

Mark Tallman: My name is Mark Tallman, and I've worked with the Kansas Association of School Boards on education issues since 1990. I'm conducting an interview today with Jack Wempe on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project. That project is 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 at ksoralhistory.org and also the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library. Transcriptions are made possible by generous donors, and Dave Heinemann is our videographer today.

So, today, as I said, we're talking to Jack Wempe because of his, as we've said before, long and distinguished career as an educator, and I should note that Jack has already done one of these. He's a real veteran, talking about his time in the legislature. Today, we're wanting to focus more on his experiences first as an educator, starting as a teacher, his focus on education and related issues when he was a legislator in the nineties, and then he moved on to serve on the Kansas Board of Regents and other issues and other activities related to higher education. So we have someone who's really seen the scope of education in Kansas over several decades of really critical change. So, welcome. I think I'm going to learn a lot talking to you. We always maybe want to begin by just saying a little bit about yourself. Where were you born and grew up? Are you from Kansas? Just what you can kind of remember from your early age and if anything interesting kind of set you on this path in public service?

Jack Wempe: Okay, I was born in Marshall County, but we moved when I was very young to Reno County near Hutchinson on a farm. My father was a farmer. Those were Depression years and pretty difficult. We moved on to an eighty-acre farm owned by my grandfather. My dad constructed a little house. That's the place I grew up on Cow Creek, northwest of Hutchinson.

I went eight years to a one-room school, which was three-quarters of a mile north of where we lived. I guess from then on, I went to high school at a parochial school in Hutchinson, a year at Hutchinson Community College, and I finished my college work, a BS at Rockhurst College in Kansas City. Later, I went ahead—in order to be an administrator, I had to get a master's degree, and I did that at KU.

MT: So you've been around different places in Kansas, have had that experience. I guess I'm interested in why did you pick education as your career?

JW: Well, it's interesting. In later years, I talked a lot about a credential, and in looking back, that was important to me. It dawned on me in about the middle of my junior year that I was going to have to make a living in a year and a half or so. I needed some type of credential. So, I switched at that point from journalism to education and sort of crammed the courses I needed in the three semesters and was able to teach.

MT: I did not know that. I long, long ago studied journalism as well at Florida State University. I didn't go that route either, obviously, which I guess is why we're here today.

JW: That's why we're here.

MT: Was there a particular reason—you could have went ahead and been a journalist. That would have been a degree, too. Was there something about teaching and maybe also what did you end up teaching when you started your career?

JW: I taught basically English. English and government were the two main subjects. Of course, I taught it in a very small high school. I think I even taught Spanish a couple of years, knowing very little Spanish. I had enough credit hours to do that. I taught biology one year, and I'm certainly not qualified in that either.

MT:&You were at the high school level.

JW: I was at the high school level, and we had a high school with thirty students where I started.

MT: And that was **where?** (We were talking before a little bit **before we began this interview.**)

JW: That was a little community called Wea, which is south of the Johnson County line in Miami County. Wea is an Indian name. It was an Indian tribe in that area. So there's a Wea Street in Paola and a Wea Creek, and this Wea community, which is a little Catholic Church community. Interestingly, that first five years was in an interesting district. There were a few of those in Kansas. At that time, the facility was owned by the church, and nuns were the teachers. The faculty consisted of two nuns and me. It was a rural high school, received state aid for the student enrollment, and they were able to operate without a property tax. They could operate on the state money because the nuns made so little money that they had a reasonably small budget. There were several of those kinds of districts in Kansas where they had a relationship somehow—and I don't know the history of it—but it had been there way for a good many years in that community.

At that time , there were thirty in the high school. Of course, I coached, Class BB, the largest class in Kansas sports, and they were all under sixty enrollment. So, there were a lot of schools of that size at that time.

MT: So that I assume would have been before the unification process in the sixties. Do you remember that either as a teacher—were you an administrator, principal by then?

JW: By that time, I was teaching in Louisburg. When unification occurred, which I think was in '65—¹

MT: That's my recollection.

JW: When that occurred, my principal came to me and told me that he was going to be named superintendent of the new unified district and suggested or said that the board wanted him to ask me if I would go into administration and become a principal in the high school. So, that's when I

¹ The School Unification Act of Kansas passed in 1963 and caused the further consolidation of smaller school districts.

moved into administration. I didn't have the credits to do that yet. So, I did a rush education stint at KU, driving back and forth evenings and summer and so forth to get a master's degree.

MT: You weren't able to take it online in those years.

JW: No, there was no online. So, I was two years then as a high school principal at Louisburg. From there, I went back towards where I'd grown up in central Kansas, and I took a position there.

MT: I'm just curious as to whether you remember some of the—you know, as long as I've been doing this, consolidation has been a term of fear in most places, and yet the legislature was able to pass this controversial law, and working for the school board, I often heard that a lot of places around the state agreed to consolidate as long as they would never have to talk to each other again.

JW: Well—

MT: But it happened. I guess I'm sort of wondering whether you remember why or some of the battles over it and how people got through it.

JW: Well, I do. There has been a round of unification earlier than that or consolidation in the late forties. Those schools didn't last very many years in a way. Then the unification law was passed. There were I think three major requirements as I remember. I think it had to be 400 square miles. I think it had to have 400 students. There was another requirement I don't—

MT: You had to have a certain amount of valuation. The number would be meaningless now. I think you had to meet two of the three to do that.

JW: It was interesting because in some areas, the smaller schools were adjacent to a larger school, and it unified with a larger school. They didn't last very long. In many areas, and later I was superintendent and in this kind of district, small communities, small schools tended to join with one another because they kind of had equal power.

So you had that, and I did that in the unified district. I later was superintendent for seven years, and we had three communities of relatively equal size. One had had the high school closed at the time of unification, and the other did not, but it was a very small school. So, there was always that, I guess, competitive feeling between those communities, and they had unified with one another in order to protect one another and protect themselves. So that was interesting. And some of those feelings are still out there.

MT: I was told that when I went to work for KASB in 1990, and I'm still told that today. Apparently, there are still some people who remember.

JW: There are. And some of those feelings have melted away, and it's gotten better. There's still some rivalry out there, some bitterness actually, over unification, and that's a long time ago.

MT: Another thing, I don't know whether you were maybe in enough places to know this, but as I recall at the time, now we often talk about—people watching this historically in 2025, we often think of unification or consolidation as ways to maybe save money, be more efficient, but at the time, as I've looked back on it, it was really to do more. It was an idea where you could offer a bigger curriculum. Maybe you could pay your teachers better. So, the idea wasn't to save money. It was really to improve the products. Even though it was controversial, I think that's why the legislature did it and kind of got away with it. Do you have any kind of sense of change before or after?

JW: I think there was some thought money could be saved. That didn't happen of course. Inflation, a lot of reasons it didn't happen. I'm not sure. I suppose it was an effort by the legislature to develop more quality in the school system, thinking that there would be more quality. The academic offerings were limited in the very small schools obviously. They didn't offer as much. So there's some benefit in a certain size. It could be too large, too, I think.

MT: And that's been another issue that people looked at, and the legislature has studied that. We may be able to talk about that a little bit, too. We want to kind of get, I think, to your—when you ran for the legislature and the seat you had there and some of the changes. Before we do that, I guess I just—kind of looking back in your career as an educator at that point, anything in particular that strikes that you were particularly proud of or concerned about? One of the things I think people were interested in historically is how our school system has changed and how the expectations perhaps have changed, maybe better or worse, but it's certainly different. So you've been in that role through the 1980s, correct? You ran for the legislature in 1990?

JW: No, it was before that. I was a unified school superintendent beginning in 1969. I was in that seven years, and after that, I left education. So my exposure to education after that was for quite a while as a parent I guess, and then of course, later I got in the legislative committees and this other stuff. But those were the years that I was superintendent, and those were the years when we developed the rights thing and the due process and the student rights and teacher rights. At the end of the sixties, that was coming off of a pretty difficult period in our history.

MT: Yes.

JW: A lot of those things were developed at that time. Negotiations came during that time. There was no negotiations before. We had a continuing contract law, and every year as a teacher prior to that, there was a little apprehension in March because if they didn't fire you by March 15, you were automatically rehired at the same salary and the same condition as your previous contract was. Your hope was that there would be a note in your mailbox offering you a raise on March 15th. Of course, then you had until April 15th to accept it, but negotiations ended that. There was no more—and the idea you could have due process and not tenure but related to tenure. So you had a little bit of job security you didn't before.

In those years, I remember when I took the job as superintendent, one of the things the board told me that the courts had just passed down a ruling concerning student dress codes and that we had to revamp our dress code to meet the requirement of the court. So, that was one of the first things I did was to revamp the dress code in our district.

I was superintendent then until 1976. I was through some of those change years. We began to negotiate—for two or three years, we called it “meet and confer.” You’ve heard that term probably.

MT: I have heard it, yes.

JW: And later, of course, it became a more formal association.

MT: Thank you for bringing me back to that. That is one of the things in this series we’re kind of exploring is how different things were sort of happening each decade and certainly the seventies in education—teacher rights, you talked about student rights, special education.

JW: Special ed came in, yes.

MT: Passed in federal and state. That made significant changes. Yes, there was a lot happening at that particular time. We might just take a minute then. I had forgotten that kind of gap you had. Then you had some work in the private sector, right? More of a business role. And that kind of also got your business going in economic development, I believe.

JW: Well, I was interested in economic development, of course. In our part of the world, it’s important. In ’76, I went into business, and I had a little building materials lumber yard and put a construction business with it. I did that for about fourteen years. During that time, our children were going through high school and college and we had sports. I was looking at education more through the guise of a parent during that time.

At the end of that period, I took a job then, five years I was an economic development director in Rice County, which was an interesting time. During that time, I ran for the legislature and was elected and came up here for eight years and was a representative.

MT: What motivated you to be interested in serving in the legislature? What was your secret in getting elected?

JW: I think I taught government and just was interested in that. I always had an interest in it. I couldn’t afford to do it, of course, in early years. I finally got to the point where I thought I could manage it financially to do it. So, I decided to try.

And getting elected, I couldn’t be elected today, of course, out there. I was a Democrat in a very Republican area. I’d be the last Democrat to serve in that area. There probably never will be another Democrat out there. I don’t know how I got elected. I just did a lot of walking, I guess.

MT: Do you think your having been superintendent—there comes some visibility, but that’s good and bad. I mean, I remember again, lobbying—a lot of superintendents ran for the legislature didn’t always win. I think sometimes the superintendent has to be a little bit of the bad guy, too, but you are well known. So, do you think that was an element?

JW: &I've been in business in the area. Of course, I've been in economic development. So, in Rice County, I was pretty well known. I had quite a bit of Barton County, where I was not well known. I had a little slice of McPherson County. But about probably 60 percent of the district I was pretty well known. So that was a factor. I'm sure it was.

MT: People today may find this a little hard to believe, but you were elected as a Democrat and entered as a majority member in the House in 1990 with a Democratic governor.

JW: That's right.

MT: That has not happened in a while. It happened at the time, and if I recall because that's about the time I was moving in to work for the School Board Association, a driving factor at the time was concern over property taxes.

JW: That's right.

MT: Governor Finney got elected. It was in many ways a time of change. What do you kind of remember coming in to that role about the issues surrounding school finance? Probably obviously property taxes go to more than schools, but they're a big consumer. What were the issues at that time at least on that front?

JW: Well, property tax was the big one. Of course, Governor Hayden bore the brunt of that. We had the classification and all those issues. Representative Heinemann was there at that time. So, he remembers those years well.

So, property tax was a huge issue, and education, of course, was an issue because of the courts. The courts were driving change in that. It had to be done differently. In the '91 session, we made a little effort and did a little patchwork. It was vetoed, and we tried to override the veto and couldn't.

So, in the '92 session, it was pretty obvious that we had to deal with the issue. I can remember Speaker [Marvin] Barkis calling me in and asking me, telling me, outlining the proposal and asking for support. At that time, I think what he had suggested was \$3,800 a pupil. I thought that maybe that was a little rich. I remember telling him that.

But, anyway, we wound up—it was quite a year. Rick Bowden was chairman of the committee at that time. Of course, Barkis was a heavy factor in driving that. So, it was passed.

It was interesting. In '73, the Power Equalization Program was passed. Governor Bennett, I think he was president of the Senate at that time maybe. Anyway, it was passed that year, and that was—they introduced this concept of ability to pay for a district, an area, which—so, essentially, I thought that—I had done budgets prior to that, which was basically just sending out so much per kid.

But this was a huge improvement in '73, and I thought it was a good system. Basically, it said that the districts will make this effort. Everyone will make an equal effort, and the State will kind

of make up the difference. So, it worked pretty well, but there was a factor in that. If you remember the '73 legislation, 10 percent of the local income tax stayed in the school district. And originally that's the way it was, 10 percent.

By 1992, when we did the new system, that had been moved up to 24 percent. Over the years, I don't know the politics of that, but the legislature had chosen to do that. Well, high-income districts didn't have much interest in this formula because they lived on the income tax.

MT: Right.

JW: And it occurred, it happened, of course, Johnson County being the best example. They were growing and high income and they were able to provide a really excellent school system without worrying too much about state distribution money. That was creating a lot of inequities in the state, and the court recognized that.

Of course, we had to deal with that in the new '92 legislation. That legislation basically introduced a new element where we considered what type of student was involved, whether it was a student that was disadvantaged in some way or lived in a small district where they couldn't raise as much money. So, it recognized the difference in the—

MT: Pupil weighting.

JW: Pupil weighting was introduced. Then when the basic system was put together, they had to find a way to let—we didn't want to reduce budgets in Johnson County. So, we developed something called local option budgeting. It permitted districts to exceed that amount by 25 percent, if they chose to, which Johnson County immediately did, of course. They could maintain their budgets that way.

That, a few years later, caused trouble, too. I was on the Education Committee by then. We had to deal with a change in the local option to make it continue to be a viable system, and we did. But, anyway, that's kind of the history of that stuff.

MT: My memory was that although the state, as you said, had the Equalization Act for some years before that, what the courts were looking at, you had—one thing I just always remembered, you can even if you step away from the extremes, Johnson County, there was a district with a 33 mill levy, a 66 mill levy, and a 90-some mill levy all next to each other. That was the difference in tax rate just in one county.

JW: Oh, yes.

MT: On the other hand, when another factor related to the base budget came in, some districts would have gotten such an increase that it had to be capped at 10 percent, and as you say, other districts would have lost 25 percent.

JW: That's right.

MT: And I think that illustrates how much the range was both in what people had to pay across districts and how much could be raised across districts. So, that was why the court kind of told the legislature, “This isn’t going to work.”

Now, here’s what’s interesting to me. I’ve been through a number of other lawsuits all the way to the Supreme Court, and the legislature has essentially had to...it hasn’t been an easy effort to get a response. In ’92, one district court judge basically said before trial, Judge Bullock basically said, “I don’t think you’re going to be constitutional and here’s why.” And a divided legislature and a governor who was sort of...and the legislature was still smarting over her veto, but as you said, they managed in one year to come up with this significant difference.

I wonder if you have any thoughts on why the legislature at that time was able to pass this massive change without really fighting the courts and now, consistently, legislators tend to say, “We don’t want to be told what to do.” I’m just saying that’s a different climate. I wonder why.

JW: It is a different climate. We had a lot of people on both sides of the aisle who were pretty supportive of education at that time I think. Maybe we do now, too. I don’t know. I think we certainly did at that time. I don’t know why. I suppose the driving force came maybe from leadership I suppose, but they had to be followed. I don’t know why at that particular time we were able to do that because that was a massive change in the system.

MT: And the key was you had to raise a significant amount of state taxes to bring down the property [tax]—and I guess it seemed to me that one of the advantages at the time was the ability to say, “If we make this change, we can lower property tax.” But you had to raise money to do that.

JW: The property tax issue helped us, certainly because it was a way to reduce property tax. It did significantly reduce property tax. It equalized it. Some districts, of course, resented that. If you remember, there were some places that didn’t appreciate what we did in this.

MT: They did not.

JW: But I think on the whole it’s worked pretty well, and it’s interesting. Even after the days when they tried to get rid of it, during the Brownback period and essentially came back to it, it has survived pretty well. I guess fundamentally it’s still pretty much in effect.

MT: The framework is still very much [in place]—now, for viewers, who want to look ahead, I believe it’s in 2027, the system will sunset. So, the legislature will have—

JW: Is that right? I didn’t know that.

MT: Yes, the legislature will have to either renew it or change it. So you can look forward to maybe watching that. That was one of the compromises after the Brownback era.

JW: That sunset was put in place at that time.

MT: So, the whole system is to be looked at.

JW: Oh, that's interesting.

MT: The legislature may simply delay—you know as well as I do— “Well, we can delay the sunset. We can do different things,” but I think the idea was to force a re-examination, but, yes, the basic framework is still remarkably similar.

I do want to maybe see if you want to react to another thing. #1, that I found interesting as I look back, since you were a Democrat, maybe you—you had a one-vote majority.

JW: That's right.

MT: And I know you had at least one member that didn't always vote with the Democrats. But somehow you were able to build a bipartisan majority in the House pretty strong. The Senate was a little more skeptical, but ultimately the negotiations were to kind of take the House funding plan, but the Senate wanted to add—

JW: Some ways to address the quality of education.

MT: Some accreditation changes, testing, more school days, and so that, too, kind of took this— what was really more of a tax equity and funding piece and brought in again this focus on, for want of a better word, “What are we getting for the money?” Do you remember that?

JW: Oh, I certainly do. I remember that veto session. The key to it was the Kerr brothers in the end, Fred and Dave. They were—Dave particularly was really interested in the quality piece and extending the school year. I think we went to 184 days.

MT: 186, I think, about another week added, a little more really.

JW: And then when they decided to support it, that's when it passed in the veto session. Interestingly, I worked pretty closely with Dave [Kerr] in later years, post-legislative years. He's the head of our organization that operates an ethanol plant in our county. Then I served on the Regents with Fred [Kerr] So, I got to know both of them pretty well.

MT: They were certainly very much part of the leadership in the Senate while that was happening.

JW: Fred [Kerr] was Majority Leader, I think, wasn't he?

MT: Yes.

JW: And Dave [Kerr] might have been chairing Education.

MT: I'm trying to remember. He did. I think it was the next year.

JW: Well, it could have been.

MT: Joe Harder was, I think, Chair at that time.

JW: Joe Harder, yes.

MT: Dave, very active, wanted to see that change, and that led to some things, as you said, following that act. There were some tweaks. Again, I don't know if you want to remember much of this. There was lowering that statewide mill levy. There was a fight over that.

JW: Yes, there was.

MT: There was bringing in qualified admissions, which was not really related to the formula, but I think was part of the sense of that expectation around it, the changes in the LOB. So, even when that was done, there was still more work to be done.

JW: The qualified admissions was quite a battle. I co-sponsored that and was one of the few Democrats that supported it. We had our internal party battles over that issue. That and the hog issue were at the same time.

The change or the tweak I remember, I think it was in '98. Mike O'Neal was chairing the Education Committee in the House. I had not been on the Education Committees because the time conflicted with Economic Development, but that last term I served. I was on the Education Committee.

We had to deal with this LOB thing. Some districts absolutely would not support a LOB at the polls.

MT: Let's see if we both remember this right. The original law allowed boards to adopt an LOB, but I think it was for only a four-year period, similar to what happens with capital outlay, and then it was either subject to a vote or subject to—but the point is, it might have lost, and a district could potentially lose, well, as much as 25 percent of their budget, really, because that's what the maximum would be. That was the concern. How do you solve that problem?

JW: How do you solve it? We had quite a few districts without an LOB at that time.

MT: Yes.

JW: It just was not supported locally, and those districts were becoming—those kids in those districts were becoming more disadvantaged as a result. So we had to find a way to relieve that pressure, and we did, I think—found a way that the LOB could be accessed automatically under certain conditions and with certain limits and relieve some of that pressure, I think.

So that was a change. I know I was castigated pretty thoroughly by some newspapers for support that, but—

MT: Yes, and that has long been one of, I think, the battles in education that you can reflect is there's always this tension between what is the state's obligation? What does local control mean? What should the legislature control? What should local people control? What should school boards control? What should be subject to voting? It's always been a balance of those things. I'm sure you've seen that from the type of districts you represented and still live in.

JW: Well, that's very true.

MT: Another thing that I think was beginning to happen then and then what I know would come back to be a factor in another part of your career when you joined the State Board of Regents, and that was the oversight of higher education. I don't know how much you might have been involved in those early years. Looking back, do you remember some of that debate over how we would govern or supervise or oversee the higher education side?

JW: Yes. We were all involved in that to quite a degree because we all represented these various schools. We had the vocational technical schools, and we had the community colleges, and of course, we had the universities, and they were all funded differently and supervised or governed differently and were pretty competitive in the legislature. They had to compete for money and attention and all this.

And there was a feeling for a long time that there ought to be a better overall system. And the story was all the time there were twenty-some different efforts to work on higher education, all unsuccessful. I think it was in '97, we had an *ad hoc* committee that worked really hard that year. I was involved in that. You remember some of these names—Jo Ann Pottorff, Cindy Empson, Richard Reinhardt, Ed McKechnie. And we met, and I think that Carolyn Rampey staffed us. I don't know how we achieved that, but we had a staff person.

Anyway, we worked really hard on trying to devise something, and we came up with a plan, and Ed and I took it to the interim committee in the summer and presented it. I don't remember the details of it. I think we had some kind of financial incentive for schools to move away from the direction of the Board of Education, that everything but the universities was under the Board of Education.

MT: Right.

JW: Well, the following year, in the '98 session then, [Speaker Tim] Shallenberger created a committee to work on this, and the co-chairs were [Representative] Ed McKechnie and [Senator] David Adkins. You may remember they came up with a plan to eliminate the Board of Regents and to replace it with an umbrella-type organization, which would handle all of higher ed.

I'm not sure if it passed the House. It may have passed the House. I don't remember, but I know it was never taken up in the Senate. The Governor at that time said that he would appoint a blue-ribbon committee, he called it, and would study it during the interim.

I served on that committee. People on the committee were not all legislators. They had business people. They had a number of people on that committee. And we came up with a plan to form—

an organization with three elements, one representing the two-year institutions, one representing the universities, and sort of a coordinating committee in the middle.

But we knew there was a constitutional issue. [Senators] Christine Downey and Tim Emert were both on this committee. [

MT: Two senators.

JW: Two senators. So, the following year, in the '99 session, they in their Senate Education Committee came up with a plan to take this idea and put it within the existing Board of Regents, and that's what they did. So, we had three members that supposedly represented the two-year institutions and three that represented the universities and a coordinating committee in the middle.

To back up a little bit, when this plan was developed by McKechnie and Adkins, Bill Docking got very much involved as a Chairman of the Board of Regents. He began to work very hard, I think, to develop resistance to this plan, to protect or to save the Board of Regents. Of course, constitutionally it's there. So, he was on pretty firm ground. Anyway, he worked at doing that. He did some traveling to talk to institutions and develop resistance to that, I think.

Well, the upshot was, it was passed, of course, in the '99 session. The new board was established. I was asked to be a member of that new board. I guess in the legislation, I think Bill Docking was directed to be the Chairman. At least the Governor appointed him to be the Chairman. So, he was the Chairman of the old Board of Regents and the Chairman of the new Board of Regents.

MT: So, the distinction is—just if people are not real familiar with the state constitution, it basically says there's a State Board of Education that has responsibility for everything that isn't under the Board of Regents, and the legislature decides what's under the Board of Regents. And that would appear—well, you can only have those two Boards. And the fear I think if I'm remembering some of those debates among the non-state university higher education was that they would be kind of overlooked. That's why the—it wasn't necessarily wanting to stay under the Board of Education necessarily but a fear—that's why there were all these efforts to redo it and change it, but the upshot was, "We're going to keep the same constitutional board, but it will—I forget the term, but basically govern the state universities directly and coordinate"—

JW: That's right.

MT: Those local—I think a lot of people wonder, "Why did you have colleges under the Board of Education?" The distinction was they all had local boards, and they all had their own local property taxes. They weren't state. The Board of Regents was responsible for those institutions that were directly under the state.

So, we did end up not changing the constitution, but having a stronger, bringing all of post-secondary ed under a single board and a single agency. I guess they've had to work out those relationships there. You were part of that, too. Correct?

JW: I was. There was a lot of maybe mutual suspicion among these institutions. And Bill Docking, the way he directed us that first year, we were to spend a year or maybe two years just really trying to develop the support or the approval or some confidence on the basis particularly of the two-year institutions. They were pretty suspicious of the Board of Regents.

But it was a totally different board. We had people on the board, myself being one of them, that previously would not have been a Regent. I wasn't a big political person in the state or something which typically got appointed. But I had worked quite a bit on these issues. That's why Bill Graves I guess appointed me.

It was interesting. We had to develop a new system. We were the only, maybe yet, the only state that has tried to combine a board that has governance authority over some and only coordinating authority over others. And we had to create a system where that could kind of work.

And I think it has pretty well. I think we were fairly successful on that. Those years, we had some really good board members who were kind of diverse in their interests. We had Fred Kerr, being an example. He was a rural guy with a community college in his area. I was pretty supportive of the two-year institutions.

At any rate, I guess we went along. The last year I was on, I was chairman, and that year, we had run out of money in the state. So, we were in all kinds of financial duress. We had to think of other things to do. So, we spent a lot of time just trying to develop a smoother operation internally in the Board of Regents, and hopefully we did that. Kim Wilcox was the president at that time and very helpful.

MT: Well, having followed higher ed really at a distance for the last thirty-five years, it does seem to me that one thing that had been an issue even before that that has really been worked on is this idea of—I guess the term is articulation or accepting each other's credits, making it easier for students to move among institutions that had long been a problem. I think that's something that—I guess you could maybe credit the new system to part of that.

JW: Well—

MT: An emphasis on really seeing, even though they're still different governing boards, that really is a system all trying to work together and not lots of different institutions. I'm sure there's still some competition, but maybe more coordination now than there was before.

JW: One thing, when we went together, we superimposed I guess a new committee system and all on top of the existing Regent system. We were functioning almost with two separate systems. One thing I did when I was Chairman, we took the three major committees within the Board of Regents—the President's Committee and the Financial Committee, the Finance Committee, and the Academic Committees, and we formed joint committees involving all the sectors on the same committee.

The problem we had early on, we'd try and make a decision and we'd take it to the Academic Committee of the community colleges, and they would agree. We'd take it to the Regents' Academic Committee, and they'd say, "No, we want it tweaked." We couldn't get anything done.

So, we had to create joint committees. When a committee decision was made, it was made. I think that has worked out pretty well at that time. We did it just by setting it up on the outside and giving the president the authority to assign issues to whichever committee he wanted to. He always assigned them to the joint committees. That took care of that.

MT: So, we've talked in the constitution, there are these two boards. You spent time on the Board of Regents. The Board of Education, I mentioned one of the interesting differences, and I don't know what the people in 1966 were thinking of, but the Board of Regents as you say is appointed by the Governor. They tend to be—you were being very modest, but very prominent men and women typically are appointed to that high prestige position. The State Board of Education, however, its ten members are elected. So it is more—I guess, I don't want to necessarily say accountable to voters, but it's a different process for getting there, and I guess I did not remember until preparing for this, you ran for that board, too, at one point, didn't you?

JW: Well, yes. After I went off the Regents in—I guess that would have been in '96, I think I ran. It was a pretty futile race. I knew it would be. We all did. But [former Representative] Mel Minor and I had talked to the Governor about it. They didn't have a candidate. So, I guess we thought one of us should run. Mel's wife was pretty failing at that time, was sick. So, I agreed to do it. I gave it a pretty good shot. It was a pretty close election, but I lost.

MT: That's what I remember seeing. I guess close doesn't count, right? It makes you feel a little bit better.

JW: Yes. Then it was after that that we had hired a new President of the Regents during the year I was Chairman, the last year I was on the board. Reggie Robinson was hired. So he called me, I guess it was in '07—I've got my years mixed up. It was '07 when he called. That's the year the Tech Ed Authority was passed.

MT: You've got me on that, but I'll believe it if you say so.

JW: I believe it was. I think it was '07. He called and asked me to serve on that board. So, I did that. I guess it was in '06, I ran for State Board. I think I said '96.

MT: That to me has been interesting about how, what the state has done around technical education and trying to foster and develop that. I've reflected—again, it's been a long time since I was in school. It's been a while since my kid was in school. I didn't have a lot of connection at all to technical education programs, career technical education, but that is an area where just the number of students going into that, the number of careers, the number of options that are available as career paths, and really what we continue to hear is that that's a huge job demand. We're producing about as many four-year-and-above degree people as we need. We can always do better, but where I think we hear a lot of the people saying we're not getting enough are

people coming out of more of those technical area. I think that's been something that both the Regents, the State Board, the School Boards have all—we've seen a big increase in that area apparently in response to the demand all over the state.

JW: Well, we had the tech schools, of course. There were ten originally, ten technical schools. They were entirely supported by the state and tuition. They had no property tax authority.

And then we had the nineteen community colleges, and about 40 percent of the offering of the credit hours delivered by the community colleges are technical in nature. That would include all of the health areas—the nursing and all of the health and the computer stuff, and then the auto mechanics and Vo-Ag [Vocational Agriculture], and all that stuff.

So, it's a pretty heavy component of the two institutions. And, of course, even as a four-year, you're a little bit—Wichita and the University of Wichita have become pretty aligned with some of their programs and work together pretty carefully. And, of course, Washburn and the Kaw Valley Technical School merged during the time I was on there. So there's a lot of interest in tech ed.

We had some issues in tech ed. We had to find a better way to distribute money for one thing. There's such a range in cost in tech ed. The nursing people dictate what the pupil/teacher ratio is going to be in the nursing school, and it's low. In a computer class, of course, you can teach forty at a time. There's a lot of difference in cost of the delivery of different technical programs, and we recognize that in some way. We finally got it done.

MT: I think that's right. Well, it sounds like you've done a lot of things. Are you planning to run for anything else?

JW: No. I'm sure those days are done. I still have a few rental houses to take care of and things like that. But it has been interesting. One thing, I've not been outstanding in any of these areas, but one thing I have had the opportunity to do is look at education from a lot of different perspectives. It's been interesting. Certainly a legislator looks at education differently from a parent or a Board of Regents member of any of those. They're all different. So, that's been kind of interesting, too.

MT: And that is exactly why we wanted to have this conversation because you could—and I think you're right. Education, we always talk about is something that maybe touches more people than any other state program and probably spends more money than any other state program, and really affects the future of so many people, one way or another. You've had a chance to be a part of all of that. So, I appreciate you sharing. Any last insights you want to leave for the people, the historians and the people of Kansas?

JW: I have no insights.

MT: Well, I think whatever insights you've left as part of the career that you've done. I know the people of Kansas appreciate what you've done and the efforts you have made. We appreciate

your time. I think people will appreciate knowing a bit more about our history in this sense.
Thank you for viewing.

JW: You're certainly welcome.

[End of File]