

Joseph Wood Oral History Interview, 04/16/2014
Administrative Information

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Interviewer: Tony Macro

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Biographical Note and Abstract

Joseph Wood was born in Boston, MA in 1943 in a large Catholic family with eight brothers and sisters. He attended Catholic schools in Boston and graduated from Boston State College (now UMass Boston) with a B.S. in French. He taught high school French before returning to Boston State College to pursue an M.S. in school administration. He also received an Ed.D. from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Dr. Wood served as high school principal and later superintendent of a school district serving Stockbridge, West Stockbridge, and Great Barrington, MA, in which post he served for nine years. He then moved to South Windsor, CT, where he served as superintendent from 1986-2006. He is married to Honey Wood, with whom he has two children, a daughter Kris and son Jay.

In this interview Wood discusses his Irish Catholic upbringing and education, as well as the course of his career. He talks in depth about issues related school politics and administration, including collective bargaining, school boards, and high-stakes testing.

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Transcript of Oral History Interview

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Joseph Wood and Honey Wood

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Joseph Wood
Oral History Interview
April 16, 2014
Interviewed by Anthony Macro

MACRO: [0:00:02.3] This is the interview of Joseph Wood conducted on behalf of the Wood Memorial Library's oral history program by Tony Macro at Joe's house on the morning of Wednesday, the 16th of April, 2014. Good morning, Joe.

WOOD: Good morning, Tony. Nice to see you again.

MACRO: Before proceeding any further, do I have your permission to record this interview?

WOOD: Yes.

MACRO: Thank you very much. Well, from a prior conversation we had, I understand you were born in Massachusetts. Where and when was that?

WOOD: I was born in Boston in 1943. I lived in Massachusetts up until my mid 20s. [0:01:00.9] I was pretty much born and bred in the Dorchester section of Boston, or as we used to call it, "Dawchesta" section of Boston. I came from a family of nine children. My father died when I was nine, so my mother went back to work and along with my brothers and sisters raised us.

I went to school—up until high school, I went to parochial schools, which was very common in Massachusetts, in the Boston area especially. In fact, to this day if you meet someone from Dorchester and you want to know where they came from, you ask what parish were you in, and they would be able to tell you. It was a very parochial Catholic section, as was South Boston, which was contiguous to it. And I went to St. Mark's Grammar School, as they called them then, through grade 8. I began in grade 2. [0:02:00.7] They didn't have kindergarten back then.

I then went to a school, a high school, in West Roxbury called Catholic Memorial. It was brought there by the invitation of Richard Cardinal Cushing, who invited the Christian Brothers of Ireland to establish this high school, and we were the first graduating class. I entered in '57 and graduated in 1961. I basically attribute my love of learning to that experience in high school. Up until that time I was not paying a lot of attention to what was going on except trying to avoid punishment from the Notre Dame nuns. And then I wanted to become a teacher. As a matter of fact, if you went into my high school yearbook, it said that I wanted to become a teacher and a coach.

[0:02:57.8] That was my initial career plan, and I went to what was then called Boston State College, which is now the University of Massachusetts at Boston. And I got a bachelor's degree in French, a major, and a minor in Spanish, and I student-taught. One of the nicer experiences I had, I student-taught at Boston Latin, which was—which still is—the oldest public school in the country. And classical education, of course, was there, so I enjoyed that thoroughly. That was my first entrance to teaching a language to students.

I remember my first class as a student teacher; my supervising professor from the college [Dr. Newman] came in to observe the class I was teaching. [0:03:52.9] And after the class, he came up, and I was of course very anxious to find out how he thought it went, and when he came up—and this is an old building, very old, steam heat and everything else—when he came up to speak to me after class, I noticed there was perspiration on his forehead, and the first thing he said to me was—and this is the first critique I had as a teacher—“Do you know it was like the black hole of Calcutta in here today?” [laughs] And so that was the first lesson. I realized if the environment isn't quite right, people don't listen. That was a really important lesson to learn, and so I proceeded successfully to get a degree there, and I started teaching French at Avon High School in Avon, Massachusetts, which is right outside of Brockton, Mass. A small town, and that gave me the opportunity—because it was a small school system—to grow professionally quickly, and in a relatively short time I became the head of the department.

[0:04:54.5] And then I became president of the teacher's association, because I was interested in getting more money at the time, and whoever was negotiating the contracts, people didn't feel they were doing the job. The main reason for that was we came in just as they authorized collective bargaining in Massachusetts. Up until then you went to the school committee. They told you what they were going to pay you, and you said, “Thank you very much” and left. There was a learning curve that people were on. I got involved in negotiations, which introduced me for the first time to administration, because you negotiate with the school committee, as they call the school boards in Massachusetts. And that fascinated me. The whole project of—in hindsight, communities have limited resources, and really what you're about in politics is distributing those limited resources in the way that is most efficacious for the quality of life.

[0:05:54.4] I thought about administration. That was one of the things that interested me about administration, because the superintendent was there [at the negotiation sessions], so I started to pursue a degree—once again, at what was called Boston State College—in a master's in secondary administration, school administration. And shortly thereafter I got the degree; I was in a hurry because I wanted to get out and do things quickly, so I applied for some administrative positions and ended up getting a principal-ship in a [regional] high school in Western Massachusetts. The school serves Stockbridge, Great Barrington and West Stockbridge. It's funny. I went up there. I was interviewing in several places, but I was interviewing for assistant principals because I was only a teacher and a department head, and that would be the next logical step. [0:06:55.8] We lived in Kingston, Massachusetts, at the time, right outside of Plymouth, and it was a long trip, and it was the day after Memorial Day. I remember saying to my wife [Honey Wood] “Gee, I don't really feel like driving out to the Berkshires, and I'm just going out there for an interview experience, because they're not going to hire me as an assistant principal

of the brand-new high school they had just opened.” And she said, “Okay, don’t, but if you don’t get any kind of job in administration, you may look back and think, ‘Maybe I would have gotten that one.’” So I went out, and long story short is, I was halfway through the interview with the then superintendent – still thinking I was interviewing for an assistant principal-ship, because I had lost track of the jobs I had applied for –, when he asked me, “How do you master schedule a high school?” And I said, “I don’t have the slightest idea.” [0:07:53.1] And he said, “You’re applying for the principal-ship of this high school, and you don’t know how to schedule?” That was the first time in an interview I said, “No, I don’t, but I’m sure I could learn.” I said, “I have a cousin who is a principal in Hudson, Mass.” [and I was thinking, ‘He could teach me to schedule.’]

He [the superintendent] had a very combative style of interviewing, and I didn’t really take to him all that much. So anyway, I went home, and my wife said, “So how did it go?” I said, “I sat down and eyeballed the guy for about an hour.” I said, “He’s a madman.” Sure enough, I got a call the next day saying the school committee wanted to see me. He taped the interviews, by the way; he taped his interview, and then the school committee wanted to hear them, the interviews of all the people he interviewed, and the school committee decided who they were going to bring in for them to interview. I went back up there and interviewed with them. I was 26 years old at the time, and once again, I thought, “They’re not going to hire me.” [0:08:51.7] I saw the guy who was next to me, who became a good friend, and he was an assistant principal, and he basically went through the steps right, and he was an assistant principal from the next town. I said, “I’m not going to get this,” and I drove home, figured that was it, and got a call and ended up getting the job.

That’s how I got into it, and my main reason for getting into it was I felt anxious to be able to impact education and learning in a broader way than just in a classroom. I felt I saw things [going on in schools] at that time that I thought could have been [done] better. Anyway, that’s how I ended up going to Monument Mountain Regional High School. At the time it [the high school] was 3 years old. The building was a beautiful school, but it had to be basically developed, because it was a regional that had just become a regional. It was [made up of] the towns of Stockbridge, Great Barrington and West Stockbridge. [0:09:52.1] And bringing together Great Barrington and Stockbridge would be equivalent to trying to bring together South Windsor and Rockville [as a regional system]. They [the two towns] were arch competitors, so it was a very contentious marriage at the beginning.

MACRO: So now you’re principal of the school.

WOOD: Yes, right.

MACRO: Before we go further on that, two questions. Do you think the combative discussion you had with the superintendent appealed to the group who listened to the tape, and they thought, “Well, here is someone who can take him on?”

WOOD: You know, I never thought of that until this moment. To this day, I don’t know

what—I do know this: he did not want me. [0:10:50.1] I know that, because I was told years later by a man who was on the school committee, and we were just chatting. He had left the school committee by then, and he sort of said, “Of course, George never wanted you as a principal.” I don’t know. I really don’t know.

MACRO: Second, before we leave the language aspect, your love of it and your teaching of it in the classroom: in your family, the Irish family, was there any Gaelic spoken, any remembrance of it?

WOOD: No, no. In fact, my mother, who was born in this country, her father was born in Ireland. Her mother was a first generation Irish. She happened to be born in this country too, but her uncles and aunts, two of those were born in Ireland. In the time, you didn’t want Gaelic. You didn’t want Irish. You wanted to be an American. [0:11:49.2] And my mother used to cringe at the fact that the neighbor next door, who was very Irish and had been in the United States for many years, had a brogue and you could barely understand her. She used to say, “Mother of God, she’s been in this country all this time, and she still doesn’t know how to speak the language.” It was not something they treasured at all.

MACRO: That happens so often, doesn’t it? My mother was a Welsh woman, and her father insisted that there would be English around the table when they lived in Wales, so no Welsh, because it held you back from advancement. Good, well, Joe, you’re principal of this regional school.

WOOD: Monument Mountain Regional.

MACRO: In Stockbridge, the Stockbridge area.

WOOD: Well, it’s located in Great Barrington, but it’s right down the road from Stockbridge.

MACRO: So how long were you in that position?

WOOD: Let’s see, I went up there from ’70 to ’77. From 1970 to 1977 I was principal.

MACRO: [0:12:52.1] So you were young. You were early in your 30s when you finished the assignment. And that was an enjoyable time?

WOOD: Oh, yeah. It was great because we were bringing [the regional school together]—it was a growing [new] school system and a growing high school, and we were hiring people, and I was hiring really dynamic teachers that were coming along. It was terrific. It was an exciting time, because we were really developing and building the school, the cultures. It taught me a lot. It was hard work, but boy, we hired some great people.

MACRO: And you were starting your own family then?

WOOD: Yes, actually, my daughter, Kris, our oldest, was born when we lived in Kingston. She was born in Boston. But when we moved up to the Berkshires, my wife, Honey, was pregnant with our son, Jay. In fact, she was known as the only pregnant woman in Great Barrington at the time, so people after she had the baby didn't recognize her, but that's a whole different story. [0:13:52.7] And so our son was born in Pittsfield.

MACRO: And you have two children.

WOOD: Yes, two.

MACRO: So after this seventh year you moved to a different job.

WOOD: Well, in the same school system. The superintendent who had hired me left for a job down in the Boston area, and they brought in another super. I had applied for the superintendency when he left, and I didn't get it. What was I? I was 33 at the time, and so he lasted two years. He came out of Indiana, and he was not prepared for New England at all. It was very different. A nice man, but just was not aware of the kind of provincialism that exists in some of these towns. So when he left, I was asked by the then chairman if I would apply. [0:14:52.3] And I said, "I don't think so, because once bitten, twice shy." I was looking around to get back to the Boston area anyway at that point, and he said, "Well, if you apply, you'll be the only candidate. Would that be of interest to you?" I said, "Sure, that's something I'll do." And so I was appointed superintendent in 1977. In fact, my first school committee or school board meeting as superintendent was 7-7-'77. That was the first. You can go back and check that. You'll see that was a Thursday night, 7-7-'77. And I was there as superintendent for nine years.

MACRO: And do you look back upon that nine-year period as a happy period?

WOOD: Oh, yeah. It was a terrific period. We were doing a lot of great things. [0:15:50.1] I think we established programs that were very strong. I think we established programs that were very strong for children. We brought in people who had a deep commitment to education, and in fact, they didn't leave. It was funny; once we hired, they pretty much grew. They were young. They were like myself. They were young, early professionals, and they all pretty much stayed there, and I started getting calls two years ago from a former assistant superintendent who came up through the ranks that I had hired as an assistant. He's now retired, although he left the assistant superintendency when he was older, went back and started teaching again at that high school. Great guy, and they started these informal get-togethers of people who taught at the high school, and people came. That's the kind of group it was. They were young, and I think they were committed, and they grew together, and they had close relationships, which were good for kids.

MACRO: [0:16:50.8] Back in those days when you were principal of the school, did you find time to teach as well?

WOOD: Well, I carried independent [study] students—they didn't have classes—they didn't have enough children for advanced placement French, so what I used to do was carry independent advanced placement students in French when I was a principal, and that's the closest I got to really teaching after I left, except we did a fairly innovative thing for several years. Of course, this was the 70s, a very experimental time in education. If it wasn't relevant, it didn't matter. If it wasn't relevant to kids, it didn't matter. It was a very *avant-garde* time, I would say, and we established what we called a 'mini course week', and that was just [a few weeks] before things really got on into the [final] exams and everything for the finals. [0:17:52.6] We suspended the [regular] curriculum. Now, think about that. Just coming to the close of the school year when you face exams and papers and everything else. In about the third week in May we suspended the curriculum for a week, and the faculty put on programs and courses in the community that kids would find interesting and maybe learn from and maybe go in different directions. We had people, of course, living up there, who were world-known artists, and Clemens Kalischer, who was a tremendous photographer. Lucien Aigner also lived in the area. As a matter of fact, that great picture that you always see of Einstein is probably Lucien Aigner's picture. He's a terrific photographer, and we had a lot of people who would come in and teach a week there. Kalischer did—it was funny, because we had a course called—I think it was called—visual photography. [0:18:52.1] No, visual literacy, and he would take the kids on a bus and bring them all through the area and ask them to observe and find out what they're looking at. Then they would debrief about what they had seen and what they had noticed and how little they really did see and how little they really did notice compared to a trained eye of a photographer, things like that.

Anyway, I taught a course called Dorchester Games, because these kids were basically from semi-rural areas, and they wouldn't know what it would be like when you're in the middle of the city. What do you do? There are no parks around you. I taught them how to play half-ball and stick-ball and wall-tennis. We used to do that for three or four years when we had the mini courses before I became superintendent, and that was the closest I got to really teaching high school. I mean, I taught at Westfield State at the graduate program up there for a while.

MACRO: Did you—a program in what?

WOOD: – in education.

MACRO: When you were a superintendent?

WOOD: Yeah, in the summer. [0:19:50.9] I did that in the summer. I went up, I think it was, 3 days a week at the time up—to Westfield. But it was a very busy time, and I was just learning the job, so I didn't have a lot of time to deal with teaching.

MACRO: Earlier on, when you were talking about your own school days, you mentioned that coaching was of interest to you. Did you ever do any coaching?

WOOD: I did. I coached high school basketball. I could have coached baseball, but basketball is a long season, and I didn't want to continue to coach then, because it was draining in some ways. I did do some coaching, but once I got involved with the school system, president of the teacher's association, things like that, I really didn't have the time to do that and teach full time.

MACRO: Before we go onto the next stage in your career, you mentioned that artist, and I'm not sure I would know how to spell the name.

WOOD: [0:20:51.2] Aigner? I think it's A-I-G-N-E-R. I don't know if you've ever heard of Etienne Aigner the designer. He's Etienne Aigner's brother, Lucien Aigner.

MACRO: How would you spell the name?

WOOD: I think it's A-I-G-N-E-R, I think. I think so.

MACRO: That was a very, very interesting society out there.

WOOD: Oh, it was. My doctoral dissertation was on the use of community resources within schools. As part of that work, we developed a list of people, who would come in to the schools and give classes. We had Norman Rockwell on it, and Malcolm Frager, a concert pianist, who lived in Lenox; he would occasionally come in. People like that were just available on occasion. They weren't available all the time, but teachers would call on them and ask them to come in when they could. It was a whole resource bank, but there wasn't a computer, so a book contained the resource list back then. [0:21:50.5] Oh, and the author of *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, William Shirer. He was a guest in our classrooms. He would speak to some of our classes in history, and once was the speaker at our commencement exercises.

MACRO: William Shirer. Oh, that's wonderful!

WOOD: It was an exciting place to live, there's no question, and to teach. And they would be very giving—these people; all you had to do was ask some of them. Some wouldn't do it, but we weren't just going after the famous people, but people from all over the community. There were farmers that would come in and talk to the kids about different aspects of agriculture and things like that. We had a rural vocational agricultural program at the school. That was one of my finest achievements is I was brought into the Future Farmers of America as an honorary farmer. Not bad for the kid from Dorchester who didn't have three feet of grass around him. But they were great programs, Rural-Ag programs.

MACRO: [0:22:50.00] At any rate, apparently South Windsor attracted you away from that job.

WOOD: It's interesting. Some things you look back, and you think, "This was meant to be in some ways." I had been recruited. We wanted to get back to the Boston area because our parents were getting old, and we wanted to get back to that area. It was a thing we thought we should do, and I was recruited for a superintendency in Arlington, Massachusetts. I talked with the kids. My daughter was going into high school. My son was going into middle school, and we talked about moving and what it would be like, because their whole experience was the Berkshires. And so we drove down and stayed overnight and gave them a feel for Arlington, which is a suburb right outside of Boston. I don't know if you're familiar with it. It still is a nice town, and they said, "Oh, yeah, this would be exciting," etc. [0:23:53.4] So I interviewed, and I was one of two finalists there. The consultant called me up and said, "There's an agreement you have about taking the job, and if you're offered it and they talk salary parameters, will you take it?" And I said, "Sure, I'll take it." We had supper that night and were talking to the kids about it and everything else, and my son Jay says, "Where do I play soccer there?" I said, "What do you mean, where do you play soccer?" "Well, now I go outside"—because we lived in a house with a lot of land—"and I kick it around." I said, "There's parks there, Jay. We'll take you to parks." "I don't want to have to go to the park every time I play soccer." My daughter says, "Do they have a music program there?", because she was a very serious clarinetist. And I said, "Yeah, they have a music program." [0:24:51.1] She used to study with Pasquale Cardillo, who was the 2nd clarinetist with the BSO [Boston Symphony Orchestra]. She studied with him in the summer up at Williams College. She said, "Will I be able to study?" I said, "I don't know. I don't know if he's available. He's up here all summer. I don't know if he's available in the winter down in Boston."

So they weren't thrilled about it, and I had told the consultant I would be interested, so I was stuck. And so when I went down to be interviewed by the school committee, the one thing I did notice when I went through the minutes, as I usually do, for the year or two before I get interviewed in the committee or board level, I look at their school board minutes or school committee minutes. And they had subcommittees, and virtually everything that came to that school committee that was of substance was delegated to a subcommittee, and they had a subcommittee for elementary education, a subcommittee for secondary education, a subcommittee for policy and procedures. [0:25:50.6] And so I thought they had come up and seen what I was about already. They had visited the Berkshires, so when they asked me—and I interviewed with them, and they said, "Do you have any questions?" And I said, "You know how I operate, and I don't do a lot of subcommittee work. I think you have a staff that's supposed to do a lot of that stuff, certain standing subcommittees." I said, "I understand the need for ad-hoc committees at a certain time, but to have standing committees that virtually everything that goes before the board goes to a subcommittee I think is an awful waste of time and usually gets the board involved where they really don't belong." Well, that was the end of that job. I got a call from Bill Mahoney. I'll never forget it. "What in the name of God did you do?" I said, "I didn't

do anything. I just told them what I thought.” He said, “You were going in there as the lead [candidate].” He said, “You lost the job.” I said, “What can I say, Bill?” To get to the South Windsor thing—I said to him, “It wasn’t a good time anyway, Bill. [0:26:53.0] But if you come across something that you think I’d be interested in and that looks good for me, let me know.”

It was a year later, I think it was, I got a call from him. He said, “There’s a school system in South Windsor, Connecticut, you may want to take a look at.” I said, “Really?” I had never thought of Connecticut. He said, “Yeah, take a look,” and so I did, and it’s interesting, because Honey and I drove down here one Saturday, and the thing that impressed me most was the library [South Windsor Public Library], the library in this town. They had just built the library, and I was really impressed they spent that kind of money. Of course, I didn’t realize the apparent political upheaval that was caused by this at the time. That’s kind of ironic, but I remember saying, “A town that spends that kind of money to put together a library has some value in education for sure, so I think I’m going to apply,” and so I applied.

MACRO: [0:27:50.9] You were successful.

WOOD: Yeah.

MACRO: Not too many subcommittees?

WOOD: No, the best thing about that—that wasn’t me. It was a certain amount of pride—Fred DiGiacomo, God rest his soul, was the chair—no, he wasn’t. He was the co-chair. Diane Deming was the chair, but Fred had come out to visit us with Diane, and usually the procedure in a superintendency search is you’re invited to the town, but before that they sent out a scouting party to go to your place too. And Fred and Diane came out, and when we’re sitting on the Red Lion Inn porch—if you’ve been to Stockbridge, it’s a beautiful old inn, and they have a big porch there with rockers. It’s beautiful looking into Stockbridge, a classic Norman Rockwell look. And we were sitting there on the rocker, and Fred said to me, “You know, we don’t have any standing committees.” [0:28:51.4] This is what he says to me now, because I haven’t been appointed, of course. “And I don’t think we should.” He said, “We should do everything as a board, and everybody knows what’s going on.” I mean, that was exactly what I thought should be done, so that was of great interest to me, and it worked out very well.

MACRO: So you had a very good impression of the intellectual intent of the town, as it were, because of the new library. What did you find as you began the job as superintendent? Did you feel that that impression was reinforced?

WOOD: Oh, yeah, absolutely. One of the procedures that they usually do before you’re hired and if you’re a candidate or a finalist, they bring you into the town. You spend a day in the town going to different districts, meeting with different people, which I did. As a matter of fact, Marv Eisenberg, who was the principal at the time at Eli Terry [Eli Terry Elementary School], was the guy they had usher me around.

[0:29:53.3] And then I went to the schools and met staff and talked with staff and saw what was going on. It was very impressive, and they were at a point where I think the town—I didn't know the extent to which—I knew the town was growing, but I didn't realize how quickly and how much it was growing. But it was very impressive, and the board, frankly, when I was interviewed by the board, I was impressed by the kind of collegiality and relationship they seemed to have and exhibit among themselves. They had longstanding board members. There was a stability there. Fred DiGiacomo was on for years. Jack Giordano was on for many years. I'm trying to think, there were two or three others. Diane was the chair, but she was on for about five or six years, Diane Deming. [0:30:50.4] Barry Giuliano, he was new. Nancy Karenski had been on. She was on the board when I was hired, and by my second year there she went to the council, but she had been on the board for many years. They had that kind of culture, and they had enough "newbies" coming on that it wasn't stale. They had about five people who had been on for a good many years and about four people two or three years. They realized that they had problems of enrollment growth, and I had had to close a school in Massachusetts because of enrollment decline.

One of the most difficult things I ever went through was to close a school because of declining enrollment. And it was tough because people are connected to these schools. You see what happens when you try to close schools. They go nuts. [0:31:49.9] I thought it would be fun to face problems of growth. That, "be careful what you wish for. You just may get it." Well, that's what happened. When I came in here there were problems of growth, and they didn't realize how much growth was coming, and I brought in a group called the New England School Development Council (NESDEC) who, by the way, was the consulting group that brought me into South Windsor. I had known them from Massachusetts. I work for them now, as a matter of fact. But what they're known for is their ability to project student population growth with uncanny accuracy. They look at data that at that time was really crude—and this was before a lot of computers and everything else. It was all pretty much hand-done, although there was some computer use.

And so I got a call the first time they put the study together. I got a call from Sally von Banken, who was the statistician up there, and she said, "Are you aware what kind of growth problem you're facing down there?" [0:32:51.9] She said, "Well, you should know there's really going to be a lot of growth coming in that town." And they look at things like how much land is open to growth, what are the current growth patterns. It presupposes the past is going to look somewhat like the future, and you're going to be able to project out, and they were right on the money on it. And so that [enrollment growth] probably dominated the 20 years I was superintendent.

MACRO: How many new schools were built?

WOOD: Well, we didn't build new schools. What we did is we took Wapping [Wapping Elementary School] back that was basically an annex to the town high school, and it was also being used as a town building. They used it for town [business]. That was not a popular decision, but I told the board it's either that, or you're going to have to really build a new

school. And I said, “Growth, like anything else, it goes up, and it goes down, so you may not want to build a new school, if you can take this back.” So we took that back.

[0:33:48.0] We put on I think it was—at one point—I may be wrong with the numbers—they already had some portable classrooms on the buildings that had been mothballed. They were not connected to the building, but we were still using two, I think, at the time, portable classrooms. We added re-locatable classrooms to Pleasant Valley [Pleasant Valley Elementary School], to PR Smith [Philip R. Smith Elementary School], to Orchard Hill [Orchard Hill Elementary School], and Eli Terry [Eli Terry Elementary School]. Two new relocatable classrooms each, so I think it was eight. We did eight in all, and then we took back the elementary school [Wapping].

Then the biggest problem was the high school, not just for the growth at the time, because that was coming, but it was in very much disrepair. It needed a lot of work, and they hadn’t done much on it since it was built. They were going to have to expand it significantly. [0:34:48.4] In fact, we ended up doubling [the square footage of the high school]—We had put together a plan, the board and I and staff, and the first plan we put together, a strategic plan, we put it together, and we first developed it. Now, let’s see, I came here in ’86. It was ’87, and it was called Excellence 2000, and the guiding principle was ‘what do we have to do now to maintain excellence or to gain excellence in order to stay current, etc.’ And we looked at the incoming kindergarten class, the graduating class of 2000. The incoming kindergarten class would have been the graduating class of 2000 of South Windsor High School, so that was our focus. And it was clear that we needed a lot of not only more space but a different kind of space. Basically we doubled the size of the high school. We went from 132,000 square feet to 264,000.

MACRO: [0:35:49.0] I think that’s what I meant, something in my mind about building of a school. It seems to me that a lot of building went on.

WOOD: Oh, they sure did. We doubled the size of the middle school. The middle school went from 116,000 to 232,000 square feet.

MACRO: That was Pleasant Valley?

WOOD: No, Timothy Edwards [Timothy Edwards Middle School], so they doubled the size of the high school and the plan called for—to get back to the plan—the first building that needed attention was the high school, because they were on notice from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges for their accreditation that, if they didn’t accommodate the facility, they were going to have problems. We got that totally—it got renewed. The entire inside of the old building was brought up to standard, and we added on, basically doubling the school, putting on an auditorium—or it’s a theater, it’s not an auditorium; adding to the gym, of course, and classrooms all over the place, new science labs, and that was phase 1. [0:36:50.7] No, phase 2—actually, phase 1 was taking care of on an emergency basis the elementary school. It was putting on the additions, taking back Wapping. Then phase 2 was the high school, and then phase 3 was the middle school, and then when I was leaving they

were onto the final phase, which was now bringing the elementary schools up to par. In my last year, 2006, we had a referendum in 2005, I guess it was, and it was blown out. It was too expensive, people thought. I think at the time it was \$96 million, \$96 million. Of course, those are staggering figures for people. That's close to \$100 million, but it was \$96 million, and that was to do to every single elementary school what we did in the high school and middle school, which was bringing it totally up to standard, and add on if we needed to here and there. It was \$96 million total. [0:37:53.9] I don't know, I think it was probably about \$60-\$70 million as far as what the local tax base was [and the rest would come from state finding], but it didn't go. And then that's when I left, but the whole tenure here pretty much was focused on getting sufficient space, and of course, if you get more space in the schools and at the end of—when I came into South Windsor I think it was about—I want to say I think it was high 2,600-2,700 students. When I left there were 5,000 students.

MACRO: What an increase!

WOOD: So you think about the space you needed but also the staff you have to hire. Our budgets every year—and on average, if you bring on a new teacher you're looking at \$75,000-\$80,000 per teacher on average. [0:38:53.8] This was back then. Between the salaries and the fringe benefits you're looking at \$75,000-\$80,000. If you hire four teachers in a given year, that's \$320,000. People couldn't understand the numbers, because how come? Well, you've got kids that have to be taught. You've got a pupil-teacher ratio that you want to maintain, and so our whole focus for the 20 years was either growth, accommodate the buildings, staff to staff the buildings and try to hang onto what we had to maintain what we had. That was the challenge.

MACRO: The funding is problematic always, isn't it? I mean, you've got the state chipping in what it—I don't know that it really does chip in what it was supposed to chip in, because you've got so much dependent upon property taxes in town.

WOOD: Absolutely, and that—

MACRO: Was that the case in Massachusetts? Was that the case throughout the land?

WOOD: [0:39:52.2] Well, not throughout the land, but it certainly was the case in Massachusetts. During my last two years there, Massachusetts voters approved Proposition 2½, which made it very difficult to increase town and school budgets. I didn't know what Nirvana was until I lost it. Prior to those last two years, Massachusetts had such a strong commitment to education that their law required that, if a town cut a school budget, all you had to do was get ten taxpayers in that town to sue. It would go to the court, and the court would automatically reinstate the amount of money cut and fine the town 10 percent of that cut that also goes to the schools. That's the way it was funded in Massachusetts when I became superintendent. Think about that. That seems like a fairy tale now. [0:40:49.5] And then they did

Proposition 2 ½, which meant your taxes couldn't go up any more than 2 ½ percent of your grand list value in any given year unless you brought it to referendum, and then you have to win it by a 2/3 vote. Do you know how hard it is to get a 2/3 vote? Now, they've since ameliorated that somewhat. It's not quite that draconian now, but it's still pretty tough.

One of the main reasons I wanted to come to South Windsor, or I was willing to apply to South Windsor, was that the town council was the appropriation body. I was up in Massachusetts at a regional school district, and the appropriation was by town meeting, not by referendum, not going quietly into a voting booth; but you had a regular New England town meeting. You presented the budget. They voted by show of hands and said up or down. That was it. I had to get two out of the three towns approving my regional budget, and then it was binding on the third town. I had to get two towns to approve that budget. [0:41:51.4] And it was tough, because sometimes you put months into a budget, and you get someone on the town floor that will get up and say something that's totally untrue or unfair or whatever. You don't have a chance to respond to that, because you're not a citizen of the town. You sit on the sidelines and watch it, and sometimes the budget goes down. When I came to South Windsor, one of the questions I asked Dr. Mahoney when he talked to me was, "What's the appropriation form? What's the appropriation body in the town? Is it a town meeting? Is it a referendum? What is it?" He said, "Oh, I really don't know." I said, "Well, I want to know that before I tell you," and he said it was the town council, once he got back to me.

It's a lot easier to explain in a rational way, whether you get what you want or not, to five people why this budget is the way it is, as opposed to in a town meeting where you'd probably get 150-200 people, very emotional at the time. [0:42:48.8] If it's a fire truck versus whatever, the fire truck always wins. It's the reason, though, that I like education, and doing what I did for the superintendency was what I started to say in the beginning. Politicians—and I say that in the best sense of the word—are responsible for deciding the kind of resources that are going to be brought to bear to support town services, education, etc. It's a tough job for them, and if I could make it more effective by giving them the kind of information or give them the kind of spine that they may need, I felt I was doing good work. I think that's what intrigued me most near the last part of my 10-15 years as a superintendent, because it's critically important. People, they get all excited about national elections and state elections. [0:43:48.4] The most powerful things in terms of what's happening for your children and your livelihood—except for war and famine, that kind of thing—is what votes are taken right here in the town. It's your children's education, it's the quality of your ambulance service, for example—whatever. It's roads, it's fire departments. That quality of life is affected day in and day out by the votes that are taken in a town.

MACRO: On the matter of curriculum and parent-teacher PTO [Parent-Teacher Organization] involvement, parent involvement, did you see any change in that from the start of your 20-year period? And I suppose the question I want to ask is what do you think about parent involvement? [0:44:46.7] Let me preface that by saying it seems to me it's increased to a level that even when I retired from the college it was making me uncomfortable. What is your view on all that?

WOOD: Well, it's funny, because for years that was the mantra. You have to get parents involved in schools and in their childrens' education to be able to basically have it done right, and that was usually a challenge to get them directly involved. Not so much in South Windsor, I'd say, because there was a lot of interest and a lot of people paying attention in this town, like towns of its cultural and socioeconomic level. Parents tend to pay more attention to schools in the more affluent towns. Is that a truism? [0:45:50.7] But there wasn't the kind of direct involvement that you see now in terms of—I think the 'helicopter parents' is a bit overdone, but I also think the degree to which parents get involved and the extent to which they question teachers' judgments and things like that now, sometimes, it's out of balance. I mean, you hire people, let's say a teacher, who if you hire well and right has got the expertise he or she needs, has the kind of skills that they have and the content knowledge they should have and are able to relate to children positively and motivate them. And if that's the case, then the parents should be more deferential to the teachers' judgments or to the schools' judgments. I don't mean they have to go in there and accept everything. [0:46:48.1] But I think if they do question, it should be questioned from a point of view of objective analysis and information, not on what they think their kids deserve. And I think sometimes that gets out of whack, and I think I see more of that now than probably 25 years ago.

MACRO: Why do you think that is? It's generational, I suppose, but that's a rather obvious thing to say. I know in my generation my parents wouldn't ever consider interfering in what I was being taught in school. They would show up on what we'd call Speech Day [Commencement], but that was the extent of it. But now, from what I hear, questioning teachers' judgment is going on all the time. [0:47:49.4] And that seems to me a shame.

WOOD: Well, there is some of that. I think part of the problem is the sheer information that's available to parents. I think technology has allowed schools to communicate much more of what's going on. I think technology has allowed the parents to be much more involved, even if they're not physically involved. They're emailing teachers and they have the ability to—you have a child who can get—things are electronic—who can get back a paper and email it to the parents and say, "Look what happened here" and have the parent email the teacher and say, "I reviewed this and looked it up in such and such, and I think you're wrong here." That facilitation I think adds to it, but I also think there's a sense of competition. Once again, to go back to socioeconomic levels of towns, if you get into one [town] that's of a higher socioeconomic level, there's an incredible sense of competition. [0:48:50.6] I'm doing some work in a town now in Connecticut, a very, very affluent town. And the sense of competition among parents is palpable, and so there's that pressure on the kids to be a certain way in terms of their ultimate grades and everything, and there's these parents that are vying, and that's a tremendous pressure, and then you have put through this technology that allows instant access to practically anything they want. It's a tough road, and I don't know how it's going to get better, because I think this is the way it is now.

MACRO: Yeah, this is competition within the parents and their children within the school?

WOOD: Correct.

MACRO: Not between one school district and another so much?

WOOD: [0:49:49.3] Well, they do look at—I mean, that's part of it. There's no question. The test data and information, there's constant analysis and review, once those test data come out to determine how—what I used to call a box school mentality. Did we win or lose? Did we beat this town or not? All they see is a bottom line. They don't understand what it really means, and they don't really bother getting into it in terms of what certain test data mean or don't mean and what aggregated means or doesn't mean. The correlation between socioeconomic level and test results is practically one. There is practically total correlation. The higher the socioeconomic level the better the kids do on tests.

MACRO: You think that was really the case in your day as you were growing up?

WOOD: You didn't have a lot of tests.

MACRO: No, but you had the examinations you had to do.

WOOD: Oh, yes, but they weren't being—to answer your question directly, no, I don't think it was quite that, because when I was growing up, I was growing up with a lot of kids that were like myself, who were children of basically blue to gray collar, or whatever you want to call it, workers, [0:50:57.8] all striving to do well and be the first kids to graduate from college in their family. I would say the metrics, the measurements, were different. It was getting into a good high school, because the public high schools in Boston, if you didn't go to Boston Latin or what they used to call the exam schools, Boston Latin, Boston English, Boston Tech, and you went to the neighborhood high schools, Dorchester High School, Roxbury, whatever, those weren't great preparations for college and university, those non-exam high schools.

In Boston the alternative for those exam schools and the preferred alternative for many parents were the parochial schools, and even then you had a pecking order. Boston College High School was considered one of the best, [0:51:49.5] Catholic Memorial was an upstart, but was considered one of the promising schools, and it turned out to be a very good school.

What the goal was there was you get into a good school, and hopefully you get into college. It was pretty simple. They didn't do a lot of comparing of tests until you got to taking your SATs. Then they got involved with tests. But I don't think I remember one—I'm talking about national tests. I didn't take any of that when I was in school. But the exams, the final exams, we took them in our schools because they could measure their schools by the New York state testing, because a lot of the Brother schools [Christian Brothers] were in New York. We took those New York tests every single year, and those are difficult tests, and they were watched.

Not by the kids or by the parents. They didn't even know what was going on. But boy, looking back on it now, I see that those Brothers were watching whether our school's results were as good as Power Memorial's in New York City, based on the New York state tests.

[0:52:54.5] And we stopped our class curriculum in May after April vacation, and we did nothing but review for those tests. There was really pressure; there was some of that; but today the test scores, getting into the right school, there's a lot of that that goes on in some of this stuff. The parents have now the ability to stay in touch. They go online. They can pull out their kids' grades as they—and the teachers, have them in the rank books, if they want them. I've been following South Windsor, but I'm sure you can do it—I know they have software that allows parents to literally track daily how a teacher marks a kid on a class day. Now, with that kind of information and that kind of pressure to succeed, it's small wonder that you've got these so-called helicopter parents.

MACRO: [0:53:51.5] Yes, the competition within school districts is very intense now, isn't it, comparing the South Windsor system with, say, the Glastonbury system?

WOOD: There's no question, and that's driving instruction, and it's driving curriculum, and I don't see that as a very positive thing for the development of childrens' intellect or capacity to learn or love of learning.

MACRO: I agree, and you said that from your very early days—well, from your time in high school—you wanted to be a teacher. How attractive a proposition is secondary education now for an intelligent, successful student in high school?

WOOD: I think education in general has got to change from the professional teacher's perspective, or you're not going to get a lot of teachers going in here, a lot of young adults wanting to go into teaching. [0:54:54.6] It's just a different climate. Teachers—and this isn't South Windsor's problem. This is the state's problem, and it's the national problem. Teachers I just happen to meet sometime [and ask], "How's it going?" The first thing they say is they can't wait to retire. I find that—and these are great teachers, and then they'll tell you it's the focus on the testing, the focus on the results. Everything teachers used to call interesting and the kids loved they couldn't do anymore. You can't do it, and they find that as a loss not just for them, but to see what children lose compared to what children had ten years ago when they were teaching. The state has bought hook, line and sinker into this whole testing program the Gates Foundation basically established, the Smarter Balance testing and the Common Core and all of that.

And I understand it, and I don't want to sound like some curmudgeon. [0:55:52.4] I do understand it, and I respect the fact that the Common Core is based on—as they like to say—standards that they should meet to either be college-ready or career-ready, if you will. These are the standards that evolved from that kind of development and analysis. That's fine, and I think it's somewhat disingenuous when they say we're not talking about curriculum here. When anybody blames them for a sterile curriculum the first thing they say is, "This isn't a curriculum.

This is ‘standards’. And oh, by the way, there’s this Smarter Balance test now that correlates to these standards.” And they’re saying these standards are great, and that’s what we need, and they’re saying we should all get there. We have these tests to show you if you’re getting there. That’s basically where the curriculum comes from, because if you don’t have the reliability between what’s taught and what’s tested, you get poor results. It’s somewhat disingenuous for people to say, “We’re not telling you what the curriculum should be. We’re just telling you what the standards are. Oh, and we’ve got these tests, if you want to see how you’re making these standards. Oh, yeah, that’s the course the curriculum is going to have to follow.” [0:56:54.0] That bothers me more than anything.

MACRO: If there’s going to be a change of direction, it’s going to have to come from the state level. The town council themselves would not be able to mount a shift—

WOOD: Well, that’s not the town council. The board of education can. The town council has nothing to do with education in the state of Connecticut except give them the money, or not. That’s the only relationship they have.

MACRO: The board of education.

WOOD: The board of education can determine within the parameters of the law, the school law, what certain courses have to be taken, etc. They can determine anything they want to do. Now, the state has the testing system that is required for school districts to take the test, so the board of Ed can’t say, “We’re not going to take the tests.” They have to take the tests. But the place that has to change is the state department of education that bought into the Common Core—that has bought into the testing for that Common Core that is now driving the instruction. [0:57:54.9] It’s got to be a combination of that state board of education along with the commissioner making some changes, and don’t misunderstand me. I think the Common Core curriculum, from what I understand of it, is very strong. It’s a strong set of standards. What I object to is the way, the lockstep way that they have gerrymandered it, so that schools have to basically conform to taking tests that have yet to be proven valid in measuring the degree to which the Common Core is being learned. If you want to go back to your point about comparing of tests, towns, test data with this town’s test data, the last thing in the world you want as a superintendent or a board of education or parents is to have your school system come out poorly in those test results. It’s not only just how my children are doing, it’s also what my property is worth. It’s a tough battle, and the change will have to be driven by the state, and it’s like anything else: [0:58:56.3] eventually people are going to change it so it’s more workable, but meanwhile there are teachers and more importantly students, that are being unnecessarily turned off by the process of getting there.

MACRO: In your career here in South Windsor, did you join local clubs, the Rotary Club, professional organizations, state organizations?

WOOD: When I came to South Windsor I was a Rotarian in Massachusetts, and I always found that very helpful, because you got to know the business people in town. They got to know you. You can be a kind of ambassador for the schools. Rotary Club always does great things for their towns. I did join that, and I stayed there for a while. The problem was when I was in Massachusetts it was a luncheon meeting. [0:59:56.5] When I came to South Windsor the Rotary meets at night at a dinner meeting, and as I talked earlier, we were in all kinds of growth modes and everything else, and I was out two or three nights a week on average, and the Rotary meeting was just one more meeting to get out to. Usually I had to leave to go to another meeting after dinner and not stay around for the meeting itself, so I ended up quitting the Rotary. And it's too bad, because I met a lot of nice people, and I think it's very helpful for a superintendent to be in the Rotary, frankly, or the Lions Club or whatever. They should be part of it. But certainly in the years I had, I was out practically every night, and I wanted some nights at home.

MACRO: Did you maintain your devotion to the church?

WOOD: Oh, yes. Yeah, through it all.

MACRO: Which church do you go to it?

WOOD: I go to St. Margaret Mary's.

MACRO: That's in the center of town, isn't it? I've done a number of interviews with individuals in town that go to St. Francis.

WOOD: Oh, yes, that's the older parish, I guess. This Father Dolan that's in now is doing a really nice job. I think he's sort of—like anything else, new blood comes in, and you have new ideas, and it freshens things up a little. I think he's working hard at it.

MACRO: As to relations with parochial schools in the greater Hartford area: they seem to be consolidating. They don't seem to be attracting the students in the numbers that they used to. Is that a fair thing to say?

WOOD: Oh, yeah. I think that's all over. When I say all over, I mean all over the country, definitely. Basically going out of existence. Pardon?

MACRO: [1:01:52.6] Something good being lost there?

WOOD: Well, yes and no. Certainly in some districts and some school systems and some urban areas unfortunately the best education some of these kids can get is a parochial education, because the schools are so bad in the public system. I think that's lost if they go out. I did not have a very pleasant experience in elementary school, I can tell you that, in the

parochial elementary school. I was, as I told you, the second youngest of nine. I had one younger brother and four older brothers that went through, before me, the same school, and three sisters that went through before me. And I had nuns that basically said, “Oh, the Wood family. I knew your brother, George. You’re not going to be like him, are you?” that kind of thing. [1:02:52.5] And they were unabashed about that, and it wasn’t very pleasant.

I’ve often thought, if you’ve got a nun that would be alive today and said that I became a schoolteacher is one thing. If they said I became a superintendent, they’d probably have a heart attack. I was a terrible student in elementary school. I did only what I had to do and then maybe not that, and when I got into CM, Catholic Memorial, it was a very different world. They were young [religious] brothers. The president—or they called him principal back then—was a Brother McKenna, who came in via Iona College, a math major, brilliant guy. And they basically put him there to found the school, [with] five young [religious] brothers. They built the school as we were going through it, and they were terrific. They expected you to act like young Christian gentlemen. [1:03:53.6] And if you didn’t, boy, you heard about it, and sometimes you physically knew about it. But it was exactly what I think I needed at the time, and that was in the first two years, and the last two years they were totally different. They were like you were young gentlemen, and you were treated like a young man, and they were very demanding. I saw what hard work does for you, and that’s where I really got my start academically. There’s a loss there.

MACRO: That experience you wouldn’t find today, do you think, in a parochial school?

WOOD: Well, CM is doing very, very well, and what you don’t find is all brothers. They have the brothers’ presence there, maybe three or four brothers still there. But it’s basically lay teachers. But they have a very—they still have a very good school, a very good school. They’re doing some really interesting things. [1:04:50.9] If we had lived around there, down in the Boston area, I would send my son there, no question, even now. I’ve stayed in touch with them in terms of newsletters and things like that. It’s still a top-notch education along with Boston College High School. That’s the other one in the Boston area. That’s still there, but the nuns—my wife went to a school, Notre Dame Academy. It was in Roxbury [a section of Boston] Mass when she went, but now it’s in Hingham. That’s doing very, very well. The upper echelon parochial high schools, secondary schools, are still doing well in the Boston area. I don’t know about Connecticut. I just don’t follow them. But as far as the elementary parochial schools, except in the inner cities, I’m not sure they offer an awful lot that’s better than a public school setting.

MACRO: Since your retirement, you have kept your hand in through consultations and so on.

WOOD: [1:05:51.3] Yeah, I do some independent consulting, and a lot of my work right now is focusing on finding superintendents for other school systems in basically Connecticut, but I do some in Western Mass as well.

MACRO: Are you very busy at that?

WOOD: Well, it's busy enough for me. [laughs] Right now I like to do one at a time—there's a lot of work to it, and part of the work ties you down for a while. And two I've done together, but this time I got involved in three of them. I didn't expect to: two of them were on the same parallel track, but I thought we'd get two. I said, "If I get two, that's okay," and then we got all three, and I had already committed myself to the director of NESDEC [New England School Development Council] that I'd do them, so I got stuck with them. But I enjoy it. [1:06:50.0] I think the reason why I enjoy it is what I said before. If you can get a superintendent and a board of education, a good match, good things happen for students as opposed to if I just do consulting, which I do, and I just go in and do an evaluation or do some planning or whatever, and I walk away. I give them the finished product, and I don't know what happens after that. But I guarantee you if I get a good match and find and recruit people who once I get to know what the board needs and who they are, then I think when I leave something nice will happen for kids.

MACRO: Good. Well, Joe, thank you very much for submitting to this interview.

WOOD: Well, it was fun. I was trying to think before you got here whether I'd be able to recapture some of it, but it was fun.

MACRO: I think you've done very well, and on behalf of the oral history group I want to thank you very much.

WOOD: [1:07:51.4] I'm flattered that you would think it would be worth your while, so thank you.

MACRO: It certainly has been. Thank you.

WOOD: Good, good.

MACRO: I'm supposed to leave it a little while here to let it sort of—I don't know—

WOOD: Yeah, you don't want to shut it off until it's finished. You lose the electronics, huh?

MACRO: I think you might. I think we're all right now.

[1:08:23.3 End of audio]

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