

Mark Tallman: My name is Mark Tallman, and I've worked with the Kansas Association of School Boards on education issues as a lobbyist, as a researcher and writer since 1990. I'm conducting this interview with Frank Henderson 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 interviews will be accessible to researchers, educators, and the public through the KOHP website, [ksoralhistory.org](http://ksoralhistory.org), and also the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library. Transcriptions are made possible by generous donors. Dave Heinemann is the videographer today.

And in today's interview, we're going to be really looking at things through the lens of local school board service at various levels. I've known Frank Henderson for many years, but again mostly in his role as a School Board member, as a board member for my organization, the Kansas School Board Association, and as ultimately president of not only that organization but the National School Board Association. So, Frank, we want to talk today about your experience as a layperson serving in a number of capacities but dealing with education issues over the past several decades. So, it's a pleasure to sit down and visit with you. You should notice, we're also doing this in the Seaman School District boardroom where you served for a number of years until retiring just a year or so ago. Is that right? In 2024?

Frank Henderson: Correct. My term ended in January 2024.

MT: Very good. Frank, as always, let's kind of start at the beginning. We're always interested in finding out where state leaders sort of got their start, both their background as a Kansan, the different communities they were a part of, and what led them to the positions of leadership they've had. So, give us a little information on the Frank Henderson story. Where were you born, grew up, some of your formative experiences?

FH: Thank you. It's great to be part of this oral history project. As a native Kansan, I've always loved Kansas. I always felt that education was very critical. I grew up in western Kansas. When I tell people that, I'm like, "This is real western Kansas."

MT: I grew up in Hays, which I thought was western Kansas until I meet people like you.

FH: Yes. Not the folks that believe when they get to Salina, they're in the middle of nowhere. But I grew up in Wallace County, which Wallace County, of course, borders the Colorado/Kansas state line, in a little community called Sharon Springs, a small farming community. My grandfather actually homesteaded to Wallace County and broke land. So, my father was born there. My mother was born in nearby Logan County on a farm as well.

I grew up in a small community there. I had pretty much what you'd call an average life. We didn't have a lot of financial resources. But we were able to make it by and enjoyed going to school in Sharon Springs, a small community, a small school. You got to know all of your teachers. Most of the teachers there were the absolutely best, the tops. Some of those I still have contact with today, but it was a great experience, a great education experience.

With my family, education was a high priority. One of the stories I've often told—our family was what some people would call “religious,” very strict and conservative. I remember one Christmas as a child—I have one brother and one sister, and a neighbor had given us a Christmas gift. So, we, as kids do, were anxiously opening the gift to see what it was, and lo and behold, it was a Monopoly game. We began to open it up, and there, lo and behold, within that Monopoly game was the abomination, and that was a pair of die. My grandfather always believed that you do not gamble. It leads to the destruction of the family, etc., etc. So, my mom promptly returned the Monopoly game to the little store and came back with books for each of us to read. So, that was kind of the beginning of me learning the importance of education and the importance of reading, and how that was really crucial and critical to my upbringing.

MT: How did that lead you out of that small town in western Kansas into a different career?

FH: Well, there really wasn't a lot of activities there unless you were going into the family business. If you had a large family farm that would be able to support you and all of that stuff, you didn't have a lot of options. I eventually ended up in Topeka, finishing a bachelor's degree at Washburn University. I began working for the state of Kansas. I worked—at that time it was called SRS, Social Rehabilitation Services, which is now the Department of Children and Families. I worked for them for a number of years and then for the Department of Corrections.

I ended up having a degree in psychology with a minor in sociology. I took a number of classes in criminal justice as well. So, that's kind of what got me to Topeka to go to school at Washburn University and continue with my employment with the state of Kansas.

MT: That background very much sort of focused on social services, human needs, that kind of thing.

FH: Absolutely.

MT: But not directly I guess we'd say on education. Again, we're going to talk about your work and involvement with various school boards at different levels. What was it that got you interested in that type of service and education in particular?

FH: The key word called “parenthood.” Everything changes when you have children. You begin to realize that “I want the best education possible for my children.” I ended up moving to the Seamen School District, buying a home there. When my children, my daughters began school, I wanted to be the involved parent.

So, I'm right there. I remember going to my first PTO, Parent Teacher Organization, meeting. They're looking for somebody to be president. “Well, Frank, why don't you do it?” So, I got involved in PTO and became involved in education there, serving on the Site Council. Then when my kids actually moved on to the middle school, I continued on Site Council and continued my involvement in the community.

One of the partner organizations that we have at Seaman school district is the Sunrise Optimists Club. I was involved in that very heavily in terms of coaching and helping kids, and from there, someone suggested, "You should run for the Board of Education."

So, I ran. The first time, I did not get elected. It was a 49 to 51 percent vote, very short.

MT: Close but not close enough.

FH: Yes, very close. Then two years later, I ran again and was elected and ended up serving for sixteen-and-a-half years.

MT: That is quite an experience. That kind of reminds me. I had the opportunity to serve on the school board as well in the area. My wife always reminded people, "Nobody ran against him." My first route was a little bit easier to not face any opposition, but apparently you overcame what might have been at that first time.

I want to talk about really sort of your experience on local issues, then kind of move into your involvement at the state and ultimately national, but a lot of those overlap. I don't want to bind our conversation in any particular way about necessarily in one role. I think what we're really interested is looking at, "What were big issues or changes that you saw taking place over that period of time?" Then we can sort of talk about that, how it affected at different levels. Maybe I'll just go back by saying when you ran—I'll be interested because I think you're representative of many local board members, did you run because of any particular set of issues or was it more "I want to be—I care about my kids' education. I want to be involved," and then when you got into that position, you started discovering some of those issues?

FH: I didn't run for any particular issue, but just to kind of back up a little bit, when I started at North Fairview Parent Teacher Organization, I was concerned about my kids, and then my concern broadened to the entire school, working with Site Council, and then the same at the middle school. And then I began looking at the larger picture of the entire district and all of the kids in the district. How can we provide a better education for each child and be sure we meet those needs as things change and as things evolve in terms of being able to meet the needs of all kids?

MT: And kind of looking back, you kind of came into that position at around 2007 or so.

FH: Correct.

MT: We're now going on twenty years kind of looking back. Do you have a sense of what were some of the issues or the changes that you were maybe initially facing at that time?

FH: Oh, yes, certainly. In our district, one of the things we began to look at is "How can we better serve the needs of all kids?" We've had a very good district for decades, but it's like, "Can we do things better?" So we did what I would call a major overhaul. We ended up closing three elementaries, going from two junior highs to one middle school, moving the ninth graders to the high school and the freshmen center to better acclimate them to the four years up there.

We expanded our Career Pathways from six to twenty-six with the idea of being able to broaden the opportunities for all students. We started an internship program. We started a program of college and career advocates with the focus on “How do we focus and prepare each student?” recognizing there are many needs, and every student is so different. They’re an individual. That was kind of the big push then. How can we become more efficient and better serve individual students?

MT: I think that is something as this series of education profiles we’ve been doing. A theme that often comes back is this idea of “How do we broaden opportunity to reach more students?” and, at the same time, recognizing those individual differences.

FH: Absolutely.

MT: Something that viewers of this who may not have had—in my background, we talk about pathways. It’s one of those things that I think people in education now are very familiar with. But I don’t know whether everyone really understands what we’re talking about in those ways are structured programs to really introduce kids to possible career paths. Rather than the old “Well, some kids are going to college and everyone else isn’t, so kind of give them the basics, and that’s all they get,” now it’s much more of a focus on having a curriculum that really lets you begin to pursue some of those interests at a younger age. I assume that’s the thing you were trying to focus on in that expansion of those options.

FH: Oh, absolutely. Definitely without a doubt.

MT: Very good. So, you then not long after joining the local board, got involved with the state-level organization, the Kansas Association of School Boards. What was your interest or motivation at that point? How did you kind of get involved at the state level?

FH: I first came on the board at KASB in the capacity of being a part of the legislative committee. That was again, of course, looking at “What are those key points that we need to address with our locally-elected officials to further public education?” And from there then, I took a seat as Region Two representative on that board, representing—there were thirty-three districts in that region, again broadening the scope of the number of students that I’m focusing on caring about.

Of course, in education in Kansas, there’s always been for decades now the discussion about properly funding education. So, that became a large focus of the work we were doing. Of course, from being on the board, then I moved into the officer rank and became president of KASB. One of my primary goals then was to ensure that KASB became that true, trusted, primary voice of public education. So, when legislators, parents, the general public had questions, they could come to KASB and get the true answers.

There was a lot of dialogue happening in Kansas regarding public education during that time, and some of the narratives were not true, and people were easily jumping on various bandwagons. And then at the same time, it seemed like there was what I might call an attack

upon public education, an attack upon our educators, and I felt it was very critical for us to be the strong voice and be able to support our educators and support our students by being able to speak what the truth was and what the needs are and how actually dollars don't solve everything, but dollars play an important role in school districts being able to provide the resources that all students need.

MT: Your involvement with KASB then really occurred at a time when the state had—I'm going to give a little historical context. I often have thought of our education system, the K-12 level, somewhat marked by school finance litigation, the legislators' response to that and other things that followed from that. You'd have gotten involved just as the legislature sort of finished implementing the [Montoy](#) result, which really did place a focus on "How do we address those achievement gap issues?"

The *Montoy* decision<sup>1</sup>, although there were issues around equity and funding and taxes also were really driven by the idea of "How do we help all kids achieve? What resources do they need?" That funding reached its peak in about 2009, but following the Great Recession, funding was pulled back considerably. Our tax-cut policy added to that dimension. So, the legislature then spent a decade really trying to kind of come back from that. You'd have been there for all of that. Are there some things I guess maybe that struck you about those debates over "How do we properly fund that rising opportunity?"

FH: It was a challenge, and again I think there was a lot of misinformation that was being placed out there in terms of how schools actually used the dollars and whether there were dollars that were being wasted and dollars being spent in areas that didn't particularly affect student performance. There were discussions, of course, "Let's put the dollars in the classrooms," yet a lot of the folks that were saying that did not understand that many positions that may be considered support positions actually do play a major role in students' success within the classroom. So, many of that came into play.

So, a lot of that was just truly educating and being able to be that strong advocate. We encouraged local board members to speak to your legislators, get in the statehouse, go to committee meetings, learn what's going on, be involved, and, of course, you yourself, Mark, was extremely involved during the legislative sessions, like you were living at the statehouse, trying to ensure that was happening.

MT: Thank you for bringing all that back.

FH: And you were at that time in that very critical moment a very trusted voice.

MT: Thank you. I hope so. In being that voice, my job was to try to represent local school boards, and I guess one thing I might ask you to reflect a little bit on as both maybe your own board and as working from a state perspective—we'll ultimately move on to the national, but talk a little bit about your reflections as that institution of the local School Board, which is, it's kind of uniquely American. Whereas in many countries, it is more you have a Ministry of Education or something like that. Our country has long had a very local focus and the idea that our schools should be managed not by "professional educators" or "education experts," although they play a

role, but a big role of letting people in local communities kind of be decision-makers to an extent.

So, talk a little bit about maybe your observations or reflections over your experience of “What do local school boards do?” And has that changed much over the time that you’ve been involved?

FH: I think local school boards are absolutely critical. #1, the fact that they are elected officials by that community, then they have the responsibility to represent that community. And most communities will tell you, “We have a good school system. We want high expectations for our students,” and so as a local school board member, you get to hire a superintendent. You get to approve a budget that is indicative of what the community wants.

So, that local school board role, it’s so critical. And every school district is different. What may be a specific top priority in one district may not be a top priority in another. And, of course, depending on where districts are located in the state, you have different opportunities for different students. But I can tell you every local school board member in every community wants their students to be able to achieve the best they can, to meet what I call their God-given potential. And school board members need to be able to be mindful of “Okay, my responsibility is to ensure that every student is able to meet that potential.”

MT: It’s an interesting tension, and some of these interviews we’ve done kind of hint of that, that on one hand, our state constitution talks about essentially a state function, a right, if you will, of individual students, and yet we also leave a lot of those decisions local. So, that blending of “How do we make sure that all kids in the state are getting what they’re entitled to do?” and at the same time, allow that variation. Sometimes, that can be a real challenge, and I think that’s something that you probably saw.

Now, let’s move a little to the step of somewhere along this, you decided I guess Kansas wasn’t big enough for your ambitions, right? I imagine that most of our viewers have some idea what associations like KASB would do. But you got involved at the national level. Can you talk a little bit about what led to your interest and maybe what did you learn when you got involved at that level?

FH: While I was still on the board at KASB, we would participate in what we call our Advocacy Conference at the National School Board Association. The [National School Board Association](#) provides support, resources, lobbying efforts, you name it, to help empower local school board members as well as School Board State Associations, such as KASB.

So, getting involved with that and going to that function, I was able to see the value of that involvement at the national level and being able to be that voice for all students. As I became involved on that board, I became aware that not every state functioned at the level of Kansas, and I listen and I watch, and I learned that there were a lot of students across the country that were not getting the resources they needed.

One of the big efforts that we made at the national level, of course, was to advocate for full funding. Many of those efforts focused on Title One funds as well as IDEA, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The agreement with the federal government was that they would provide 40 percent of the excess cost to educate a student with disabilities, knowing that it did cost more, but, however, they had only been fulfilling that to the tune of about 13, 14, 15 percent. So, that was one of the things that we would advocate for at the national level. And again there were just so many areas that were so critical to all students, even depending on the part of the country, there were more students being neglected that weren't getting the resources they needed.

MT: So, that certainly is something that has long been an issue with people who look at education, for want of a better word, sometimes called "the achievement gap." Whatever you think about overall educational accomplishment, we tend to have some students because of conditions like poverty or disability who just by many measures aren't as likely to succeed. So, the question becomes, "How do we deal with that?"

And the federal role, I think as I understand it, you may want to share a little more about this, has typically been kind of that supplemental role. So, you mentioned, I think like the Title One program--some so much people hear about--are dollars that really help disadvantaged students, mainly economically. Or individuals with disabilities, special education, is really a major federal mandate for a long time. Even things like school lunch nutrition programs are basically designed to say, "Okay, this is not that core education function, but if students have some of those needs not being met, they probably aren't going to do as well."

So, that has been a real struggle, and your work at the level of the federal government has been to try and say, "What should the federal government do?" Probably again we have these same issues—people tend to appreciate federal help, but not necessarily federal directives or mandates or some of those things. I imagine that's been a case that you had a chance to watch there and may play out somewhat differently in different states.

FH: Sure. You mentioned the achievement gap, Mark, and one of the things that I've discovered is that the achievement gap is more times than not caused by an opportunity gap. So, you mentioned the federal funding. The federal funding is focused on being able to provide opportunities for those students to succeed because it isn't as simple as "These children born in this part of the country or whatever just are intellectually gifted, and these are not." When there is that opportunity gap—and poverty, of course, has always been shown to be a large factor affecting a student's performance and just so many other things. So, a big focus is on being able to increase the number of students that are able to succeed by addressing that opportunity gap. That is a big focus of being able to help all students.

MT: One of the things again in research I've looked at and others have done, while those gaps certainly remain, there has been at least broadly speaking over the past several decades some progress in closing some of those gaps by graduation rate, by college attendance, and some of those things, perhaps a long way to go. And certainly, at this point, we're recording this in 2025, we're really back having some of those issues, "What is the federal role?" is very much up for debate right now. So, I suspect that's going to go on.

You ultimately served as President of NSBA. What was your motivation to seek that level? What were some of the issues and challenges you faced in that office?

FH: Well, I would say my motivation is still kind of the same, being able to broaden the scope of my influence and being able to have an impact upon all students. As President of NSBA, of course, I had a platform to be able to have a voice and impact school board members from all across the country. I'm going to read to you just a little statement that was kind of my foundational platform as President of NSBA. It states, "It's our responsibility in partnership with families to ensure that each child is given the individualized, specialized, and tailored opportunity to succeed and reach their God-given potential, regardless of conditions, needs, experiences, characteristics, and gifting. We take that combination unique to each child and work to bring out the best outcome for each and every student." So, that's kind of the bottom line of that.

When I came in as President of NSBA, this was, of course, following COVID. COVID impacted the education system all across America from local districts struggling and basically trying to find a way to educate kids when they couldn't be face to face. Some districts already had one-to-one technology devices in place, and it made it much easier. Others did not. In the Seaman District, we had one-to-one. We were able to also partner with the Boys and Girls Club and our Sunrise Optimists Club for space for kids. It worked out probably as well as it could, but we all know the value of face-to-face education with a teacher. You can't replace that, but we all tried to do the best we could.

After all of that was said and done, of course, there was an impact of students that were not able to achieve at the same level they were prior to COVID because of just a host of other reasons. I mean, so many reasons from poverty, from students being home alone, parents having to work, some working two jobs, this and that and another. There's just a whole host of reasons. Some caring for their younger sibling. So, that impacted education across America in terms of looking at scores and how students did.

But also another factor, and again this plays into my part as President of NSBA, during that same time, there was a group that said, "We don't want our kids to be masked." And also at that same time, that same group and other groups along that line came up with the ideas of "We don't want equity. We're concerned about diversity initiatives. We want to ban books," etc., etc.

So, all these things kind of came into play at the same time. Local school boards struggled with how to deal with all of this. Some of the groups were extremely vocal in some places across the country, not here in Kansas, but some became actually kind of physical with altercations.

During that same period of time then, there was an employee at NSBA that had written a letter to the White House administration requesting assistance for local school boards. That letter ended up being misconstrued to imply that local school boards, NSBA, school board members, whoever they wanted to put in that category, considered parents to be domestic terrorists and did not want parents to be involved in their students' education.

But nothing could be further from the truth because most school board members are indeed parents. At the state level, in terms of board members and at the NSBA level, it's the same group of parents that are wanting to provide the best for their students. So, there were those that wanted to use that for political gain and began to basically make a national campaign out of that.

So, when I came in as President, it was right at the end of all of that. So, NSBA was a "four-letter word" that wasn't considered to be good in people's perspective. So, one of the biggest challenges I had then, "Okay, let's take this and be able to get our true purpose out again, be able to renew the confidence in who we are, what we do, who we stand for, why we exist."

So, I joined with what's called The Learning First Alliance. It's a group of all of the professional associations connected with education—social workers, teachers, school superintendents, all of that. And we launched a campaign titled "Here for the Kids." We wanted to make it clear that we exist for the kids. That's why we are here. We are nonpartisan. People wanted to be able to put a partisan jacket upon us like, "No, we're nonpartisan."

So, I literally traveled all across the country, met with school board members, met with state education officials. They were called commissioners in some states. Other states, they were called like secretaries or whatever, but met with them with that message. I had a large campaign going with the PTA, Parent Teacher Association, to be able to get that message out and really renew that confidence and bring everybody together and say, "This is what we are trying to do" and again unite for that work up on Capitol Hill because that was so critical.

We continued to meet with our elected officials in Washington. I met with Senator [Pat] Roberts so many times; he probably got tired of seeing me coming. Senator Roberts was someone that supported full funding for education, supported full funding for IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Prior to him leaving office, I remember meeting with him, and I said, "Senator, you're going to be leaving us. What about IDEA?" And he said, "Frank, I'll get it done before I leave."

He didn't actually get it pulled off, but he did introduce legislation that would provide an incremental increase in the percentage of funds going to IDEA to get to that 40 percent. The bill hasn't moved through, but at least there are still some that are supporting that and want to be able to make that difference. They realize the importance of that.

MT: Again, at the time we're recording this, one of the issues, we're in the first year of the second Trump administration, and a big push we know is coming is to eliminate the US Department of Education. Without taking a position on that, I would just note that one of the things I learned is that the National School Board Association, a large part of the creation of that and similar national efforts was as more policies were happening—the federal government was getting more involved, and states like Kansas and others wanted to have a bigger voice and felt they needed to come together to do that.

A good example is, I believe, correct me if I'm wrong, the only other Kansan to serve as President of that organization was a gentleman named Dr. Robert Haderlein from Girard, southeast Kansas, who actually ended up serving on the Nation at Risk report. I know, showing

my age, but this was about history. I believe that was 1983 and was considered a major educational effort because it was basically one of periodic reports worried about the future of American education, calling for rising standards and reforms. We've been kind of talking about that and whose role it is for many, many decades. That's probably going to continue.

I forced you now to relive. I'm sure you ran for NSBA President and thought, "Wow, this is fun. I can defend us" and spend most of the time doing that, having to get a hold of that. I want to talk to you about another local issue that I know was also a challenge for you, but I think it goes back to part of what my understanding was always your need to find a way through controversial issues, and that is some of the challenges that came around of the name of your district that you were a part of. Again, you talk about the issues around widening opportunity. You, of course, were the first African American board member in this district, I believe, the first for KASB's presidency. You certainly played a role in those kinds of issues for a long time. But near the end of your term, you had to deal with a new controversy that I'm sure you didn't see coming. Do you want to talk a little bit about that and what that meant, and how you played a role in the district ultimately resolving that controversy?

FH: Yes. That was a trying time for this district. This district is relatively small. One of the unique things about our district, we're not really connected to a town.

MT: And just so viewers who may not—the Seaman School District is essentially north of the main Topeka School District, which is USD 501. So, most of at least historically, the city of Topeka, at least many years ago, was part of that school district. You guys are kind of north of the river, not entirely right, but in general, you're the part of the county that is not ultimately part of Topeka proper. So, just so people know where you are and what you're talking about.

FH: That's correct. We're in northern Shawnee County. The majority of our district is not in the Topeka city limits. So, in the county, people don't identify as living in Topeka, and our district is called Seaman School District, and people will say, "I live in Seaman," but there is no town.

So, the school becomes the community. Just as a small town, people would gather around school activities, etc., etc.,. football games and band concerts, the plays. They do that in our district because they identify with the school community as the community.

So, as you mentioned, I was the first African American to be elected to the school board. And because the district is very, very predominantly White, 90-plus percent, and also people had considered—it was considered a "racist" district because we didn't have a large number of African Americans or Hispanic Americans living in the district.

I remember when I ran for the board, someone had made the comment, "Well, if any Black person could ever get elected to the school board, it would be Frank." I'm not sure if that was a compliment or what it was, but that's what was said. When I was elected, of course, I was very pleased to be elected. This school district has always been very fond of its school and very fond of who they are, very proud of Seaman School District.

I remember when my daughter was in high school, she came home one day and said Fred Seaman, the founder of Seaman School District—

MT: A superintendent. Was who Fred Seaman actually was.

FH: Correct, yes. He was a high school principal because we weren't actually a district initially, and said he was a Klansman. I didn't think any of it. I just kind of blew it off. "Yeah, right" because people always come up with something. But one of the things about our students, we've always encouraged our students to be involved in civic activity and be involved in ways that they can improve their community.

So, a number of our students actually embarked on a research of Fred Seaman, and not only did they discover he was a Klansman, but he was the Exalted Cyclops of the KKK. So, the students then came before the Board of Education and said, "We should change the name because it's not fair, it's not right for students of color to carry this man's name on their jerseys, on their uniforms, on their graduation diplomas."

We had a dilemma. I know that within our seven-member board, there would not have been unanimous support to change the name. The community went into an uproar. We actually then contracted with the Kansas Leadership Center out of Wichita to actually engage our community. They're good at engaging communities to address difficult issues.

So, we actually had a group of nine members that were all Seamen graduates to be a part of that. They did anything and everything to research. They had coffee chats; they had everything else. They came up with a document and researched all this material. There was a great deal, literally hundreds of pages of documents that confirmed that Mr. Seaman was indeed the Exalted Cyclops of the KKK.

So, it created a lot of controversy. I'm disappointed in the way some members of the community responded. Some went to name calling of the students. I'm very proud of the students. They remained professional throughout all of it.

In the end, we ended up drafting a resolution. It seemed like no one was really happy with it, but it was a compromise. This resolution essentially said, "We are going—from this point forward, we're going to align Seaman with the community and not with Fred Seaman." Basically, it said that we would support equity, diversity, inclusion for every student in our district. And we have a museum that contains a history and that basically all the information that was gathered to be a part of the museum--Fred Seaman's image, his pictures would be removed throughout the district, and anything would remain would be placed in the museum. So, people would be able to read and know what happened, but making a clear statement that we are supportive of all students.

MT: It seems to me that that challenge was on one hand brought by students who were finding a part of history that really, really concerned them and a community that felt like, "We are a community. We're aren't responsible for that," and that's exactly the kind of thing that often really digs in every side. Although your compromise didn't make everyone happy, it looks like

as something of an observer that you at least go through it without really tearing the community apart in a way that sometimes controversies like this can have.

FH: Yes.

MT: Is that kind of your—

FH: Well, it pretty much tore the community apart just with the discussion because people were able to draw sides. “I don’t like that person because they believe this, or that person believes that side.” I don’t think anyone was really happy with the resolution, to be honest with you. I know personally I caught flak from both sides. People were saying, “How could you have not changed”—and it’s a 7-0 vote to adopt this resolution. Then other people are saying, “You’re basically making Fred Seaman look bad by doing that,” but I felt it was the best resolution that we could come up with.

MT: And your board, the seven people representing this community did come together around that.

FH: The board did. It was a 7-0 vote to adopt that.

MT: So, we talk about how reflective a local school board—in my experience, there’s always this “What is a local school board?” “Well, it’s like a Board of Directors, and everyone gets together, but at the same time, it’s kind of like a mini legislature” or something, right?

FH: Yes.

MT: So, you do have different sides and different positions. So, working through that, and of course, for most of—certainly for most of my experience, there was a prohibition against school board members being paid. That has been changed. I don’t know if any boards have made that change. It’s rather recent. But it does mean that local school boards are pretty much volunteers. They may have an education background. Many do, but many do not and are ultimately very close to the people they’re elected to serve for good or bad.

So, the positive thing is the ability to be responsive. At the same time, you’re kind of only looking at what you know there, how do you connect to larger issues? That’s why I think your experience has been interesting because you’ve both seen that very local perspective, but then how both the state and the federal government—so, what is their appropriate role? How do we balance those, and how do we get at some of those—how do you deal with those differences in achievement if we want every child to succeed, and yet again right now, some of the controversy--diversity and equity and inclusion and all of those things are seen as very bad things by some people. Maybe that comes down to different interpretations of them, but again I think it’s interesting that you’ve had the opportunity to see that over a long period of time, really wrestling with “How do we implement those issues in a correct way?”

FH: Well, it’s absolutely critical for the federal government to provide some oversight. They enforce EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] laws when it comes to public

education. If we allowed every state, every district to do what it wanted without any regard, we'd be back to pre-Brown v. Board of Education days.

MT: So, that tension between "How do we ensure that everyone's common rights are protected, but at the same time, how do we let our public schools be responsive to differences in their local community and differences in student need? That's really something that you've been dealing with for a number of years, correct?"

FH: Right. Of course, the federal government never sets curriculum. The local school board determines the curriculum. Your State Department of Ed determines the standards. But the federal government I believe has such a vital role in 1) providing those funding opportunities that need to be there to help students that are not achieving, to help students fill those opportunity gaps. They're also being able to provide the civil rights oversight.

You'd mentioned earlier about the possible elimination of the US Department of Education. Of course, my concern is that what if the funding dries up with that, and we're not able to meet the needs of all students, or at least attempt to do that, or what if the oversight for all students leaves with that? I think those are the critical elements that need to continue to take place.

MT: I want to touch on a couple of other things before we finish up. You talked about your educational background, then going to work, I think with the attorney general for a while, having some exposure to issues in the criminal justice system. And then you spent a number of years working with the Topeka Rescue Mission. So, again, having exposure to some of the issues around poverty, homelessness. Anything that you maybe want to share or maybe you've learned or think is important to stress about kind of that connection between education and some of these other issues that we have to deal with as a society?

FH: Well, as President of NSBA, my short-line theme was "Every Student Matters." Throughout my work career, whether it was serving on the parole board, working in the AG's office, working with the homeless, you're working with individuals. I believe that God is the creator of all human beings, and everybody has value. People's lives are so different, but I believe that we as fellow humans have the responsibility to see the value in every person and do what we can to be able to help that person fulfill their potential.

MT: I suspect that you in those roles have kind of seen up close the impact of a successful education or if a child has for whatever reason not been able to be educated maybe to a certain level.

FH: Yes.

MT: Those are the individuals that tend to be over-represented in the criminal justice system or poverty statistics.

FH: Yes.

MT: Our students who we haven't been able to reach.

FH: Absolutely. I've often told folks too, I asked, "Do you remember when you were in elementary school a student that just didn't seem to thrive and just wasn't making it?" They're like, "Oh, yes, I remember that." I said, "Well, many of those end up in the correctional system because they didn't have that support." There are many in the correctional system that never learned to read until they were incarcerated.

So, all of those factors are so important in terms of people being able to succeed in life. There's been some tremendous success stories of kids that grew up in poverty and didn't have a lot, but they had a good family or had a good teaching, a good teacher, a good educational system, and was able to thrive.

Back to my little community of Sharon Springs, there were very few Black individuals there by the time I grew up. When my father was a child, there were many more, but very few when we grew up, and just a handful of us, just a couple of families, but pretty much all of us, the African Americans kids who grew up ended up with graduate degrees, two attorneys, and some got into the educational system, and achieved very mightily.

MT: We often hear that, of people who look back on a small community, a small school which some people worry maybe doesn't provide enough opportunities, but we also hear a lot of stories of people who say a high percentage of those kids are able to go on and succeed. Maybe that means having to move away for other opportunities. Maybe it means they stay with the local business or family farm or something like that, but certainly there's less and less of that. Kansas like almost every other state, we've seen movement away from our small towns and rural communities. So, the state and its education system has to respond to that.

Before we wrap up, you are still involved in education to a degree. You're not with NSBA anymore, but what are you doing?

FH: Well, I still have my hand in education. I believe in that. It's a passion for me. I'm actually conducting superintendent searches, and that is helping school districts to find that superintendent that matches their community needs. And going back to the fact that school board members represent the community and that whole process involves spending a great deal of time not only with administrators in the district, students in the district, teachers in the district, but also in the communities, business leaders in the communities, parents, and being able to hear what's important for them in a school superintendent and then creating what we call that leadership profile report and then finding individuals that meet that report.

MT: That's another aspect of board service as we've talked about. These are laypeople. These are not education experts. Many have other jobs or are very involved in families. So, a key part of their role is to hire that chief executive officer, the superintendent who should have all of those responsibilities and who then is the one who actually directs the staff, that kind of school district staff, kind of rising up ultimately to superintendent, and then that person connecting to the board, and the board, of course, a representative of the community is how that system is supposed to work.

FH: Absolutely.

MT: And again, that's common. If I remember correctly, all states except Hawaii have local school boards.

FH: Correct.

MT: One of our states does not. So, every state—but there are differences in how much power boards have, how large a role they have. Kansas I think somewhat unique is even constitutionally we have a role of local school boards, what they're supposed to do. So, it's in some ways a stronger both legal and traditional position of local control than some states have.

FH: Absolutely.

MT: You probably had a chance to see that somewhat as you talked to colleagues from around the country.

FH: And some School Board members are actually appointed, too, rather than elected.

MT: Right. Different roles for that. Before we wrap up, I want to give you the opportunity. Is there anything that we've missed in this conversation, important stories or important themes or issues or just either accomplishments or regrets that you may want to share before we wrap up?

FH: I feel like we've covered a great deal. One of the highlights, just kind of a fun highlight that I had an opportunity as President of NSBA was to sit down at our national conference and interview Jenna Bush Hager. She was able to speak to the importance of education with her family and the importance of reading and all of that. Of course, she is a co-host of "The Today Show" and always has a Book of the Month Club and emphasizes the importance of reading. So, that was kind of a fun highlight. One of the things that she said which was cute, she's like, "Contrary to what a lot of people believe, my dad does know how to read and reads a lot."

MT: Well, Frank, you've had quite a life from little Sharon Springs, Kansas to the halls of national power and rubbing shoulders with I guess political celebrities at least in some ways. You've led a very interesting story and certainly have been a leader for a long time in education and other parts of state government. Thank you for your time. And I certainly want to thank our viewers who obviously make this possible. Thank you for viewing. Frank, thanks again.

FH: Thank you, Mark. My pleasure.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kcur.org/education/2017-07-10/5-themes-at-the-heart-of-kansas-school-finance-lawsuit>