

Mark Tallman: My name is Mark Tallman, and I've worked with the Kansas Association of School Boards on education issues as a lobbyist, a researcher, and writer since 1990. I'm conducting this interview with Christy Levings on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators and significant leaders in state government, particularly those who served during the 1960s through 2010. The interview will be accessible to researchers, educators, and the public through the KOHP website, ksoralhistory.org, and also the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library. Transcriptions are made possible by generous donors, and Dave Heinemann is the videographer today.

Today, we are shifting our focus to the voice of the teachers in our education project. I've known Christy Levings for many years, back to when we were both advocates in the legislature in her role leading the Kansas National Education Association, the largest organization of teachers in the state. Christy, a pleasure to be with you.

Christy Levings: Thank you.

MT: I want to talk about your career, but through that, what you've seen about what's really happened in education over the past several decades. Probably neither of us want to stress how many decades it's gone back, but there has been a lot of change. So, why don't we begin as we usually do, just a little bit about yourself, where you were born and grew up and then move into what got you interested in a career in education.

CL: I'm a Kansan for my total life. I was born and grew up in Topeka, and except for a couple of stints for different things—I was an exchange student and lived in the Netherlands. That gave me a perspective of looking at the United States from outside in, which was really a remarkable experience.

I came back, got ready to go to college after that and really thought I wanted to go to law school. I got a part-time job when I started at Washburn University in Topeka tutoring fourth graders at Gage Elementary in Topeka, which was my former elementary school.

I ended up working with a group of fourth-grade boys who were having trouble in math. I worked with them after school and worked on what I saw where they had deficits and did that kind of thing. Then I'd been there about two or three weeks when I got called in. I thought, "Oh, my gosh. I'm in trouble now. They're going to let me go, and I kind of need this part-time job while I'm going to school." The principal said to me, "We have a problem." I said, "Okay. If it's something I'm doing, I'm sure I can fix it." He said, "No, here's the deal. You're doing too good a job. We now have boys who are refusing to do their math during the day because they want to get kicked up into your group after school because you're making a game of it, or they say you make it sound fun and interesting." He said, "I want to know why you're not an education student. You need to go." And my former sixth-grade teacher came and did the same press. "You need to move over and become an educator. You have a knack for that. That makes sense to you. You need to do it."

So, I did. I graduated at an interesting time in '74. When I left, I not only had certification for K-8, but I had certification on how to teach in a one-room schoolhouse because that was still a need in Kansas at the time, not particularly in eastern Kansas where I was, but it was still a need. So, I had an interesting prep compared to today. One of the things that was a big deal at Washburn was there was a continuous need for learning all the time—so, not only being educators, but being scholars. I think I left there with that.

I ended up teaching and taught really everything K-6 over the next twenty-some years. During that time, I really became committed about what teachers needed to do to learn to be better teachers. That was important to me, recognizing it, and also recognizing that teaching elementary school is not a volunteer project. It is a professional job. You need to be prepared for it. I did my first master's program in developmental psychology, and the development of kids as they went through was a real big piece of that. While that wasn't directly related to classroom, it was related to understanding about students and how they learned.

My second master's at KU was Educational Policy and Administration. Along the way, I also began to realize that teachers needed a voice. Teachers need to be the one talking about what teachers needed, what it took to be a good teacher, what it took to be a piece of that.

I carried that into me as I became involved in the Kansas National Education Association. I carried with me the whole piece about what education is about, which is solving problems and helping individuals learn to be better. That became important to me as an association leader as well, too.

I also thought that there were processes developed by the legislature—some worked well; some didn't. But collective bargaining, over the years, I bargained sixteen contracts and brought two districts, one a small one, Louisburg, and one a large one, Olathe, into their first written contracts, but taking with it the whole recognition that it is a problem-solving mechanism that puts the best and demands the best out of professionals and demands from the district that they support the professionals that they have. So, that was kind of the path that got me into the life that I led.

MT: A lot to talk about there. I think I want to come back to several things. Maybe, just out of interest, that sounds to me like a somewhat different way of deciding, "I want to be a teacher." I sometimes tell the story when my daughter was in kindergarten, she told us one day, her mother and I, that she thought she might want to be a teacher when she grew up. I said, "Oh, like your mother." She said, "No, like Miss Burton" who was her kindergarten teacher. I don't know if she knew her mother was a teacher. She didn't know her in that role. I guess I'm sort of under the impression that a lot of teachers have kind of—it's been a longstanding—maybe that's not true. Yours is a different path. You've obviously worked with a lot of teachers. What can we generalize maybe about the kinds of things that make people decide they want to go into teaching? I think that's important now because one of our challenges is fewer people are deciding to go into teaching to staff the needs we have. Can you tell me a little about your thoughts on that?

CL: I think people go into teaching because they want to help people, and they want to move people from here to here. They want to get that student ready for the next one. You can't be a successful fourth grader if you weren't a successful third grader, and that sort of begins in kindergarten. The people who take that job want to move them.

Of course, I have great admiration for kindergartner teachers because they get this whole mish-mash of kids. You'll get kids in the kindergarten class who already read and others who may never even learned the colors and the shapes, and somehow they're supposed to move that whole group up to the next row. These people want to solve problems to make it better for students. They want to make kids smart and successful down the road. It's always about down the road.

I think the smartest thing some districts have done is that they have their high school seniors walk through a corridor of teachers, starting with the kindergarten teachers because they're the people who got them on the road to be successful there. That's what teaching is really about.

If you ask teachers today what took you out of teaching or what makes you think "I'm tired of this job," it's not that. It's "Nobody supported me. I'm tired of fighting for the materials I need. I'm tired of fighting for the time to do the job." Teaching as we've institutionalized it is very, very difficult. It's a job that takes twelve to thirteen hours a day, and first of all, you're only going to get paid for eight, but we expect you to do all that other to be ready for tomorrow because if you don't do the planning and the grading and keep on top of that and looking ahead, where you want to go—if you don't do that, then you are not ready for tomorrow. It's such a demanding job, and we've moved where our society doesn't recognize the demand of that. We haven't in some instances put leaders in buildings who were educated and well prepared to be that.

One of the things that happened during my career, as you talk about this time span, in my career, we went from understanding the role of building administrator from a business-type manager—I'm in charge of making sure there's toilet paper in the building—to being an educational leader that's trying to develop professionally every individual in the building so they in turn can develop the students to the best of their ability, who runs ahead of things and takes problems out of the way.

And yet, I saw the cross-over of that, and I felt bad for some of them because they were barely being building managers. They were not prepared to be what was being demanded of them. And as we got into more, some good, some bad, but more types of accountability that became very apparent and very hard. Turning around, going to the central office, and being yelled at because your building's not producing the way we want it to, like it was—not the same as how many widgets can you put together in your factory today, but yell at them because they're not doing. So they go back to the schoolroom and yell at the teachers, "You're not producing what we want today" is not a system that works.

So, we've seen that change. We saw a different group of people going into administration, and the teachers that are coming in have very different ideas. They know they're not there to prepare widgets, and they're not going to be treated that way. But we've seen a huge mega shift in that.

MT: In your opinion looking back on this, what are some of the key things that led that change? If we go back over that roughly fifty-year period, so we go back to the seventies. That's probably a good point. I think the one thing my reading of history tells me is we've always thought we've had an education crisis, right?

CL: Right.

MT: Any time you look at, "Our schools are failing. We've got to get better." There's also a lot of support for schools. It goes a lot of different ways, but there is chronically this feeling that "Maybe it is simply we have to get better." What are some of the things that you think, maybe starting with what you think has been helpful, has led to—should we say higher expectations? You talk about a lot of things, the different role of the teacher, the different role of leadership, maybe different expectations on students. What are some of the things that you think has motivated those changes?

CL: I think one of the things that blessed this state for a period of time were the leaders in the various educational organizations as well as the Department of Ed. I mean, the amazing job Andy Tompkins did leading the Department of Ed as well as leaders and the ability to collaborate and work together. The Kansas Learning First Alliance, which was put together from leadership from the Kansas Association of School Board, the superintendents' group, the principals' group, Kansas NEA, the individuals who came in that room and talked about we could work together and make things better, and we could learn a lot about where it was—when I talk to other people in other states about that, they told me, "We couldn't even get those same people in the same room together, let alone working together."

I think we were blessed by leadership at the time that was willing to say, to do something better, and we were willing to look at what accountability was. Because I spent time as a national officer in the NEA and in six years worked in forty-two different states, I saw the perspective of what Kansas was doing. We didn't take enough credit for some of the great stuff that we were doing. I mean, we had accountability on a lot of issues that was working very well for us. There were other states that couldn't say that.

I mean, when No Child Left Behind was brought into effect in the Bush administration, in some states, it pulled aside and really showed an ugly interior. Some states said, "We know that the education on our reservation schools is really, really bad. So, we just don't count that." And when they had to, it was devastating.

Kansas had never played some of those games, I think partly due to the legislation and to the legislative and education leaders in the state. We never played that game. I was at the State Board meeting when the ACT people came and said, "Okay, we don't know what you're doing. What are you doing? Are you sure you're doing this fairly and correctly because you're scoring a point or more above the national average and nobody does that."

Well, we'd like to think that we had developed, first of all, our own standards long before anybody asked us to. Our ongoing development of our teachers—I was president of Kansas NEA at the 50th anniversary of Brown v. Board. I got a lot of requests for an interview as a teacher

leader during that time. I'm not sure it was all flattering because one young reporter for *Education Week* wanted to know what I felt like when the *Brown v. Board* decision came down, and I had to point out to her that I was about eleven months old. So, I didn't have a lot of feelings about that, but she obviously thought I was much better. She wanted to know if I could find some teachers who were actually working when the decision came down, and I said, "I certainly hope not. I hope our people are not on the job at eighty-six years old."

But she did ask me questions about it, and I've been licensed in the state since 1974. I had both a teacher and an administrator license for fifty years in the state. Anyway, during that time, she said to me, "When did you start doing professional development where you had to renew your license with new learning?" and I said, "Well, I've had a license since '74, and we always have. I always have done that." She said, "That's true." I said, "Yes, ma'am, that is in fact true. You can call the Department of Ed if you want to ask them when it started because I can't tell you that." She said, "That's much farther than any state in the Union. We know that at *Education Week*." I said, "Well, then you should know that we've been doing that this long, and continuous learning has always been a part of what we're about." But I do think it's the crossroads of the leadership and KASB and Kansas NEA who are willing to say, "There's something more important than our individual agendas," and that's the agenda today for the state.

MT: You've alluded to some things where at least in my experience, and we've shared some of this, organization's leaders do try to work together. There have been challenges throughout that period.

CL: Sure, there have.

MT: So, let's go back a little further again, maybe zeroing in a little bit on the 1970s. A couple of things come to mind that maybe I'd ask you to respond to, maybe not because you probably weren't directly involved at the beginning of them, but maybe how they've changed over time. One thing that we associate with the seventies is the passage of the Federal Special Education Law, and states coming into compliance with that. That's something that some of these—I always in these sessions want to sort of help people understand from a historical view point what's different. Of course, a major thing was shifting from "There's kids that we just really aren't even going to try to help" to saying, "We want to try to help every child no matter what."

How have you seen that being implemented? What are some of the ramifications, maybe good, maybe bad, maybe new challenges that are a result of that? You'd been in the profession just when that was really getting started, I understand.

CL: Yes. [Public Law] 94-142 was a number we all could say, and [knew] what it meant. When I grew up in Topeka and walked to Gage [Elementary] School, we used to walk past Donny every day. Because Donny sat on his front steps. Donny was Down syndrome and he waved at us, and we waved back at him every morning and afternoon. But Donny didn't go to school.

So, now I'm grown up, and we have 94-142, and Donny is going to go to school. It was a scramble for some schools. It was a place of "How do we find the answer for what we need to do?" Unfortunately, we got 94-142, and we got very little money to make it happen. So, a lot of

people were scrambling and taking money out of school district's funds that really stretched them, that should have gone to other things that now had to go to special ed.

But I saw that and I saw what we learned to work together, learned words like IEP to develop an Individual [Education] Plan for each of those children and what it was. And I saw things that happened where parents literally showed up with attorneys to say, "Yes, we, too, know what 94-142 means, and it means our child is going to go to school, and what are you going to do for him?"

We had a lot of things that we had to figure out. I remember having a conversation with a set of parents who had a very disabled child. I wanted the best for that child, but they wanted that child to have water therapy in a pool every day. And I said, "We don't have a pool." She said, "I want the district to build a pool." I said, "I understand that," but I'm thinking we're looking for a different solution because I'm thinking the district's not building a pool here, and there'd be a lot more costs besides building the pool. I mean, getting the staff to do it—I can't leave the classroom and go out to the pool with your child.

So, there was a lot to figure out and a lot to work through. Some we were good at, and some we were not good at. There were some that it really pushed them. I remember talking with some administrators who really were at the end of their rope. They didn't know what to do.

MT: I think that gets into a question that we both dealt with, talking with the public, talking to legislators, the ongoing question about costs and why do costs keep going up? Why do demands keep going up? The general theory of inflation is "How much more does it cost this year to buy a loaf of bread than last year or ten years ago or fifty years ago?" but you're usually still talking about a loaf of bread. We can define that.

What we now expect from education fifty years ago, we weren't trying to educate kids who wanted and maybe needed water therapy or needed one-on-one.

CL: Right.

MT: I think one of the issues that comes back is one fact of life is that schools have significantly increased the number of employees, but a big portion of that has been to meet those special need kids that we weren't before and whose parents, exercising their rights, continue to want more services, but those are either going to have to come at the expense of others, or we have to find ways to add that. There's been a lot of tension around that.

CL: There has been a lot of tension around that. There's also been a lot of tension about the regular classroom teacher. I think in the beginning people thought that that was just another thing that the regular classroom teacher could do. I mean, honestly, I had a couple of kids in class while I have twenty-five other kids who really needed a lot of individualized help, and I'm thinking, "One of these days, I'm going to get sued because these twenty-five are not getting what they need because I'm doing a lot of "keeping-them-busy" activities so that I can I try to move these two as much as I can.

I had a child who I honestly think is the closest I ever came to having a mother slap me. She had her fist up in my face because she was refusing special services for a child who desperately needed them. She wants me to fail him. I said, "I'm not failing your child. I am teaching your child at the level he is." When I tested him in reading, he was about 1.6. This is a fourth-grade class. And I moved him to 2.8 by the end of the year. I was pretty damn proud of that. That was more than a year's growth for a child who desperately had to have one-on-one services. And she's furious because she wants him given fourth-grade material and marked as a fail because that will motivate him to do what he has to do.

It isn't. And the district had tested and showed her the results. He has severe learning disabilities and some physical disabilities. She took him to an independent and paid to have an independent evaluation who told her exactly the same thing, and she still wants—I said, "I'm not doing it. I am not going to mark this child psychologically as a failure when he's really working his tush off to the best of his ability." Then I told the superintendent that I really preferred not to meet with her alone anymore.

It was a struggle over a period of time. It's still—your loaf of bread thing is a really interesting thing because we now want to give a loaf of bread—and a plain loaf of bread costs two dollars. What we want to get back is an artisan French loaf made of exotic grains, but we want to pay two dollars for it.

MT: Right. I guess that's the thing—now that I can look back over fifty years plus, at this point, maybe we can look back and see that change. Most people, most parents, they're looking at a much shorter—they're looking at where we are now, right?

CL: Yes.

MT: "What does my kid need today? What do I want today? What do I want to pay in taxes today" not necessarily reflecting the differences of what we are asking for as a system.

So, you mentioned, moving a little away from special ed to maybe the regular classroom, a little broader, I think you also talked about No Child Left Behind. That I guess is another thing I'd maybe ask you to reflect on is just even beyond special education, changes in what we expect theoretically every student, every non-disabled student to be able to achieve. What's your perspective on how those general standards or expectations of the system as a whole has changed?

CL: Well, I would say the big overall thing for me is it isn't bad at all to think that we want the best for every single kid. What the problem is is when you think you're going to get that by doing the same things you've always done. You may remember I had quite a dialogue with the former Chair of the House Education Committee and saying to him that I might be a Kansas farm wife, but I know that cows don't gain weight by just weighing them over and over again. It makes a difference what you feed them and how much you put into them and what kind of grain you get, and then you're going to get a weight gain. So, just thinking, "Let's test them every semester, every quarter" is not going to give you different results if you're not doing the other thing, and that was really the piece of it.

The conversation from the national level was not a bad conversation. For one thing, we had no accountability across the country. We had such a kerfuffle over trying to put national standards in place, but I can tell you that having been in all the states, it's a very unique opportunity I had to be in an education system in so many states because there was such difference.

In Louisiana, the first-grade standards were to count to twenty-five. In Massachusetts, the first-grade standards were to be able to count over a hundred, to be able to add and subtract, which were not even included in these standards. The difference between states—so to be able to say, “Have every kid count to a hundred” would have brought up some states that needed to have somebody shove them a little bit.

Like I say, the variation as we attended national meetings with the Federal Department of Ed under No Child Left Behind—they had no idea of what states recorded and didn't record. Arkansas, for instance, had a state law, which I'm sure went way back to post-Civil War, they could only record people in population as White or Black. They could not be recorded as Native American or Asian American or anything else. You had to be White or Black. So, they had no test data except White or Black because nobody could be recorded any other way. And the Department of Ed is saying to the Arkansas Department of Ed, “You need to change that and do it this way.” They're saying, “Sir, I have no ability to change state law. I can't do that. The legislature will have to do it, and I don't think they're very likely to do that.”

So, it simply was an opportunity out of No Child Left Behind, there were things we learned. And I know people hated it because some places just interpreted it as more testing, and again, you get back to gaining weight. It doesn't matter how many times you weigh. So, there was that. But like I say, I was really shocked at looking at when North Dakota and South Dakota were forced to open up and look at their graduation rates and their achievement rates in their reservation schools. It was appalling.

And they weren't the only ones. The Southern states pulled them apart. I got off the plane every time I came home to Kansas and said, “Thank you, God” because we did not know the jewel that we had, and we didn't appreciate the system that we had. Like I say, to have ACT show up and say, “Why are you doing so much better?” But I worry we've not kept up with that over time, and that we haven't shepherded that the way we should.

MT: As we are recording this in 2025, as someone who's look at this a long time, I share some of those concerns. There are some measures that suggest—while Kansas still by most metrics is an above-average state and sometimes a very good—I think there are some areas where at least we raise some concerns about how we compete with other states, what they're doing and maybe how well they've taken up the call to widen that.

In some of these interviews that viewers can look at, one of the things that has really struck me—again as someone who's spent much of my career debating test scores and their relevance and the frustration that they aren't improving fast enough is to also remember that the most recent data I've been able to find, Kansas and the nation, last year, the last recorded year, had the highest graduation rate on record, and every level of credential from high school graduation to technical

certificate to bachelor's, master's has hit a record high as more and more students complete high school and are successful enough with whatever challenges to even go on beyond that as we call for that.

That's I guess some measure of that despite the day-to-day problems and debate and those gaps that still exist. Broadly speaking, some good things have worked. You've talked about some things that may be part of that—special education for disabled students, No Child Left Behind, make sure that your other groups will be made to look at. You've talked about the need—you can't just keep doing the same thing. You've also mentioned professional development. Talk a little bit about, as you said, that isn't really a new concept. How has it changed or how has that helped teachers do a different and hopefully a better job?

CL: When I began, that constant learning process had to be college hours. Just taking a college class doesn't hurt you, and it makes you hopefully continue to see yourself as a scholar. It really didn't direct into the work.

The changes to the professional development in the state was a part that was really big. The Professional Development Plan that was adopted by the Department of Ed, and our organizations worked hard, Kansas NEA worked hard, Kansas Learning First Alliance worked very hard on, was to recognize that quality professional development was aimed at making you better with the skills you needed in the classroom, to widen your knowledge about the content area if you're a secondary teacher—how do we get that and looked for different ways and looking at it on-site and recording it in school districts and providing it and looking at the quality of what professional development happened at the school-district level.

That stepped on some toes. "What do you mean, we don't have good professional development material?" "Well, does anybody leave with any new skills?" "I thought it was just we got together, and we had a speaker."

I'll never forget, I was at a secondary school, and the principal said to me, "I just have to tell you, I don't want anybody to know, but our professional development, we have to keep it a secret." I'm thinking, "Oh, my lord, what are we talking about?" He said, "We didn't have a speaker. What we did was, we found a book about teaching reading skills at the secondary level that we were really impressed with, and we worked our way together as a group, chapter by chapter. We all left with ways to implement new reading skills at the secondary level across the building, but I know that's not really professional development because we didn't have a speaker." And I said, "No, really, you had the best kind of professional development. You don't need a speaker. You might think about what you want the next time that will take you farther, and that might take a specialist to come in and be your speaker, but this is really what professional development is about—is being better." It is about how do you get the skills you can implement of where it is, and how are you open to skills like coaching?

At my school district in Olathe, one of the jobs I had there prior to my officer level at NEA is I worked with professional development for other educators. I also coached new teachers and worked on developing that. I worked on professional development for administrators on how to bring professionals along and bring them into the piece, which is an interesting piece because if

you look at the exit surveys from people leaving the profession, it's always, "My administrator did not know how to support me to do my job." It's a huge piece of why they left. So, trying to develop professional development for all of them—and there were people here who recognized that if we were moving forward, there were things we had to know and be able to do.

MT: If our viewers can't tell, we're sitting in the one-room schoolhouse on the campus of Emporia State. That just reminds me that I've done interviews and worked with the individuals who do kind of a teacher working conditions survey every few years.

CL: Right.

MT: One of the things that—probably no big reveal to you—but what's coming out is what seems to make such a difference is the role of the principal or the building leader in helping their teachers feel heard and valued. I don't know whether statistically everyone has talked about—are they happier because they're paid more? Most people would be, but regardless it seems of the level of salary, part of that sense of working condition is how do you perceive you are treated and listened to, led, but led in a positive way?

I think there's been a big movement in Kansas—we've talked a little about this—to improve that as well. I'm gathering those are things that I hope you've seen over your time? Is that more of almost an internal "We know we want to get better, and we're figuring out that's part of it" or is there some other factors involved?

CL: It's never going to be stationary. There's always going to be change. There's always going to be more things to learn. I think honestly that was a frame of mind that some people had to learn. It's like, "Why do we have to keep on learning?" Because nothing stays the same. There are pieces of it that—when I started teaching, the length of the elementary day is virtually the same. The amount of curriculum that you need to put into that child in the same type of day is 200 or 300 percent greater than what it was, but it was the same day.

I noticed the other day that we have another big thing coming about, reinstating more recess time. I don't think there are many teachers who would say kids don't need recess. They're just trying to figure out how to do all the other. When I started teaching, I wasn't figuring out when they were going to take keyboarding. We're doing computer with every kid to the kindergarten level now. Where are they? And what are our expectations when they can leave?

The interesting thing that still happens—we have a mindset about that loaf of bread that costs two dollars is I watched a small community near me talk about replacing their public library. And somebody wrote in and said, "I don't understand why building school buildings and building a public library is so expensive. My dad was on the Library Board in 1968, and they paid \$90,000 to build the library, and I don't understand why it's going to cost this many millions now. "If you look at what—should a high school have a functioning library? It can cost ten million dollars to outfit a public high school with the kind of computer and resource material that they need to prepare those students to go into jobs.

I would tell you that my district had a real benefit in that Garmin International sits in the middle of it. And all you've got to do is have Garmin people come over and say, "Here's what we expect from your high school graduates," and they're like, "Oh, okay. So we really do have upgrading we have to do if you expect this out of our graduates."

But I also had an opportunity when the commander—and I'm not going to say his rank—I don't know whether he was a lieutenant general or whatever he was, but he is the commander of a huge aircraft carrier, and he did an interview about the fact that of the two thousand people that are on that ship and make it operate and that it's totally computer driven, that 50 percent or more of them were in high school two years earlier, and they had come directly in there to train, and what his expectation of those high school students was in order to do that, to provide the national defense for this nation.

I mean, our schools played this huge role and teachers play this huge role, and they fill that responsibility but what drives them out is what you said. It's not the resources that are there or the support that's there. It isn't salary. I've never seen a study about teachers and their beliefs where salary is #1. It's usually third or fourth.

There's such a disparity. I saw figures just last week. The average salary for a fifteen-to-twenty-year person in Kansas is about \$60,000. In New Jersey, it's a little over \$95,000. There's huge disparity across the country. We never believed Kansas would be the first in salary, but we were at the middle, and we're not any longer in the middle. We're down in the low forties. Those things don't help us. But if you're still believing that you can build a public library for \$90,000, you've not really got a good feel for what it takes to run a quality education system.

MT: Discussing salary and some of the things a little bit, let's talk about another development from the seventies when you were just starting. In my own mind, I kind of tried to think of some of the big things that sort of happened decade by decade. The seventies, I was just kind of moving through high school and college. So, I don't have as much a memory perhaps as some.

CL: That's really sad.

MT: I know. But one of the things that clearly was a national movement and in Kansas, you mentioned getting collective bargaining.

CL: Right.

MT: If you want to put it in the general term of teacher rights. You again through your career both as a teacher and then moving into leadership of organizations had a chance to observe the impact of bringing collective bargaining, Due Process procedures, some of those things into our system, certainly controversial at the time.

When I went to work for the School Board Association in the 1990s. We weren't all that far away from some of those issues and some of the frustrations of local school boards who didn't necessarily want to share some of that authority, probably human nature. But we now have a

state law that made— some of those things had to happen. People had to get used to that. That's something else we can look back on now.

Over time, what is your sense on how that has worked? Has it worked well? Where are there still problems? Have you seen attitudes change? You've worked with a lot of associations working with local boards. What are your perspectives on that?

CL: Well, it's certainly come a long way. And you're absolutely right. In the beginning, it worked well in some places and some places, it worked really badly. It also depended on what people's understanding of what collective bargaining was. There wasn't always good advice about that.

Southeast Kansas who had a lot of union experience from the miners and whatnot, they handled it so badly there, and I might say got some really bad advice from KASB.

MT: Before I went to work there, I'm sure.

CL: Before you went to work there, yes. Before you went to work there. Really bad advice. And some people tested the law, and got really bad advice. Seaman is another place that got really bad advice, laid off, fired all their teachers and started again, lost huge institutional history. And I had several school board members from Seaman over the years say to me, "That was the stupidest thing we ever did, the stupidest thing we ever did."

Collective bargaining is supposed to be a problem-solving process, and it was not seen as that in the beginning. I've always believed that it is. You're right. There are districts, both administrators and superintendents and school boards, who did not want to share, didn't want to see it as that, and it was hard to push it to where it was, and it was hard to get everybody on board that this was a problem-solving thing, and that you use the process.

People penalized people. I had a school board member in Louisburg who, fortunately for me, well, he tried to get me fired at a public meeting, and that was because he was angry over bargaining. Fortunately for me, he'd gone to a party the week before and after a few drinks, had told everybody at the party he was going to do that. So, I had all these witnesses step forward and say, "Wait a minute." So, he ended up publishing a public apology in the local newspaper, which I enjoyed immensely.

So, there were some bad examples along the way, but recognizing that it is about making things better, and Olathe, which I spent a number of years with that organization, brought ten contracts together there, they went in it looking at what some other people were going and saying, "We're not doing that. That's not for us" and making it, melding it, pushing it into a problem-solving process. It's still pinched a little occasionally about what it was, but I had worked with another spectacular leader, Dr. Ron Wimmer, and we believed collectively what we were about was making the district better and was solving problems. He ended up getting a lot of grief from some of his administrators saying, "Why are you working with her so well?" He goes, "Because she's telling me stuff you're not, and she's finding problems in the district and helping me get them situated so we're operating better all the time. And when you have a huge district like

Olathe, Shawnee Mission, Blue Valley, Wichita, I mean it has to be about “How do you make it better?”

And some people have a bad history. I remember having a conversation with the president of NEA Topeka and the superintendent. I took them to lunch and I said, “Now, here’s the deal. You two can keep carrying these suitcases of your bad history and hateful behavior, or you can drop these suitcases and decide you want to go on and do something different. It’s really up to you two.”

To their credit, they said, “We can do better,” and they brought all their teacher leaders and administrators together, and we collectively did training for them, and they got better, not perfect, but they got better than they’d ever been before.

I’m not going to say that the road we’ve been on is easy or that it’s solved, but it is. Challenges against due process that have gone on in the last ten years are stupid, and they don’t help anybody, but I guess they make somebody feel better about it. I don’t know. And their legislators are still angry that the court case that brought Gannon, that brought school finance forward, one of them was complaining about it just in March in a legislative breakfast. She didn’t know I was there, I don’t think. Anyway, she began to talk about how the Supreme Court—remember they called them the Old Ladies in Petticoats?—had forced them to do the school finance thing. And I finally had enough and I stood up and I said, “Karen, you know better than that. That’s not true, and here’s why you had to because you didn’t fulfill your half of the bargain. You didn’t do your legislative work. You’re still trying not to do your legislative work, and that really doesn’t cut it anymore. People expect it.”

But we have a group of parents who don’t have that history, and they don’t understand it. I don’t think they know they’re going to have to speak up, and they’re going to have to talk for their schools because not everybody has their best interests in mind. The push to change to an elected Supreme Court is in some people’s minds about the fact that the courts enforced the legislature to do the right thing for the schools, and that would be a huge mistake all the way around. There are people who don’t have that history, and they need to be aware of it.

MT: I guess it is worth knowing that there have been school finance cases and plaintiffs being successful in many different states with many different types of methods in selecting the court. To some extent, is it due to who’s on the court or is it due to what is the state of law?

CL: Right.

MT: And “What are you arguing? What are you trying to do?” and those kinds of things. Like you, I’ve observed probably three major battles over probably the three real legislative battles over school finance. One of the issues that always comes back is this—school funding is about providing the resources necessary to do what? If you continue to want more, then that becomes the question of “What are the resources necessary to get more?”

It’s pretty obvious that we can get the results that we have now for what we’re spending because we are. But most people on whatever side of the aisle you are continue to want more. They may not always want the same things. Often they do. Sometimes they don’t. But in most cases, it’s

rarely saying, "Everything's fine. We don't need to get any better." And that seems to be a theme of what you're talking about during all of this.

You've mentioned several things. I just want to see if there's anything else you want to say about any particular reason that kind of led you into your involvement with NEA locally and then your experience as the state leader? You've already talked again a little bit about some of your national work. But just over that period of time, were there any particular developments or things you were proud of or maybe regrets and disappointments over that period of time from the viewpoint of the organizations?

CL: Well, I think one of the things I'm most proud of is bringing forward the role that "If you're going to talk about what's good for the classroom, you have to talk about what's good for the teacher," not only just to make things better for the teacher, but to make things better for education. You can't only talk about one side of it without talking about what improves for the teacher and the administration. And the teacher has to have a voice in that.

I guess that's what really got me involved is we have to have a voice. I remember early on talking about school calendar with my superintendent and him saying, "Well, what difference does it make?" and I'm saying, "It makes a really big difference. If you take the break here, it's hard for the high school teachers to get in what they need to get in in each semester. If you run to straight through here, it's too hard on the elementary kids because they get too tired, and they can't function." And he's like, "Oh, I only thought I just had to figure out how many days we had to have." "No, there really is a lot that has to go into putting this calendar together," and that comes from the teacher voice and being a piece of it.

Schools are very complicated environments and they run it, and people outside of it don't always recognize. I remember a legislator who wanted to tour a building in Olathe, and I said, "Meet me there, and we'll meet in the front hall." So, he came in the front hall. She had a reporter with her. I said, "Fine, let's just do it." I said, "We're going to start the tour here. Let's stand here for just a moment. I want you to listen." They stood there for a minute. They were like, "We don't hear anything." I said, "Exactly. There's 650 children in this building today. You don't hear anything because a group of professionals has them involved in appropriate activities. So, you're not hearing screaming, yelling, fighting, whatever because professionals know how to do that. They know how to do it." And recognizing that that's a very complicated thing, and the teacher voice has to be a piece in it. And there had to be somebody while teachers were in the classroom doing their thing that was out here talking about what they needed. I guess that's the thing I'm most proud of, constantly being out there talking about "Here's what teachers need. Here's what's realistic."

I had a legislator tell me, "I don't know why we need school breakfast. When I was growing up, my teacher kept a box of crackers in the drawer, and kids could go get a cracker if they needed one." I said, "Well, this year, there are 32,000 children enrolled in Olathe district schools. I'm not sure a box of crackers is going to do it."

All of us have experiences as a student. We sometimes think that transfers. "I know how school operates," but really you know nothing about what's going on back here. You know your little

piece of it out here. And parents and the public sometimes carry those. Like we talked about earlier, it's a time thing. What did it cost to do it in 1955?

And then we get the reverse, going back to the good old days. Somebody needs to talk about what they were. The level of education to draftees in the Second World War was so alarming that the National Education Association, the National School Board Association, the National PTA moved a huge effort, and that's where the celebration of American Education Week in November comes from to put an emphasis on education because there were so many illiterate people who drafted into the military. They couldn't get them to read instructions because they couldn't read. The graduation rate in 1948, 1950 was like 40 percent. So, people do a lot of good old days that has no good old days. There has to be somebody who's constantly talking about where we've come, what we do, and what we need today.

The pandemic was an absolutely earth-shattering thing. Had we ever done it before? Actually, we have. "We've never closed our schools or done that"—that's not really true. There were two instances in the fifties where schools were closed in some states for two years because of polio. There's some great pictures that show kids on the ground. At home, they're on the floor, and they're listening to the radio because they're broadcasting lessons out for them during that time.

A lot of kids didn't have any structure to get them through the pandemic, and we are really building back of that. It was a change, and we had to recognize a change. My grandson was a fourth grader. He finished fourth grade with me and then did fifth grade the next year with me. He went back to school doing better. Well, if you can do one-on-one with a teacher, but there were a lot of kids who didn't come back with that.

It didn't only affect their education level. It affected a lot of things. My youngest granddaughter was a senior two years ago, three years ago. I was trying to talk to her about applications for scholarships and things. She said, "Grandma, you need to stop and think. I'm a pandemic kid. I can't tell you what clubs and organizations I went to. I can't tell you about the volunteer stuff I've done in the last two or three years because it didn't exist for me. I'm very different from what it was." I thought that was very astute from a seventeen-year-old to say, "This is how it has affected me."

Teachers need a voice out there all the time, and I want to do that. They don't get enough credit for how hard they work. Like I say, the reality is—somebody said to me, "I don't understand why you're always talking about improving teacher salaries." I said, "Well, because they work eight hours a day. They get paid for eight; they work twelve." I always get this thing is that they get all this paid holiday. You do realize that they don't get paid for any of that. They don't even get paid for Christmas Day. What job do you know of a professional person who doesn't have a paid holiday for Christmas Day? They don't, and they still don't. And still I talk to people all the time who say, "You mean, they're not paid in the summer time?" No, they are not paid in the summer time. That still exists, and we still haven't addressed that of how we can do the recognition of what the profession needs. But I think I nudged it, pushed it, kicked it a little bit over time, and that's what I'm most proud about.

MT: So, what have you been doing—I don't know how you say you're retired. What have you been doing after your active time leading with KNEA and some of those other things? I know you've got a lot of other things that you're involved with. Tell me about some of those.

CL: One of the things that I did actively when I was working was work with boards, and I've done training for lots of nonprofits, even the school board and leadership teams. I work with leadership teams and organizations that have a governance leader and a staff leader. The training for that and the development of partnership for that, I'm still doing a little of that. I've done a lot of it over the last few years. That's a partnership that is immense, and there's really good work and research out there for it. And like I say, I've worked for a number of nonprofits that were not education stuff, but I do that and some for-profit. Actually, I've done a couple of for-profit organizations.

I do a lot of volunteer work. I've a real passion about hunger. So, I do fundraising for food for a homeless shelter, development of meals for a homeless shelter in Kansas City, Kansas. I do good works about that, and how do we support families and that piece of it.

MT: It sounds like definitely keeping busy.

CL: I try to. I try to.

MT: I think we've covered the main topics I wanted to go over. Before we wrap up, let me give you one more chance, if you think of something that I missed that you want to mention or talk about or just any kind of concluding thoughts, now would be the time.

CL: Well, one story I haven't told that's really important to me. In my national role, I had the opportunity to work with the US Secretary, Arne Duncan. I used to say, "I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing that Arne knows my name," but he would always stop and talk with me. Really, for a guy who got stuck with a lot of bad press, he was a very kind man. My first round of breast cancer happened when I was doing that work, and Arne checked on me to make sure I was coming through that okay. So, a great guy.

But his experience had been in Chicago. And he and President Obama tended to equate public schools with what they worked with in there. And I would say to them on a regular basis, "If you will please—let me bring the President, let me bring you, Secretary, to Olathe, America, to any of the Kansas public schools. I want you to see how they function and what we're doing for kids and the way we have raised the standards and are looking to make our kids successful. You would get a different vision. You're trying to hammer a national picture based on only one example, and it's not working for you."

Plus neither one of them had ever worked with a state system. Now, granted the Chicago system is bigger than most state systems. However, they didn't understand how the state part of that—I spent all the time that they were in office virtually working with them, trying to get them to come and see.

I don't think Kansans understand what a jewel this system is. I don't care where you come from. We've got kids from Hoxie and kids from Liberal that have been on Fulbright scholarships who go all over the world, who go to Harvard regularly, who produce students who go everywhere in the world. We don't—I always like to say, in my neck of the woods, there's been so much publicity about Eric Stonestreet and Jason Sudeikis and all those guys who came out of Shawnee Mission School's drama department.

We have a jewel of a system. I am very proud of the time I spent moving it forward. I think that work is continuing, and there are good leaders that are out there working on it now, but I think it's something you can't let slide.

MT: Thank you for your work. Thank you for your contributions over your career and the other things you're doing. Thank you for taking a little time today to share this. In conclusion, as always, I want to thank our viewers for looking at this. Remember the transcript is available, and there are many other interviews available for your consideration. Thank you very much.

[End of File]