ideas for other reforms, where we can lighten the burden off the property owners onto maybe another vehicle to receive dollars in education, so we can offset that cost or start changing the structure [of] the way we pay for education in the state.

So, I'm hoping those bright minds also will come up with some great suggestions on different arenas, as well, because often that's what happens when you start brainstorming with a lot of people. I think that, more so than the underpinning of exactly what I told you in the legislation on what we expect them to do, hopefully, there will be a lot of conversation, a lot of notes taken on other areas that we can help initiate in the state.

Pogue: Is this commission designed to say that district A must merge with district B?

Chapa LaVia: Absolutely not. We will not...It's not my intent, as the genesis of this legislation, to force that upon any named district in the State of Illinois. It's the intent that greater minds in education come together and say "This is what a possible unit or district that wishes to consolidate or realign or whatever you want to call it possibly looks like."

If we're paying \$200,000 for a superintendent, all these administrators, all the health costs, teachers' benefits, teachers' salary, the school, the kids, the maintenance, the overhead, and you have two hundred children in a school district, it's questionable if we can do this better in a different format or a different way. But it's not up to me nor the members of the commission to single out any one district or unit and say, "This should be in the report. We should do it with this district." It's not my intent. If it is used, inadvertently, I would see it just being used, based on data and how it would look, because we're asking them to give us information on where might we be duplicating efforts. How do we improve the savings? What would it look like if we did do realignment or consolidation? How would you come about the numbers?

So they are definitely going to have to use some real live situations, as far as collecting some influx of data. But every general state aid amount, throughout the State of Illinois, is supposed to be X amount, but it really isn't. You can go to East Aurora and get \$6,800 per kid for state aid, and you go up to Chicago, because of all these block grants and other dollars they get pumped into their arena, the kids seeing more like \$8,200 per head.

So, even that, so, I can see where they're definitely going to have to have some data. I don't know if it will be present in the report. I'll have to talk with the lieutenant governor on specific units or districts, but they're definitely going to have to collect districts' information to make their case on what a candidate would look like. Not necessarily that being the candidate, but their specific numbers, germane to this area, that would have this kind of significant outcome, because the information is not so uniform that you're going to get the same data from the same sections from ten miles away from each other, let alone a 150 miles away from each other, right? So, they're going to have to use some specific data on how we're going to achieve that, if we do.

Pogue: To kind of conclude our discussion of House Bill 1216, when do you think the commission will hold its first meeting?

Chapa LaVia: I'm hoping that they start this summer. I'm really hoping by July that we'll start seeing some activation on it. I hope that [the] lieutenant governor right now is starting to work to formally start the ball rolling. In fact, I'm glad you brought that up, because I've got to do some calls to make sure that's starting to get in the works. But, of course, we have to wait upon the affixed signature

of the governor, to make sure it becomes law, first, so we can start from the right point. But it wouldn't hurt starting to talk and making sure that people are available at certain dates to start doing it.

Pogue: Are there any other states or studies that the commission might be looking at as a model?

Chapa LaVia: Not that I am aware of with this commission. However, speaking to different organizations that are dealing with the teacher evaluation that we're creating—and we created through the first piece of legislation a couple of years ago with Race to the Top—we have people from outside the state, coming in and giving testimony and counseling on how to get that complete. So, I would assume that would happen, too.

One of the reasons, also, we decided to make sure that the lieutenant governor was prominent and the chairwoman of this organization, is that she might have resources that the State Board of Education doesn't, because of all the cutbacks and costs and things like that...resources with contacts; maybe resources, as far as paper, locations, some financial support to this commission to make sure that they get it done quickly, and they get enough resources they need to make a collusion to it.

Pogue: What role do the regional superintendents play under House Bill 1216?

Chapa LaVia: I want to say they were added in the end, into the bill. They're going to be one of voting members there, sitting at the tables and making sure that their voices are also heard, because that was whole other thing that came up, with getting rid of the offices of regional education, which is another very interesting animal that we're not tackling right now, but that they, too, would have a voice.

Pogue: As far as the commission, would it be also looking at districts that may be too large to be effective or the issue of having to redo district boundaries?

Chapa LaVia: About being too large, I'm hoping that's some of the things that are going to be tackled, within the discussion of the tables, because, like I said earlier, sometimes, taking a small district and forcing it into a big district, you can lose test scores, kids, self-confidence. I mean, there's a lot of stuff that goes along with that and within the environments that happen there. So I'm hoping they go through some discussion on de-consolidation, as well. I don't know.

We're hoping that the lieutenant governor will give them a little bit more direction on the topics they'll be covering and what subcommittees they'll be creating, within the task force. I didn't want to direct it too much, because, once again, we're forcing them to do something. This is just having them come to the table and have an open mind and start to brainstorm in different areas of where we can work together.

Pogue: In kind of a final question, the state seems to be, because of its financial situation, relying more on local sources to provide funding for schools. The hot button issue has been the transportation fund that traditionally had been supported by the state. But it has been phased down or reduced. Then, there was a question about even getting the fourth payment. Transportation will be a hot button issue with school reorganization, with bigger districts. Is there any concern on the kind of mixed message sent from the State of Illinois tied to transportation?

Chapa LaVia: Since I wasn't the gentleman that spoke those words, (laughs) I really would have to see the logic behind that. I know there's a lot of discussion. I signed a letter in support for the governor to make sure that those dollars are not withheld, that they are paid out, because of the importance. Just because I have a say on everything in education—my own opinion, of course—it seems that... There are school districts that do not have transportation, East Aurora being one of them.

There's something to be said for kids walking, not more than a mile and a half, of course, or two miles. I mean, that starts to get really drastic. Down in southern Illinois, it's to a point where, not only, if they don't have bussing, they get a taxi to take them to school and get reimbursed. So, there's a necessity, of course, when it's way too far for kids to go back and forth.

But, the structure in which we set up payment for schools, I mean, we're already in arrears. It's, "You did work last year, and now we're going to pay you this year." It doesn't make a lot of sense to me, as a businesswoman, that we think that entities that we do that to are going to survive under this kind of climate in the country right now and the economy. But, if we don't have the money to pay, we don't have the money to pay. Will it send mixed messages? I don't know, maybe in some cases, but in other cases, I hope that people on the commission see this as an opportunity to voice their concerns, gather really good ideas and data to help them survive these hard times, and maybe, in the long run, even if they choose not to consolidate or don't find themselves a good candidate to consolidate, that they'll come up with some really great tools to save money and think outside the school walls on reinventing how they come about providing education for those children in their school districts, because I would like to really see the municipalities in every city take more of a role on helping to educate the children. If you have a city that would like to flourish, you want to make sure the crime rate's down and your educational system is amazing.

It's kind of, for the most part, most cities—except for the mayor of Chicago, because they are in charge of their own district—has been kind of hands-off with most municipalities. So, we don't know what the state of the state of education in the State of Illinois looks like. I can just tell you that there are a lot of people hoping and praying that we start getting it right.

That's no mark on anybody in the past that's worked really hard in education. That's what is called change. Just like an iPad's in my purse right now, twenty years ago I wouldn't have had an iPad and my phone. You have to wonder why kids still have books in the classroom, as opposed to iPads and more technology in the classrooms.

And are we competitive? Will we be competitive globally? There are no boundaries any longer. The kids meet other kids in Bangladesh and China, through Internet in their classroom, teaching classes. So, it's just, things change, and it's time we take big steps to start looking for dollars to afford the transportation, to afford the tools the teachers need, afford the tools that the school districts need, so we can become competitive worldwide.

Pogue: We want to thank Representative Chapa LaVia for giving us the opportunity to talk about school reorganization and House Bill 1216, and, in particular, we held this interview, June 7, 2011, at the office of the state representative. So I want to thank you very much for the time that you've given us.

Chapa LaVia: I want to thank you. Have an awesome day.

(end of interview)