Mark Tallman: My name is Mark Tallman. I've worked with the Kansas Association of School Boards[KASB] on education issues as a lobbyist, researcher, and writer since 1990. I'm conducting this interview with Dr. Steve Abrams 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 1990s through 2010. The interview will be accessible to researchers, educators, and the public through the KOHP website, ksoralhistory.org, and also through the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library. Transcriptions are made possible by generous donors. Dave Heinemann is the videographer for today.

So, welcome Dr. Abrams. Mr. Chairman is what I probably usually called you. As we were talking earlier, you at least formally entered your leadership role in 1990, which was the year I went to work for the School Board Association. You were on a local board. I was at the state [KASB], and I have sort of followed your career. We're going to talk about [your] local board service, long-time service on the State Board, including serving as Chair, and then you're in the State Senate where you also chaired the Senate Education Committee. So, you have had the opportunity to view and participate in a tremendous amount of history in the area of education for a long period of time.

That's what we want to talk about today. But as usual, perhaps, to start, let's talk a little bit about yourself. I know you are a native Kansan. In looking over your resume, you never went too far from home. Why don't you talk a little bit about where you were born, where you grew up, and we'll work our way a little bit through your educational history and then what brought you to an interest in both political leadership and education issues. So, tell us the origin story of Steve Abrams.

Dr. Steve Abrams: Sure. My family homesteaded in 1871 northwest of Arkansas City. So, I grew up there. I started school at Lone Star School. It's a one-room school, Grades 1-8. Lester Lewis was the teacher of Grades 1-8.

MT: Really? The teacher.

SA: Yes, the teacher. That's right. Then I went to Ark City Schools after consolidation occurred. I believe it was '64, if I remember correctly.

MT: That would be about right at least.

SA: I then graduated from Ark City High School, married a local girl, and went to K-State, graduated with a bachelor's in animal science, went back and farmed from three years, and then I decided to go back to veterinary—I applied for and got into veterinary school. I went to vet school and went back to Arkansas City and opened up a veterinary clinic. I started the clinic in 1978 and continued in that role all these years.

Then in 2013, my son joined the practice, and then in 2021, we built a new facility. It's a lot bigger, a lot nicer, and as such, he has grown the practice a lot since then, and we currently have four veterinarians. It's a mixed practice in Arkansas City, Cottonwood Animal Clinic.

MT: I visited your clinic.

SA: That's right.

MT: Is this a different clinic that you're now in?

SA: Yes, it is.

MT: Very good. I remember coming down and visiting you there.

SA: Right.

MT: So, it sounds like kind of a homestead family, a farming family. You obviously wanted to stay. Do you want to talk a little bit about—some people want to get off the farm, and some people want to come back to the farm. What was your thinking?

SA: I don't know. It never crossed my mind to leave, I guess. I don't know why, but it was just one of those things. I wanted to stay. My wife was from Ark City. We thought it was best to raise our kids in that environment on the farm. I lived on the farm that my great-grandfather homesteaded and I kind of grew up there. The kids grew up there. They still live there as a matter of fact. The house that he built, my oldest son lives in that house now. Anyway, the point is that we never really considered doing that, leaving is what I'm saying. It's just something we wanted to do, stay there. We thought it was a good atmosphere for our kids.

MT: It's interesting in this process and otherwise, talking to Kansans and how there are certainly many that have long-time roots they're still a part of, and that's what they valued. And, of course, we've got others who moved around and moved from other states and that sort of thing. So it's always kind of a mixture of the two. Clearly, you wanted to be a part of your community. I assume in that practice, a long-time resident business owner, somewhere in there you apparently decided to run for your local school board.

SA: Right, and that came about in like 1988, '89. I'd had my practice going for a while. We were starting to hire people to apply for jobs, and I was appalled—that's not an understatement. I was appalled at the number of people that couldn't fill out a job application. They just couldn't read it. Surely, our Board doesn't know that student graduates can't read.

Well, I ran for and was elected to the local Board, and sure enough, they knew that there were students that couldn't read well. Okay, well, that led to the next thing, to the State Board of Education, and find out that's a statewide phenomenon. As a matter of fact, it's a nationwide phenomenon.

So, it kind of went from there. My focus from the very get-go was actually about reading. That changed, and I can't remember the exact year that that changed, but along about 2005, something like that, all that time I'd been focusing, trying to get more reading programs, trying to focus on that.

And in 2005, approximately right in there, Jeanine Phillips has the Phillips [Fundamental] Learning Center in Wichita. She had been attending all of the board meetings in the State Board of Education, and she was after me saying, "Steve, I want you to come tour my facility." "Okay, okay." But then I never did.

Finally I said, "Okay, I've got to go there. I'll spend thirty minutes and go." Well, I spent four hours. I was astounded at the various things that I learned there. It was a phenomenal experience for me. I hate to use the word "epiphany" but it really was an epiphany for me.

At that point in time, after talking to her and learning about the things she did, I had kind of a change in focus in what I was trying to accomplish. That's when I moved more from focusing on reading, which reading is important. I'm not trying to say otherwise. But at the same time, with her help and understanding how reading occurs and what happens in the brain for different students, different students learn differently, even how to read, learn how to read differently, I learned that there are a number of students that don't read exceptionally well even as adults. I was surprised by that. But they are absolutely astounding at what they can do.

That's the reason I kind of focused, "Okay, how do we help those students become successful?" I started thinking about career and tech ed. That's how I kind of moved into that. Then as we moved into that, career and tech ed, trying to move into that direction, that's when I tried to talk to some of my friends in the legislature about—and I could not get any traction for them—I don't want to make it sound bad, but understand my passion about career tech ed. That's when I decided, "I'm going to run for the Senate."

I did. I was on Senate Ed and became Chairman of Senate Ed. That's one of the things that I'm real happy about is that Senate Bill 155—I know it's kind of a group effort of everybody in the building. I've got that. But still I feel like I was kind of the one that helped kind of move that forward mostly because I think that helped K-12 schools across the state be able to help some of the students focus on career and tech ed type classes. I was real happy about that. I think even to this day I think it's a reasonably successful type of movement for that direction.

MT: As we have this conversation here in 2025 because we don't know when people will actually view this, I can certainly tell you that the data of the number of students participating in those programs has dramatically changed over that period of time. That is something that we track, how many students take those courses in high school, either in a tech ed view, a dual enrollment view, how many receive different types of credentials. One of the things that I think has been a dramatic change is the number of students who now earn credits either towards a technical certificate or some other fashion. Many more kids are getting a start on some type of post-secondary focus certainly than when I was a student; I think to some extent even with my kids. That's clearly been a change.

As always when we have these conversations, Sir, there's so many places we can go.

SA: That's true.

MT: I want to go back a little bit further. I'm going to keep us a little bit chronological. I think your story is not atypical. Why do you run for a local school board? To me, it usually comes into a couple of reasons. I've known a lot of school board—some of them is "I wanted to serve. I believe in education. My kids were in school." Others, it often is a particular concern or a particular issue.

SA: Right.

MT: You obviously felt here's a problem that maybe isn't being solved quick enough. I wonder if you can reflect back on those days first being on the School Board, dealing with those issues, what did you learn about why that problem occurred? What was being talked about thirty years ago, thirty-five years ago? What were we talking about then? I don't think it's any surprise. Most people think kids should learn how to read. I think that's something schools wanted to do, but we've been talking about a problem in reading as long as I've been alive, I think, probably long before that.

SA: Right.

MT: What was that experience like, coming on to a board and saying, "I see a problem. I want to do something about it." What was your experience with the local board, first of all?

SA: I think on the local board, it was that "We know it's a problem." I don't think anybody thought otherwise. They thought it was a problem, and "We certainly need to improve it, and we need to figure out how to do it." As far as being able to actually come up with a solution, a methodology, no. I don't think anybody was able to do that exactly.

But at the State Board, it was slightly different in that it was a recognition there was a problem, but I think—and this is—as a profession, I understand and know veterinary medicine pretty well, I think, and the concept of education is one of those that everybody thinks they're an expert because, "Well, I went to school, and I'm an expert. I went to school."

MT: "I spent years in school. I must know something about it."

SA: I must have learned something. So everybody has that kind of attitude, I think about it. Consequently, everybody has a different opinion about it. It sounds—I'm going to tell you what my opinion is, what I believe is that reading—when I started school, Grades 1 through 8, there wasn't a kindergarten. There was first grade. I could read going into first grade. I could read. Reading was just simple. It was easy. I mean, I could not imagine somebody not knowing how to read. It was one of those things. I would go to the library, the public library—I know I'm chasing rabbits here, Mark.

MT: I'm going to try to herd them a little bit.

SA: Keep me focused here, if you would. But the public library was directly across from the high school. Back then, they didn't have school lunches. All the students went home for lunch except for some that lived out in the country. They had their own box lunch or sack lunch.

I would eat, and then I'd go across and read at the library. I loved doing it. I'd pick up books and I read. I would read a book over that hour because it was easy to read, and I loved reading. It was incomprehensible to me to understand that when people said they didn't know how to read, I thought, "They're not trying. There's something wrong."

It wasn't until I got back to Jeanine Phillips that I came to understand there's a huge difference in how the brain acts. I think that when I first got on the State Board, there was some understanding that there were differences, but it was a process of learning even for the professionals about how to read and how that was going to move forward. As such, I can't remember if they had reading specialists then or not. But if they did, they were just starting those instructors, those teachers that focused on reading. That was reading specialists, if you will, and they started becoming more popular, if I could use that word, over that period of time.

So, the process for learning to read was something that was accomplished by the professionals as well as for those of us lays that were trying to be in policy to try to understand how to move forward on that. It was a learning process for all of us, I think. That's where I'd come down on that. What was the original question?

MT: You know, I promised I'd keep us on track. I think what I was interested in—and wanting to explore maybe—I don't want to put words in your mouth, but it seems like a straightforward problem. You'd hope there'd be a straightforward solution. "Well, I'll run for the board, and I'll get that fixed."

SA: Yes.

MT: It sounds like you didn't completely get it fixed in part because there wasn't a clear, obvious answer.

SA: There was not a clear, obvious answer. As a matter of fact, I think that is true to this day, even in 2025, that there's not a clear, obvious answer how to do that. As I have said in other times, other places, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

MT: That goes back—I've probably told this story. Faithful viewers of this series might have heard me say that my mother studied to be an elementary teacher, and I can remember as a child we had weird conversations—maybe you had the same if you kind of knew how to read and went to school. I was probably the same. I remember my mother in the mid-sixties being frustrated because she told me, "They're getting rid of phonics."

SA: Yes.

MT: I can remember the arguments about phonics and not phonics. That has been a debate that's been going on, as I say, virtually my whole life.

SA: Right.

MT: And even now in 2025, we're still talking about what we've learned, and I think there's a lot of people saying we're still trying to figure it out. It may be more of a consensus now. I think that's something that was taking root. I think I remember talking to you about conference committee reports on the dyslexia task force.

SA: Right.

MT: A long time ago, maybe not so long, but that again was an initiative that you were working on as a senator that ultimately involved the State Board, the Board of Regents, educators, members of the public about that same issue.

SA: Right.

MT: Why do we continue to have challenges of reading when it's such a fundamental issue? Okay. We need to keep in a reasonable amount of time for this. Let me talk about this a little bit. Why did you decide to run for the State Board? What was your experience there? And I can come back to this, but I'm also curious—we talk a lot in this series about some of the different tensions. One is between local control, state oversight, going from a local board, which often has a pretty heavy focus on local—we want to be responsible to our community. Then you move to a state position where part of your responsibility is to—the constitution says have that general supervision, but I'm curious as to, again, as you made that transition whether you remember. So, why did you run, some of the issues? And then after having spent some time on both, did you learn anything or anything striking about that experience?

SA: As I've said already, my focus was on reading. I just could not believe that reading, it was so easy. I just couldn't understand why people weren't doing it. There must be a lack of discipline in the classroom. I was being very simplistic about it. Why aren't people reading?

As I moved into it, particularly at the State Board level, I started reading more, the background material that we'd get, I came to an understanding about brain development. We got a lot of articles about brain development, how brains develop differently for different people, and as a matter of fact, at different ages. Consequently, I learned more about that, and consequently, that is kind of where I picked up about the concept of reading that it is maybe, I won't say "impossible" but more difficult for some people to learn to read. It's not just a natural event that occurs organically. It doesn't occur like that. Consequently, that's the reason.

At about that same time in there, we found out—there was some data that came out that said in the jobs that are required in the state of Kansas, the jobs required only about 22 percent of the students to have a college degree. So, that means that some 80 percent, 78 percent did not require a college degree. But we still need welders and electricians and plumbers and hairdressers and just the list goes on and on and on and on.

And furthermore, a lot of students want to do that. They want to be an electrician or welder. They have zero interest in English literature, things like that. They're saying they're so bored in trying to do it. And boredom creates the opportunity to be slackers, to do something different, cause disruptions in the class, and all kinds of things as you well know.

So, that is part of the reason that I started focusing on career and tech ed. How do we try and move that forward in order to make it easier for the classroom teacher to teach those students that want to be there as well as those students that don't want to be there, and yet they need to have some sort of training to be—I'm going to use the word "successful" in life, that kind of thing. So, that was kind of the dichotomy right there.

MT: Again, moving from the local board to the State Board. Did you view things any differently as a result of that? You still kind of had the same set of issues; it was just the level you were working on it.

SA: Just the same set of issues. Just the level we were working on it. Obviously, at the local board level, it is—you're actually hiring and firing teachers or replacing teachers or those that you may know and/or even if you don't know them personally at a larger setting, a larger school district, certainly you know the class that they're teaching, and you have some idea about the curriculum they're teaching, whereas obviously at the State Board, that is done completely at the local level, and at the State Board level, it was more about the policy that is trying to alert the local boards, "This is the criteria for the curriculum that we want you to cover. You pick your own curriculum, but we want to be able to cover this and be able to have on the state assessment—state assessments were big at that point in time. And being able to—we're going to cover this type of stuff. However, you get there is fine, but we want to be able to cover this in this state assessment.

MT: I don't want to retraumatize either one of us, but when I think back on that time, one of the—a little bit of state and national history. 1983, of course, was the Nation at Risk Report, which really led to many years of—I think it's safe to say tying into that same idea of "Can kids read? Can they do math? Are they prepared to be successful?" The whole question of what should be our standards? What should be our expectations?

And in the late eighties, moving into the early nineties, again as we were getting involved in this, one suggestion I guess, or one idea put forth to deal with some of those questions was the change in accreditation to what was initially called outcomes-based education, eventually modified into quality performance accreditation.

You were coming on to the State Board when some of those first decisions were being made and some of the early debate, as you say, the 1992 school finance law. Part of the politics, I can remember sitting in the gallery of this chamber, watching the Senate debate it, and part of getting the vote was directing the State Board to adopt this new system, requiring standards, a new system, minimum levels of state assessments, everything you talk about. We had that focus.

It's been a while. What do you remember of that—I'm going to say mid-nineties and subsequent years as Kansas was talking about this transition in how we would evaluate schools and to some extent students?

SA: As I look back at that time and compare it to the things that are going on in today's world in 2025, it seems like "Why were you kind of fooling around with such minor issues like that?" I don't want to minimize that because my opinion of QPA was that I was opposed to it. I thought it was too much about—I'm going to use the word "touchy-feely" kind of stuff. I thought it ought to have more focus on the actual academics of how to learn and what to learn, that kind of stuff.

That's where I was at. As I look back on it from today, it's obviously a lot different today. But at that time, I was opposed to it.

MT: I think what you've captured—again, you had a long career on the State Board and after that, but my experience, you can react to this, is virtually from the beginning of that, there has been a tension between essentially a framework that says, "We're just going to look at numbers. We're going to look at test scores. We're going to look at graduation rates as our outcomes," and another philosophy that said, "But we also have to look at all things like emotional health" or we have to look at ideas of citizenship.

I'm trying to think back on those early days of QPA and some of those things. Those debates were exactly over that between the kind of clear outcomes—maybe you could put it this way. Do you only look at the results or do you also look at some of the processes or some of the requirements which you hope will lead to better results?

Some people will argue, "If you have the right results, it doesn't matter how you get there" and other people say, "But there's some things we know"—Let's say accreditation of teachers, for example, has always been sort of—it's been controversial, the idea saying, "Well, we don't let the locals decide everything. There needs to be a framework of certain minimum qualifications." That's been a part of that the whole time. That's, of course, something as a State Board member, that one of the major things the State Board does is oversee the teaching of teachers, the accreditation of teacher education programs and then ultimately licensure of teachers.

SA: Right.

MT: So, those two were issues that you dealt with on your time on the board.

SA: Correct.

MT: So, again, sort of thinking a little bit chronologically, we then begin to move into the early 2000s, and the catch word I think we heard then was No Child Left Behind. President George Bush's proposal adopted in what seems rather amazing now, a fairly bipartisan approach, but it was arguably another larger federal step. Probably most people agreed on the goal, not necessarily on that role.

SA: Right.

MT: The Kansas State Board then had to decide how to react.

SA: Right.

MT: Do you have any recollections or insights over that time?

SA: Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. No Child Left Behind was adopted by the State Board on a 9-1 vote. There was one person that voted against it. That was me. You might have guessed that, right?

MT: I didn't remember the vote specifically, but I'll say I wasn't shocked.

SA: 9-1. And it boiled down to exactly what you said. It was bipartisan. There were several Republicans that went along with it. There weren't as many Democrats on the board, but the Democrats and Republicans voted for it except for me, and I was of the opinion that I did not like the idea of more federal involvement in education in the state. I thought it was foolish to do that. I still think it's foolish. The more likelihood that we have education occur at the local level, I think the better off it's going to be.

And you're correct, I mean obviously you're correct about the role of the State Board in licensure of the teacher programs, but the teachers are hired and fired at the local level. And the locals also determine their own curriculum. So, I'm in favor of that. I believe that needs to be held just like it is, and I would add to it, but the locals, the local school boards, need to be held accountable for the results that occur.

MT: Yes.

SA: As we all know, the reading scores have not gone up from what they were when I ran for the board in 1990. I find that somewhat frustrating when you look at the state assessments for third grade and eleventh grade, and it makes me want to weep. I feel bad about it. I really do.

MT: It has been a constant source of concern. I've actually recently been doing some research on it. One of the things I think is disappointing is we had, although there have been some changes in standards and such, about a ten-year general progress on most of those measures. And then—I know there's a lot of arguments over a lot of different things from funding to instructional strategies and everything else, in 2013, that area, we started seeing some decline, and then of course, with COVID, which I guess you missed in all your roles, we really have had a decline.

SA: Right.

MT: I think now we're back trying to figure out where do we go from here. On the other hand, I guess if there is some good news, it's sort of the other side that you're talking about, and that is the number of students earning any type of credential from a one-year certificate all the way up to doctoral, master's, bachelor's.

Last year, the Kansas institutions awarded more of those certificates than any time in the history that I can find going back to—

SA: And I think it's wonderful, absolutely. I agree.

MT: That's that tension I guess between what needs to be looked at. I think what a lot of people, some of them argue over things like state assessment reading scores is kind of a one-time measure and kids can do better, but there's also—data shows that there is some sort of predictive value. It's something that can't really be ignored. But I think when you try to assess the last number of decades that we're talking about, there's been some areas again where progress has been frustratingly slow and some areas where there does seem to be a real change.

SA: One of the things that you just alluded to, and I'm going to try to follow up just slightly, is the state assessment. I believe it's good to have a state assessment because I believe it's important that we compare Greensburg to Liberal to Dodge City to Topeka. We need to have some sort of comparison right there. And if everybody is able to just gather their own assessment and say, "All of our students are testing out at 90 percent," well, how does that compare to somebody else that's right down the road?

So, I think it's important to have that. But as, here's a name, a blast from the past so to speak, John Poggio was important to being able to identify, manufacture, and make the state assessments. It was just exceptionally frustrating for me in that he came in and had various discussions with the board every year, sometimes two or three times a year, and it was always a challenge for me because he said, "We're going to have another state assessment, but we won't be able to compare it to last year's state assessment.

Oh, my gosh! How do we know whether they improved or didn't? And as a matter of fact, next year, they're going to have that same state assessment. We still won't be able to get a comparison because there's not a trend. You need at least three years to create a trend.

I found that just very frustrating to be able to undergo that process. I hated it. I understand that sometimes state assessments change, and I don't have a good solution on how to get around that, you understand, Mark. But at the same time, that was one of the most frustrating things, trying to get a number or identify whether there was a trend, whether we were actually making progress in that regard. I found that frustrating.

MT: Since this is about history, I'm going to tell a story.

SA: Oh, my gosh.

MT: I may have mentioned, I don't know, but I remember once observing a State Board meeting where you were having a discussion with Dr. Poggio, and I believe he made some comment, and you said, "I don't really give a rat's"—I'm going to say "tail"—about X," and he immediately looked at you and said, "I'm sure you're speaking as a veterinarian."

SA: He did as a matter of fact.

MT: That's part of your legacy, I guess, the things we remember about the—but I do think that's a good point. I'm guessing that was a conversation was happening maybe in the late nineties, maybe the early—twenty years ago at least.

SA: Yes.

MT: We continue—today's State Board of Education is having exactly the same—what should our state assessments look like? How do we score them? How do we set levels that are useful? Are we aspirational? Are we too high? Are we too low? How does that fit in what we need? I guess that more things change, the more they stay the same or whatever because that has been again, thirty-five years at minimum, there's been this discussion at all levels about assessments and probably in a larger sense about accountability. How do we know how well we're doing?

SA: Right. And you mentioned the idea of tension. I would add to that, there is another function of tension that we haven't really addressed yet, and that's between the State Board and the legislature.

MT: A great segue.

SA: Because constitutionally as we're all aware, the State Board of Education is a constitutional body. It is not from statute. It's a constitutional body. And the State Board of Education also constitutionally is required to hire the Commissioner of Education.

MT: Exactly.

SA: Constitutionally. And yet at the same time, the legislature—shall I politely say sometimes is very frustrated by the fact that they are required to provide the money and at the same time, they feel like they have no control over how the money is spent. I think that tension is part of the issue that has been ongoing since at least the sixties. I have seen no evidence it's going to change in the foreseeable future.

MT: I was going to say you weren't able to solve that problem.

SA: I was not able to solve that problem.

MT: When you came into the Senate—and I know that you were—even on the State Board, you were involved with senators, other parts of government and all of that. When you joined the Senate, did you gain any insights or anything that maybe gave a little more insight into why that tension maybe occurs from their side of the aisle or any suggestions on—a part of checks and balances in the constitution is going to be tension, but anyway to maybe work that a little bit better?

SA: I feel like I understood the problem from both sides because I understood what the constitution said. I had a thorough reading of it, a thorough understanding of it, and as you've already alluded to, I had some friends in the legislature, and they were constantly complaining in

my ear about what the State Board was doing. So, I had some understanding of that before. I don't think moving to the legislature helped solve that problem.

One of the things that you mentioned is that tension is part of the checks and balances, and I think part of the issue is that the legislature feels there is no checks and balance on the State Board of Education. I think that's a fair statement to make that most of them feel like that. The legislature has\ checks and balance obviously, the governor, as well as the Supreme Court, obviously, but many feel like there is no check over what the State Board wants to do and can do. So, I think that's part of the tension.

MT: Did you feel all powerful when you were on the State Board?

SA: Oh, my gosh, no. Gee whiz. No, I did not. I was going to try to make a flip remark, but I don't think we want to go there.

MT: I do remember again over my time that sometimes people would talk about the State Board as sort of a fourth branch of government.

SA: Exactly.

MT: It alludes to a—it is kind of a constitutional anomaly, but around the time we were both coming into these roles, there had been, I think, several proposed constitutional amendments that would have affected—and the people didn't want to do it.

SA: Right. It was turned down flat.

MT: At least the last time they were asked, the public seemed to want a fairly independent State Board.

SA: And I don't get any sense that that attitude has changed. Maybe I don't get around as much in talking to people as I used to, but I don't get any sense that it's changed. I think it's still much the same. I think if they promoted a constitutional amendment here in these chambers, I'm suspicious it might go down in flames, to get rid of the State Board or to make it under the authority of the governor or something like that.

MT: One of the things I guess I felt over my period of service, and I want to ask you to reflect on is most people and even I'm going to say most legislators are pretty happy with their local board, and usually there's a fair degree of trust. Now, even now and then, there comes a problem. Every now and then, you have some local board members unseated. It doesn't happen very often.

SA: Right.

MT: And working for the [Kansas] School Board Association, we always kind of thought, "Okay, legislators, people love their local boards. Why are you doing X, Y, Z?" But I think some of that is some people might like what their board is doing, but they don't necessarily like what another board is doing or might be doing. So, their feeling is, "I'm worried about something bad

happening. I don't think it's going to affect my board. I don't mind my senator representative getting into education."

So, that comes back to this. The local board think that they're doing their job. The state board is trying to do its job. The legislature is trying to do its job, but sometimes those can overlap because each is sort of looking at it through a different perspective.

SA: Right. I think you can extend that even further nationally. You can say, "Well, I like my senator in DC, and I like my representative in DC, but we need to do something about them out there somewhere else that I don't like what they're doing," that kind of thing, the same thing.

MT: Absolutely. I guess that's why people can be just terribly unhappy with government, and incumbents tend to get re-elected.

SA: Right. It happens all the time.

MT: It historically has. So, we've talked a little bit about your move to the State Senate. I think it's fair to say that at that point—and this may back up a little bit further—one of the issues you were dealing with was funding. That's been mentioned. Partly because the Montoy lawsuit had led to the legislature, agreed to the Supreme Court to put in a significant amount of money. Other reform efforts were hoped to go along with that.

That really came to its peak in about 2008, 2009 when the Great Recession—we kind of look back on that—tremendously, state revenues dropped. The tremendous budget problem that had to be dealt with. K-12 education is half the state budget. Throw in higher education, it's about two-thirds. You as a Senator kind of came into that, compounding tax policy. You had income tax cuts that further kind of reduced revenue.

So, a big issue for a number of years was "How do we fund schools? What's the appropriate level? What's the role of the court?" You were on the State Board when some of those decisions were there. You were in the Senate when Gannon would have been at least unfolding. What are some of your thoughts or reflections just on the ongoing issues of school finance in the state?

SA: That's kind of a broad question, and I don't know exactly where to take it in that my opinion of it, I'm of the opinion that the Supreme Court overstepped their bounds. I believe constitutionally—I can read, you can read the constitution, and to me, it very plainly says the legislature has the general oversight for funding education. So, I just think that they overstepped their bounds by saying, "You're not doing enough. You're not doing enough. You're not doing enough."

That went on for years. I can't remember exactly, but maybe a decade they kept that case open saying, "You're not doing enough." And I thought that overstepped the bounds. But it is what it is. You've got to deal with it where it's at.

MT: Ultimately a decision was reached that had the requisite number of votes in the legislature and the governor and the Supreme Court—

SA: All signed off on it.

MT: On several cases has agreed, and that's kind of where we are now.

SA: But it's—I'm almost of the opinion that it is—it's immaterial. I don't really think it's that important if we had 90-plus percent of our students able to read effectively. See, I go back to that idea of how much money is enough, and then if they're still not reading appropriately, is that because of lack of money? Well, if it's lack of money, then how about the unencumbered funds that continues to grow every year, that monies that are going into the coffers of the school system, various school USDs, and not being spent?

It's a dichotomy that is difficult to come around. It's not an easy solution to it. How do we solve this that we want education to be successful for the students of the state of Kansas and being able to be—I'm going to use the word "affordable"—for the citizens of the state of Kansas. That's a dichotomy that is really difficult.

MT: I think the issue always is—again, for viewers that may not have their state constitution right in front of them or their history, some of that tension is you have a State Board that is supposed to have general oversight. You have local boards to manage local schools. And then the legislature is to make suitable provision for finance.

SA: Suitable provision.

MT: And, of course, what the court has held in some cases is that "suitable" means more than whatever the legislature wants to do.

SA: That's right.

MT: So, the plaintiffs in the past have successfully convinced the courts at least—

SA: Right.

MT: That is the ongoing—

SA: That has been.

MT: That enough wasn't put in, or it wasn't allocated the right way.

SA: Right.

MT: Another historical thing that we might remember is when you were coming into this role and I was, the major school finance question really had to do with tax equity.

SA: Yes.

MT: In other words, the cases were over "This district is rich and can raise money easily and a lot of it," and I'm guessing Ark City can't raise very much money. So, suitable, what was really talked about—are we equalizing things? But over these decades, the shift has really come from suitable meaning that, but also are we providing enough to get the results we want? And then the counterbalance of that is, are schools using the money effectively to get the results we want?

SA: Right.

MT: And that's another one of those tensions.

SA: Right. Very well stated. Correct.

MT: I spent a lot of years trying to write summaries of these things for hopefully readers like you. I've been thinking about this a lot lately. Of course, as you say, many of these issues are still there. The State Board is again looking at accreditation. The US Congress is looking at the role—should we have a Department of Education?

SA: Right.

MT: And what should that federal role be? The legislature in the last school finance—you may have been there. You probably voted for it—put a sunset on the law. In a year or two, the whole system automatically—the legislature will have to either positively vote to continue the system or come up with something new.

SA: Right.

MT: Or there won't be funding for schools.

SA: Right.

MT: That I'm sure will raise a whole other number of issues.

SA: I think that is in part and parcel what's going on with the interim committee now.

MT: Exactly. Right.

SA: They're trying to look forward to this sunset, if you will.

MT: Not wait until the last minute to deal with it.

SA: Right.

MT: That's always a challenge in government, is it not?

SA: It is.

MT: Again, as a young lobbyist, I don't remember whether you ever badgered me about this as a school board member—people always say, "How come school finance—why does the legislature always wait until the end of the session?" And I go, "Well, partly because of guys like me are usually in there telling them, 'You need to give us more.'"

SA: Right.

MT: I said, "If you're willing to take the same amount as last year, we can probably have that bill done in the first week of the session."

SA: And also April 15th. That's a big deal right there.

MT: That's right. That's exactly right. Okay. I think we've covered a lot of what I wanted to go through. I wanted to give you a chance—I think we've already talked about what you feel were some of your successes and the bodies you served with, some of your disappointments. Are there any other issues or topics or just again things that you either want to talk about, things that you're really proud of, or things that maybe we didn't get that right, or we didn't get as much done as we should have.

SA: Well, obviously, we could go back and discuss the things that I'm disappointed in for ad infinitum, if you will, just because it's continually rehashed and rehashed as you and I have done privately over Chinese buffet dinners. But I don't know that that serves a purpose because I have—there are some things that have been—I'm satisfied with what I did. I'm glad I did it. At the same time, it was time for me to get out, and I got out and was able to move on with other aspects of my life. So, I was not one to try to stay longer than I thought I should, not longer than others thought I should, you understand, but longer than I thought I should.

MT: I think with that, obviously, Senator, Mr. Chairman, I will thank you for your service, and I'll thank you for all the cordialities you have extended to me in a lot of different roles. And then finally, as always, we want to thank the viewers of this because you're the ones we do all this for. So, thank you very much.

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