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

Today we're going to be turning our focus to an educator from Topeka, Kansas who spent I think much of his professional career in that area. We want to talk about your experiences as a teacher, as a principal, and community leader. It's an honor to be with you, Dale, Mr. Cushinberry.

Dale Cushinberry: It's my pleasure.

MT: Absolutely. Why don't we start as we've typically done by just give me some background on yourself, where you were born, where you grew up, and what moved you into the interest in education, and ultimately educational leadership?

DC: I grew up in Topeka, and I was born over by the Expo Center, 1820 Fillmore. I attended public schools here, particularly before the Brown case. I went to Buchanan Elementary, which at that time was an all-Black elementary school.

After the Brown case, I went to Central Park, which is where Robinson Middle School is now. I attended there for a few years, and then our family moved to the Highland Park area.

MT: For people who may not know Topeka, that's sort of a move from the central part of the city to the east side.

DC: That's correct. At that time, Highland Park was not in the city. They were a rural school at that time. So, at Highland Park, I finished at Highland Park Elementary. I went to Highland Park Middle School, then graduated from Highland Park High School.

MT: Now, just to clarify, this would have been well before the Unification Act that created USD 501? Am I correct in that or was that part of it at the time?

DC: No, actually Topeka Public Schools had their own entity. Highland Park was just outside of that.

MT: They were part of the Topeka system, but not part of the city of Topeka.

DC: Correct.

MT: Very good.

DC: So, any rate, after I graduated from Highland Park High School, I was fortunate to receive some scholarships, was recruited by probably the most famous Black college coach at that time, Johnny McLendon. Johnny went on to become the first Black head coach in the NBA. He was the first Black coach to coach at a predominantly White Division 1 school. He sued the NCAA to allow Black colleges to participate in postseason play and won. After being allowed to participate, he won it three years in a row.

So, that was most of my experience. I started at Kentucky State, and I ended up finishing at Emporia State here in Kansas.

MT: So came back to Emporia State to finish up. What were your degrees in?

DC: I have a double major elementary and secondary education. I have a master's degree in counseling and psychotherapy. I have another degree in school administration.

MT: Did you come back to Topeka from Emporia State directly?

DC: It was kind of a funny situation. I planned on maybe trying to go back to Washington, DC where my sister lived. I was visiting with my mother. We went to church, and she was proud of the fact that her son graduated from college. She was telling all of the church ladies, "This is my son." We were eating dinner, and I thought, "Maybe I should stay around for a couple of years so Mom can kind of see the fruits of her labor" because she had sacrificed a great deal so that all six kids could have an opportunity.

I ran into a guy named Onan Burnett. Onan was principal of Capital City High School at that time. He said, "Have I got a job for you!" That summer, I taught archery at Capital City High School. I knew nothing about archery. I learned quickly though. That was my first entrance into the school system. Then after that, I was hired to teach sixth grade at Parkdale Elementary School.

MT: We have been reflecting, those of us who have been involved with these recordings on the small state of Kansas. When I started lobbying for KASB in 1990, Onan Burnett was the lobbyist for USD 501.

DC: Correct.

MT: So, we worked together for a few years until he retired from that. I haven't heard that name in a while. That brings back good memories. He certainly provided me some mentoring.

DC: He was quite a gentleman. He'd been around a lot, and he knew a lot. He kind of helped guide me in my initial entrance.

MT: So, the first level of teaching you had was what?

DC: Elementary.

MT: I'm kind of interested in your progression then as a teacher.

DC: It was kind of funny. Here's a guy, 6'4, a Black guy, teaching in an elementary school, sixth grade. There wasn't then and there still isn't a lot of men at the elementary level. It was really interesting. The kids didn't care whether I could teach or not. All they cared about was I could dunk the basketball on the playground.

But it was a great experience. I think the elementary teachers, hats need to be off to them because they're definitely boots on the ground, and they give the kids a start. When you ever go into an elementary school and you watch the elementary teachers work, they don't have a lot of breaks. They'll get the music class, possibly the kids going to the library. They're responsible for those kids all the time. So, it was quite an experience. I enjoyed it. I learned a lot.

MT: I want to come back to some other background, but just to sort of get it on the record, what further steps did you take within the district until you ultimately became principal?

DC: I was at Parkdale for two years. Then I was offered a fellowship at Emporia State to work on my master's degree. So, I left [USD]501 after two years, went back to Emporia State. I was the assistant basketball coach under Ron Slaymaker at Emporia State. I finished my master's degree, and then I came back to 501.

At that time, I was placed at Highland Park Junior High as a counselor and head basketball coach. I did that for a couple of years, and they made a change in administration. I had had some background in administration, had almost finished my degree, and they named me the Interim Principal that year.

Now the irony about that year was Highland Park was going to close at the end of that year. My job was to start the year and close it at the same time. After Highland Park Junior High was finished and I was Interim Principal, I was then offered a position at Highland Park High School as an Assistant Principal. They didn't have any principalships at the time. So, I took that for four years.

Then I ran into a president at Washburn University, a guy by the name of Dr. John Green. I was in a meeting, and we were having a discussion, and I got a call from him two days later, asking if I had any interest in working at Washburn University.

At that time, I really didn't. I think his interest was also to have me as a basketball coach. I met with him. They talked about me being an assistant basketball coach under Bob Chipman. Bob and I were good friends, and that was not an issue.

MT: For viewers, we don't know when they'll watch this, but a very longstanding and very successful coach at Washburn.

DC: Absolutely. He played under Jack Hartman at K-State. At that particular time in my life, I was wanting to make a transition from basketball. I didn't really want to pursue that as a job. So,

I called him back and told him that I would not be interested in the position because I wasn't interested in coaching.

He called me back three days later. He wanted me to meet with the head of the Education Department. At that time, I believe it was Dr. Oldham. We talked, and he said, "Would you be interested in teaching in the Ed Department part time, and the other part of the time you could be in University Relations half time?"

I ended up taking the position. I taught half time in the Education Department and worked in University Relations. At that time, I was under Dr. Mary Rowland. We were able to establish the Minority Affairs Office. We were able to establish the Advising Center for Nondeclared Majors and so on and so forth.

I was there seven years, and I ran into a Topeka Public Schools superintendent by the name of Marvin Edwards. We were talking at a luncheon. He leaned out and kind of gave me the old side eye, and he said, "I understand you used to be in 501." I said, "That's correct." "We need you back." We got to talking, and he was going to assign me to a principalship at Lafayette Elementary School.

During that summer, after I'd signed the contract, he ended up moving, that superintendent. So, the new superintendent came in. It was Dr. Gary Livingston who I knew well, also. Gary called me in July, and he said, "There's been a change in plans." I said ,"What do you mean, a change in plans? Do I have a job or don't I?" He said, "No, you have a job, but I need you at Whitson Elementary as opposed to Lafayette." He said, "I think Whitson needs you as well."

So, I took the position at Whitson. I was there five years at Whitson Elementary, a great opportunity. I made a lot of friends. I enjoyed the environment. I enjoyed working with the kids and the community.

After five years, a new superintendent at that time, Dr. Weaver, asked to meet with me. We met, and he said, "Are you interested in being a high school principal?" I said, "No, I'm not dissatisfied with what I'm doing at the elementary level." Then he talked and he said that, "We're needing to make some changes," and my name keeps coming up. I said, "Well, I want to reiterate, I'm not dissatisfied where I'm at."

Then he took a deep breath and he kind of reminded me that my contract said "or as other deemed necessary by the superintendent of the schools."

MT: So, they'd like you to volunteer.

DC: Right.

MT: But if not—

DC: I kind of looked at him and arched an eyebrow. I said, "Dr. Weaver, that's not the only option on the table." He said, "I don't know what other options there are." I said, "I could resign." He said, "There's no need to do that." I said, "Let me think about it."

Two days later, I'm in Dillon's Grocery Store, and a lady who's a friend of my mother stopped me and put her hand on my shoulder and said, "Son, I'm so glad you're going to be at Highland Park. We need you." I said, "Oh, my goodness. What can I do?"

So, I came back the next day, called Dr. Weaver, said, "Look, I will do this for five years, and then I have to re-evaluate." I ended up staying sixteen years and retiring as the Principal at Highland Park High School.

MT: It sounds like you had opportunities to do other things, but I guess what I'm curious about is "What do you think it was that first led you to considering a career in education, in public school teaching, and then what was it that kept bringing you back into these different positions of leadership, starting maybe from a personal viewpoint?

DC: When I went to college, my first major at Kentucky State was broadcasting. I wanted to—

MT: You have the voice.

DC: I wanted to be a DJ. I wanted to be a newscaster and a sports announcer. When I transferred to Emporia, they didn't have a program. So, I kind of milled around, nondeclared for a semester or two, and I decided it would be cool to be a businessman, carrying the attaché case. I started taking business courses.

That wasn't my cup of tea. They were too linear. It wasn't as interactive as far as interacting with people was concerned. I was working at a place called William Allen White at Emporia during the summer. I was working for the Recreation Commission. Dr. Lee Barron was the director then. I was having so much fun at my center. They would drop off equipment, and I was to design activities for the kids. The truck would come at 5:00. We weren't even ready to go because we were having so much fun. They would always remind me, "Hey, you need to be ready at 5:00 because we have to get this stuff back to the Rec Center."

At the end of the summer, I was in the Ed Building, I ran into Dr. Waters, Harry Waters, who was my advisor. I said, "Dr. Waters, what can I do and make money working with kids?" He didn't even bat an eye. He said, "You should teach." I said, "Well, I don't know about that. I don't know that I've distinguished myself in the classroom. I don't know that I would be the best candidate to be a teacher." He leaned forward and he arched an eyebrow and he said, "What you just told me makes me realize that you in fact will be a great teacher because you will know the importance of putting forth the effort to get the results. You'll be able to communicate that to young people." I signed up for the Education Department and never looked back.

MT: So, it wasn't a "Well, from the time I was a kid, I knew I wanted to be a teacher." Not at all.

DC: No.

MT: It was more of a circuitous route to get there. Okay, you obviously got your education. You got the degree. You got the job. What were your first days or months or years like actually being a teacher?

DC: To be honest with you, my first days and years were a learning curve for me. People talk about teaching when you sign the contract, but you really actually learn a lot. So, between the teaching and learning from the kids, learning about learning styles and so on and so forth, it was a learning curve.

To be honest with you, when I retired, I was still learning. I was learning from the kids. I was learning from the teachers. I was learning from my colleagues. I believe that if you're a true educator, you never stop learning.

MT: One of the purposes of this series of interviews is to really talk about or try to identify some of the big changes or the big themes that has happened in Kansas education, and that probably reflects in national education over the past decade. You have, I'm just going to tick off a couple of things that come to mind, as a student or a professional, you've been through desegregation.

DC: Correct.

MT: You have been through I guess whatever we'd call the upheavals of the 1960s, some of those things that happened, the introduction of special education, the whole broad effort in education to become more, for want of a better word, inclusive, to reach more kids. That's one of the things we've talked about is a theme of education trying to expand its reach to help more students at a time when more and more students are facing challenges. So, you've seen a lot.

DC: Yes.

MT: And I guess I'd ask you to kind of in whatever order you want kind of reflect on what have been, maybe what has driven or some of the results or the challenges of some of those big changes that you've had the chance to watch over your career.

DC: And to throw in that group No Child Left Behind and some of those initiatives that you know so well, as well.

MT: Yes.

DC: Sometimes I think in education in our efforts to get the boat to a certain destination that all the oars in the water aren't going in the same direction. So, the boat sometimes kind of circles and spins around. If you ever want to stump the panel in education, walk into a room of educators sitting in a dais or in a room and play the old "Columbo", Peter Falk, put your hand on your forehead and say, "I'm curious. What is the function of education?" You would hear crickets. And then a few voices would venture forward and say things like, "Well, you need education so you can advance yourself in life. You can get a good job and so on and so forth." And most of the conversation will be centered around that type of discussion.

When I was teaching at the college level, I used a paper by a guy from India named Krishnamurti. The title of his essay was, “What is the Function of Education?” The short of it is “Is education something that we learn some body of knowledge so that we can get a job so that we can fit into some divot in society, therefore becoming dull, weary, and stupid?” or “Is it to take a body of knowledge combined with understanding life and all of its subtleties, therefore when put together, makes us a truly learned or educated person?”

Well, I think it’s the latter. I think oftentimes educational directives are politicized, and they really aren’t as focused on helping our young people understand what true education is and understand the creative process because many of the things—we talk about AI and all of that today. Those kind of advancements don’t come from fitting in divots in society. They come from thinking out of the box, getting kids to wonder. And we’ve lost a lot of that in education in my opinion.

So, when I go into buildings, when I’m supervising student teachers, teachers are compressed into teaching toward state assessments. They’re unpacking and trying to boil down those things they’re going to be tested on, and they don’t venture out anymore.

So, kids now are proficient on state assessments, but they’re not truly educated. I can pretty much coach any kid that has any mental capacity to be proficient on a state assessment. All I have to do is unpack those things that are going to be tested. All I have to do is double dose them in areas where they’re weak, whether it’s reading or math.

But what are the trade-offs? Well, I end up taking them out of art, taking them out of music, so on and so forth, so that we can accomplish this goal. And somebody’s going to reflect and say, “That Dale Cushinberry is a heck of a principal. Seventy-six percent of his kids were proficient on the state assessment. They are really learning at that school.” That’s further from the case. So, I think about things like that.

Here’s my premise about kids. Kids are fine. They really are. What our kids are victims of our system failures. Systems that fail around them, whether it be the home front, whether it be our school, whether it be our churches, on and on.

I’m mentoring a group of kids at Highland Park High School, young men, and people kind of warned me that, “Hey, I don’t know what it’s going to be like. These kids don’t seem to be interested in much. They’re more interested about the feud between Kendrick Lamar and Drake than they are about the world situations and so forth.”

I said, “That’s fine.” I have a belief. I will take you where you are and then escort you to where I want you to be. Most people try to fight where the kids are. At the expense of being able to move the agenda forward, they have this guerilla warfare. “If you don’t do what I tell you to do, I’m going to write you up. I’m going to send you to the office” and so on and so forth rather than saying, “Oh, what is it that you’re doing? I see. That’s pretty interesting. At some point in time, I’d like to have you tell me a little bit more about that and maybe the rest of the class, but at this time, I’d like to have you join the rest of us.” You escort them.

I guess my whole opinion about education today, there's nothing wrong with our kids. There really isn't. Oh, yeah, they're exposed to so much more. I mean, when I grew up, the TV shut off at 10:00, and the test pattern came on.

MT: We're showing our age because I can remember that, too, I think.

DC: We had no choice but go to bed. Our parents insisted we went to bed anyway. On TV today, our kids can learn everything from making a baby to a bomb. They're exposed to it. We think that we can shield them, and life will be fine. No, we can't. They're exposed to it. The worst thing that we can do is play hide and seek from our young people, whether it's your own personal child or someone else's child. When you see a student having an emotional reaction towards something, find out what that's about. Whenever you see a student that's excited about something, find out what that's about. And you build and you escort. You're in the escort service.

I believe we should do away with calling people teachers, principals, counselors. We should just be a Ways and Means Committee. Our whole job is to look for ways and means to help our children be successful. And you know what? If we think in those terms, we don't get so categorically stifled by "This is my job. This is my job. This is my job." It's our job to create an environment, to create a culture where our kids can meet success.

MT: You're giving me some things to think about. I hope people are watching this as well. I'll share with you a couple of developments that I followed over my career and maybe let you respond. On one hand, we know there is a love/hate relationship I think with assessments, right?

DC: Yes.

MT: State or whatever. On one hand, it's a common measure. We talk about it. It's something that is always pointed to. And yet there's also a lot of people who say but that's too narrow.

So, on one hand, if you look at those measures, education hasn't progressed very far over the last number of decades. If you look at measures like graduation rates, for example, college attendance, the overall level of educational achievement in the long term over decades has been improving. We've never been higher. And some of the gaps that we look at—racial, gender--those things, while they may still exist, they have been closing. That I guess you could argue is a success story. And yet there continues to be concern that despite that progress, we do still continue to have gaps, right?

DC: Right.

MT: We know low-income kids in general tend not to do as well. Some racial groups. Whatever you put on the table. And maybe it's always been this way. So, how well are we doing, and what should we be doing about it? You spent a lot of time in a school with a lot of those challenges, probably more than your share around poverty and some of those issues. So, again, I'll put that question—over your career, did we get better? Did we try harder but there's more things working

against us? I guess if you were to look back at Kansas education or Highland Park education twenty years ago, thirty years ago when you were in the system and where we are now, what's gone well and maybe what hasn't? Where do we still have the most work to do?

DC: That's an interesting question. It's kind of a loaded question because it's kind of cyclic in the sense that what I found as a principal is that you're only as good as your last satisfaction. You can raise—they used to give out a state report card, and you'd use that as kind of a barometer to affect different groups in your school that are low in reading or whatever, SES [socioeconomic status] factors and all of that.

What I think happened in part because there are some real school successes, and I'll tell you about one—I think people are under so much pressure to raise the caliber of their schools, I think sometimes we're a little creative with the numbers. Now I know people watching are going to say, "How can he say that?" I'm being realistic, and I know that when people are under pressure that sometimes we don't always report it all, or we report what gives us the face value that we want.

But to answer your question, it's not fair to say we haven't made any gains because I've been in places where teachers are really teaching up. I used to hear coaches say, "I coached him up. That's why he's better. I coached him up." And teachers are down low [00:31:19.28] working hard, and they're taking the kid.

Where I have my discontentment with schools and measures is I don't like letter grades, A, B, C, D, because sometimes, and it depends on teachers, sometimes they're inflated, and sometimes they're not. I want to look at something that talks about mastery. If I could develop a grading scale, it would be from 0 to 7, 7 being mastery, 0, you've got work to do so that when you as a parent come to school and have a parent, teacher, student conference, that I can talk to you and say, "You know, your son John, he's at a 4, and mastery would be a 7. We think we can get him in that 5, 6 range that he is more than capable of going to the next level and being successful. These are some of the strategies that we're using to help him get to that level. What questions do you have?" That's a different conversation than "Your son has a B, and that's a pretty good grade." It's not descriptive enough for me.

I know when you say that, unfortunately there are some educators who use grades as a punitive tool as opposed to a growth tool. But I think at the end of the day, we're talking about mastering. Are you capable to go to the connector flight and have success because you have the foundation?

Engraved in me also is as a teacher, what I realize, and myself included, a poor test taker. You slide the test in front, and you may have so-called studied or looked at the book for an hour, whatever you do, and you just can't quite get it out. But you should use different artifacts to assess student performance. It could be a project. It could be an oral thing and so forth. I don't think we do enough of that. I think we are still stuck on the paper assessment, and we know that there are a number of kids that are in our purview who struggle with that type of assessment.

MT: So, in most of your career, you've been very much sort of 'in the trenches' was a term we could say. You've have worked directly with students or the teachers teaching them, their

parents, part of your community, having lived in Topeka for many years, you're very well known in this community. I guess I'd ask you to reflect a little bit both from your personal experience and then maybe if you could generalize a little bit more, what is the relationship or should be the relationship between the public school and kind of the community at large?

DC: They should be as one. Our target goal as a community is to build a bridge for that student or students, and no one of us is as smart as all of us, and no one of us has all the answers or resources, but collectively when we rise to a higher level of collective purpose, we tend to do a better job.

Now, relationships are essential, whether it's teacher/student, teacher/parent/community, so on and so forth. What I found as a principal, I used to come into communities and I would go to garage sales, pancake feeds. When I was a principal at the high school, every third Sunday, I'd go to a different church in the community. It's really interesting when you walk into a place and people say, "Isn't that the principal from Highland Park High School?" And the conversation starts to pick up, and you become a known entity.

It's a lot easier to deal with things that are relevant when you're a known entity, and you don't have to go through the introductories or try to convince somebody that you're there for them because you've already established that prior to any situations that could occur. And I found that out, whether I was dealing with gang issues or whatever, that I could go with a couple of my people to visit with some of the gang leaders in the community, and my favorite comment to them is, "Look, I don't run anything out here. My turf is from 23rd Street to 25th Street, California to Bellview, but I need your help."

In the sixteen years that I was a high school principal, we never had one weapon in the building, one gang fight, no graffiti on the walls or broken windows. Now that wasn't as a result of having a lot of security and police. It was the result of a relationship because one thing about kids that are in gangs or different kinds of sets, we can argue about their activity but their bond is word. If they bump fists with you and say there won't be anything happening at your school, there will not be anything happening at your school. Now, they may shoot at each other out there, but it won't make its way to your school.

I find that many administrators, teachers underplay those relationships. When you meet a parent who struggles—they struggle to student themselves. They had a child when they were very young. They're just trying to meet their Maslovian needs. And that parent comes to a teacher conference and is made to feel less than, what type of cooperation do you think you'll get? Or progress reports. You always send out progress reports to let parents know prior to grade cards coming out, student progress. Well, many of the parents don't respond to them because they hear so much negative about their child.

So, we developed programs where our social workers, counselors, parents say, "I can't come to parent/teacher conferences because I work." "Okay, what kind of sandwich do you like? We'll go by Subway and pick you up a sandwich and chips and a drink if you'll just give us fifteen or twenty minutes of your time."

You've got to be creative in ways that you make that contact and keep that contact, and you build relationships. Even when you have those situations, and you will have them, where things aren't going as well as they should, it's a lot easier to sit down with a parent and say to them, "Look, I know you're upset. The board won't let me talk the language that you're talking. In order to heal this, we're going to have to talk the same language. Would you like some coffee?"

Redirect the anger. That person will ultimately calm down, and you'll get on with the matter at hand. What the matter is, they're frustrated, too. They want their child to do well, but they don't see that anybody's giving them a lifeline. So, when you reach out and give them a lifeline, you compliment them and say, "Look, what you're doing is very difficult. We want to let you know we appreciate what you're doing. Tell you what we're going to do. We're going to need to work together." And you turn to the child and say, "John, your mom and I've been talking, and you've been listening. Here's the situation. Mom has you part time. We have you part time, but you have you all the time. So you're going to have to start doing more, is that going to be a problem?"

You build that contract with that young person. Then on every Friday, they have to come and see me and let me know how they're doing. We've saved and moved forward a lot of kids through that process. Now does it take some effort? Sure. But if you're in it to win it, you don't mind putting forth the effort.

I always tell teachers when they are seeking to come to Highland Park, I tell them all the factors. "We didn't make AYP. We've got this and we've got that. We have some challenges. Are you still interested in the job? Because at the end of the day, there are going to be days where you're going to outrun your deodorant, and it's going to be down and dirty. I just want to let you know that up front. So, if you need to think about it overnight, let me know in the morning, feel free to do so."

MT: A point of clarification for our viewers is AYP stands for Adequate Yearly Progress, which was an artifact of the No Child Left Behind. It was very much sort of based on the idea of "What is the minimum test score progress you can make?" One of the things we know is that schools with more kids with more challenges tended to have—it's harder to reach that. Schools with a greater percentage of those populations tended not to do as well. Of course, that's one of the things when No Child Left Behind was finally abolished. Many people felt that was a problem with, but it does bring us back to this question of how we—what is the holistic way to evaluate schools and what they're doing? How much can you fairly ask the school to do? Because the school can't control everything.

DC: Right.

MT: One thing I'd like to get your opinion on. I've been observing education issues since probably the eighties generously speaking, a little bit even when I was in school. It seems to me that broadly speaking, there has been a shift between people worrying about—you mentioned gangs. A lot of the concern about our schools and particularly maybe schools that frankly people thought other schools were, not necessarily their own.

DC: Right.

MT: We were worried about gangs. We were worried about fighting. We were worried about drugs. We were kind of worried about kids getting along with each other, and that's where the problems we're seeing.

My understanding is that there's a lot of data that says that many of those issues aren't as big of issues now as more internal issues for kids, that now what we tend to hear about when we talk to people is problems with depression, problems with anxiety, inability to focus, get along with other kids. Is that kind of your experience as well in your role? Kids are still facing challenges. They're a little bit different than maybe they were twenty, thirty, forty years ago.

DC: Not only are there some differences, but the manner in which they handle, the methods they're using to handle them are increasing. Suicide is on the rise. What people don't understand is suicide is a coping mechanism. It used to be in the day to get on the side of the teacher, you bring the teacher an apple. The teacher, "Oh, my, this is great. You're a good young man." It was an effort to be on the side of the person who dispenses the power.

There were other methods that were used when students who were academically superior, they would get recognized. I always remember in schools, they would have the pre-spelling test on Wednesday and on Friday, they would have the main spelling test. What you'd get on Friday is the grade you got.

So, there were a couple of us who struggled a little bit with that little "ie" thing, getting that mixed around. So, often, we wouldn't get 100 percent, but we'd have to sit there and watch those kids who got 100 percent go forward and get some candy. And you think about how you feel when you're sitting in that seat and your colleagues are getting candy. The only reason you don't get candy is because you couldn't get that "ie" thing straightened around.

So, what happens, and I'll tell you the coping mechanism because this is a true story, some of us who couldn't get the "ie" thing straightened around decided to bring our own candy. When the spelling relays, as I liked to refer to them, started, and she would go to the first row and all those who got them all right stand and come forward. By the time they got to the second row, we decided it was time to break our candy out.

The only problem was, our candy were M & M's. So, in opening them, they over-tore the package, and they spilled on the floor. They sounded like BBs. The teacher turned and had that laser look. I remember having to stay in after school.

But it's a coping mechanism. Kids want to be successful. That's why I encourage teachers, if you have ways of rewards in your classroom, make sure everybody is a participant because they'll figure out other ways to compensate if you don't.

Kids today also if they can't please anybody, they can't get good grades or the teacher's upset with them, the parents are upset with them, they don't feel like it's worth it, I'll just leave it all together. That's where suicide starts to creep in. People think of it as a selfish, dastardly act, but

they don't look at the fact that maybe it's a coping mechanism. We can argue that it's not the one we would prefer anybody to take or consider, but we have to look at the role that we play in shaping our environments that could possibly produce that.

The other is the social media. I've had the opportunity to intervene with a couple of young ladies who were contemplating suicide because they had dated these young men for a while and thought that they were tight, as they say, and only to break up. Now, during the process when they were tight, they took illicit pictures, pictures obviously their parents and mothers wouldn't approve of, and now this young man has put them out all over the media.

The girl is embarrassed. She doesn't want to go to school. She doesn't want to go out in public. She doesn't want to be around her friends. So, she feels like her only option is to leave it all together.

The question used to come to me as a principal about "Did I ever go into my children's room and look around?" and so on and so forth. And my response was "Yes". Now I didn't go into my daughters' rooms and rifle through their drawers and so forth. But if you're in touch with your kids, if you walk into that room and just stand and like a fan just kind of oscillate, if you do that regularly enough, that room will tell you something, and that's being in touch.

The other, bringing it forward, is about the computer. Now let me also tell you, with my kids, you can be upset. You have a right to be upset about certain decisions your parents make. But you're not going to slam doors. You're not going to lock yourself in a room. You're not going to act the fool. And before we go to bed, we need to talk.

So, what we end up dealing with is a situation where kids do lock their parents out. They get to the point where they feel like it's not worth it. The point that I want to make about computers today, if I had a child and they had a computer, yes, I would look on the computer.

You know, it used to be, you had to go out where the creature was. Your parents would tell you, "Don't go to this night spot. Don't do this" or "Don't do that." Now they can bring the creatures with them. With that being the case, do you value your young people?

I look at money. I notice how reactive people are with money. If you went to the top of the Capitol building and just flung a sack of money off the top, man, you're talking about a mad scuffle down below. Well, then, why aren't we that interactive about our kids because they are our money.

I used to tell my daughter who would get upset, "Well, Dad, why is it that when a guy comes to pick me up, he has to come inside?" I said, "Good question." I said, "Because I value you. This guy drives up, honks. I can't even see him. I don't know who he is. If you turned up missing or something happens to you, we don't even have a reference point." I said, "I value you. You're my money."

When I go to a bank and ask for a loan for $10,000, they don't say, "Oh, yeah, sure," and bring me out a sack of money. They ask a lot of questions. Why? Because they want their money back.

They value the money. So, to the people out there, we need to place the same value on our children and the same process that we go through to take care of our other wealth with our children.

MT: I want to note that you're certainly correct that we've seen a long-term increase in youth suicide. I've actually done a little bit of research. In the last four or five years, we've actually seen a decrease in numbers and rate in Kansas, and I think that has in part come about because there was so much concern about the very things you're saying, and many schools really tried to respond to that. Once again, sometimes that can be controversial because "Why aren't you focusing on test scores?" Schools were doing things to try to deal with the issues that you were mentioning. At least in that sense, it looks like there has been some positives. That's a statistic—not to minimize the long-term increases that we're seeing that can certainly still be out there, but at least a little bit of good news there.

DC: You have to, as a parent, as a teacher, you have to have a keen awareness like the old-school teachers used to have. I could never understand how they could see certain things and call you out about certain things. They must have had x-ray vision. They could just see stuff because they were attentive. We have to have that same vigilance and be attentive.

When I did in-service for beginning teachers, I told them that every kid that puts their head on their desk is not trying to make your life miserable because I can tell you circumstances where children have had some adverse situations at home, and they got no sleep. There was so much discontentment, so on and so forth at the home front. They didn't have food. By the time they got to school, they were just tired and upset. So, they laid their head on the desk.

If your first response is, "All right, get your head up off the desk or I'm going to send you to the office," that kid could care less about you sending them to the office because their other needs haven't been met. Pretty soon, you continue to press the student. The student throws the book, curses you out. Now they've got another situation.

What would happen if you would say, "Hey, Linda, apparently you're not feeling well. Let me get everybody else started, and then maybe you and I could talk." Give them some space. In that space, we start some dialogue and say, "You know, ultimately now, you need to join us, but if you need some time, you certainly can have a pass to go see the counselor if that's what you need to do. You let me know. I'm going to go ahead and get everybody started. Then you and I need to talk." It's a more humane way of dealing with each other.

MT: And those are things that are harder to track over time. We can look at ACT and SAT scores going back a long time. We don't necessarily have that data, but certainly many educators that I talk to say that those problems the kids bring from home because of things they're doing really have changed and gotten worse in recent decades. So how you have an education system that can respond to those while at the same time not making that just an excuse but helping kids work around that is really the balance that everyone is trying to get to.

DC: And it's really more crucial today. Again, back to the old-school teachers, they seemed to be impervious to all the stuff outside. They're able to focus on teaching. Today's people in

education are so affected by the political climate, with Republican, Democrat, whatever, and they bring it into the classroom. It affects the way they deliver the service to the kids.

So, whatever ways your personal beliefs are, if you get into the field of education, you're going to have to leave the guns at the door and come in with a focus on being a resource, being a Ways and Means Committee, not judging, not talking about the single parent or the whatever whatever, but saying, "Okay, I'm glad you're here. Let's see what we can do."

MT: That's probably a good place to begin to wrap up. I want to give you the opportunity to take a minute. Are there any things that you think are important to bring up, maybe that I haven't asked you? Some things you're really excited about that you accomplished or regrets? And then maybe one last thing—you mentioned mentoring. If there's anything kind of you're doing now in retirement that you want to share with us?

DC: I think mentoring and working with young men and ultimately we've got to bring the young ladies to the table because they need to be having a conversation together. I think it's exhilarating. I think too much that's occurring right now, adults are playing hide and seek from our young people because they built their fears about them, and they don't understand the possibilities or realities.

When you go into a room, oh, yeah, they're going to be clowning, jiving around. You have to have a means of bringing a focus. I have a question I always ask, and it just sobers them up. It is "Who cares whether you live or die?" The room will get kind of quiet. "I care."

"Well, do you remember a kid by the name of Trayvon Martin, shot and killed, and how everybody was in the streets, and 'This can't happen'? Do you hear anything now about him? In some people's minds, he's like a piece of paper, balled up, and thrown away. Is that what you want? If that's what you want, then keep coming to sessions like this, acting the fool and not paying attention. Keep going to your classes laying your head on your desk or missing classes all together because you have negatively devalued yourself."

I can reach any student. I really believe, I don't care who they are. I don't care if they're in gangs or whatever. I believe that I have the ability to reach any student with their consent. Oftentimes with young people, if they're reluctant learners or reluctant participants, we feel we have to kick the front door in of their house. No, you check it, jiggle it. You appeal to them to open it. But then you go try the side door and the back door, other methods. You'd be surprised that sooner or later, that student if they understand that you're there for them, they will leave one of those doors open because I don't believe any young person comes to us saying, "I want to be unsuccessful." They may not always have the tools in their box to be successful, but that's where we come in.

I think for me one of the privileges that I've had is to be able to work with other people's kids and to be able to establish something that not necessarily is measured by A, B, C, or D grade, but I can honestly say, "They're more when they left than they were when they came."

MT: That may be a good place to wrap up. I think if anything that kind of sums up one of the things we've heard over and over in this series of education interviews about what people have tried to do and how we've tried to see education continue to improve and serve more kids.

Thank you for sitting down with us. Thank you for your service.

DC: It's always a pleasure, man.

MT: Thank you to our viewers who obviously make this possible. Good luck in the future.

DC: Thank you.

[End of File]