Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Government History Documentation Project
Ronald Reagan Gubernatorial Era

Wilson C. Riles

"NO ADVERSARY SITUATIONS": PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA AND WILSON C. RILES, SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION, 1970-1982

With an introduction by
Ralph W. Tyler

An Interview Conducted by
Sarah Sharp
1981-1982

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

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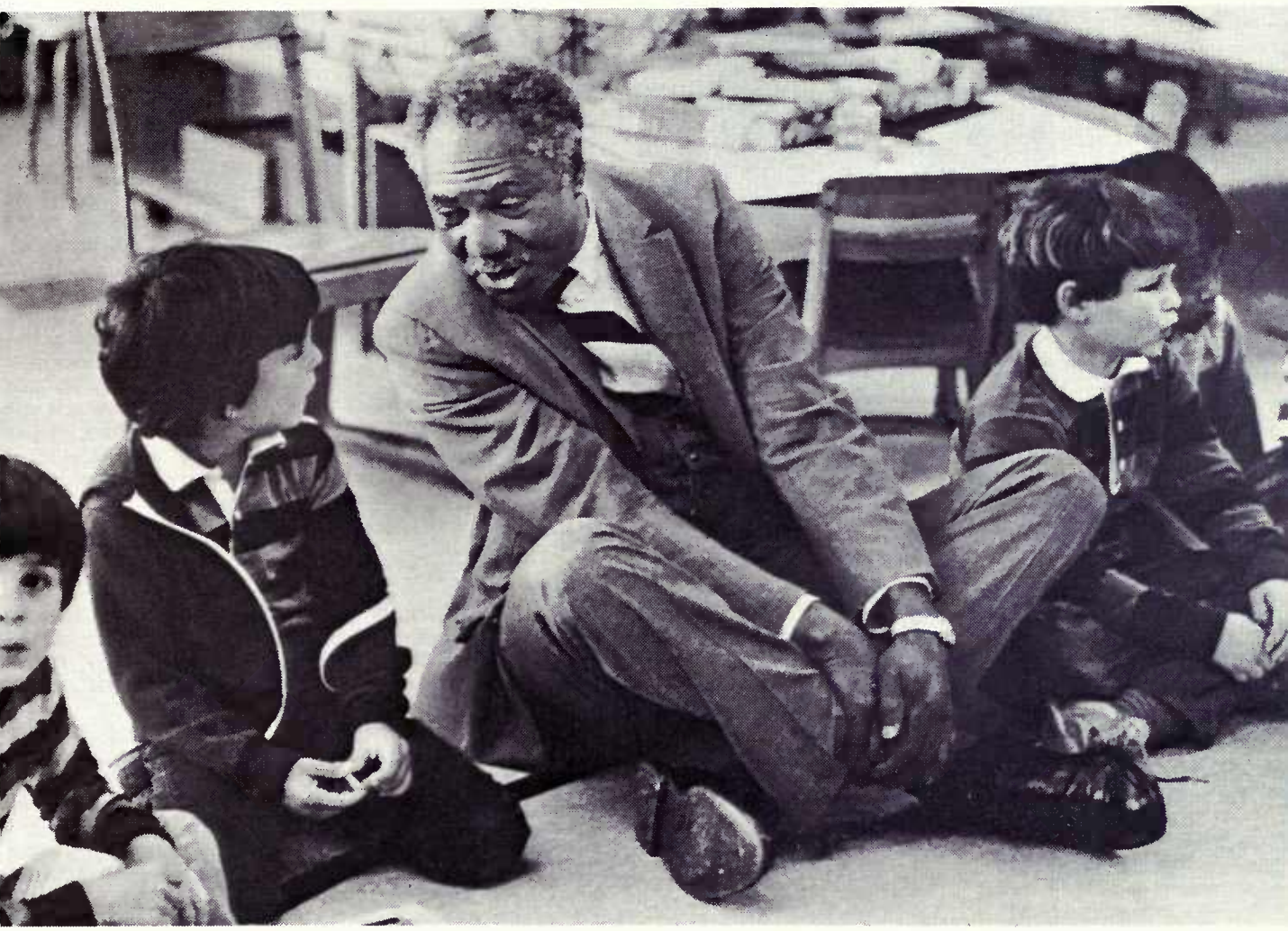

Wilson Riles, Superintendent of Public Instruction, visiting the kindergarten at Vallecito School in Lafayette, California, ca. 1981.

Sacramento Bee photograph by Owen Brewe

Ex-state schools chief Wilson Riles dies at 81

■ He was the first black to hold a statewide office and put his teaching experience to work on behalf of system changes to benefit children

By Deb Kollars
SCRIPPS-McCLATCHY NEWS SERVICE

SACRAMENTO — Wilson Riles, an orphan who rose from deep poverty in Louisiana to become superintendent of the massive California public school system and the first black to hold statewide elective office, has died at age 81.

His death came late Thursday at Mercy General Hospital, where he had been hospitalized for more than two months, from a severe lung infection, multiple small strokes and a heart attack.

Up and down the state, educators remembered him Friday as a passionate advocate for the students of California.

"I'll always think of his devotion to children," said Don McKinley, who was Riles' chief deputy for 9½ years and the first president of the Association of California School Administrators. "What was good for children was always foremost in his mind."

Gov. Gray Davis, who ordered the flag at the state Capitol flown at half-staff over the weekend, called Riles an "inspiration to all those who have ever been told the odds are against them. Wilson was a veteran of World War II, but he was also a veteran in the fight against discrimination."

A former teacher, Riles served three terms as state superintendent, from 1971 to 1983. He was known especially for his work in developing early childhood education programs and pushing for parents to become more involved in their youngsters' schooling.

He was a nationally recognized

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

WILSON RILES rose from poverty to a top education post.

in education who was as com-
e advising presidents and mov-
political circles as he was
d parents, teachers and chil-

e teacher in him would come
ywhere — in airports, eleva-
wherever he felt it was impor-
make the point about schools
ildren," said Davis Campbell,
ty superintendent under Riles
w executive director of the Cal-
School Boards Association.
is later years, Riles would re-
n his accomplishments with a
re of humility and pride:
d you ever guess a black boy
he backwoods of Louisiana
become superintendent of ed-
n in the biggest state in the
? I couldn't have done that
People helped me along the
owe them."
er leaving public office, he re-
d active in school matters as
of his own educational con-
firm, Wilson Riles and Asso-
in Sacramento. In recent
he conducted superintendent
es for two Sacramento area
districts.

In his 81 years, Riles journeyed far from his hardscrabble beginnings.

He was born June 27, 1917, in rural Alexandria, La., where his father worked harvesting rosin from pine trees for turpentine. When he was a boy, his mother died, and shortly after, his father. Friends took the child in and raised him. He worked his way through high school by delivering milk from 2 to 7 a.m. many days.

Following high school, Riles moved with his foster family to Arizona, where he attended Northern Arizona University and earned a bachelor's degree in 1940. After serving three years with the Army Air Corps during World War II, he completed a master's degree in school administration at NAU in 1947.

Riles began his teaching career in a segregated one-room schoolhouse for the children of black mill workers near Pistol Creek, Ariz.

In an interview in 1994, he described the simple rules for academic success that he tried to instill in his students: Be on time, if not early, to get a good seat in the front of class. And always over-learn the homework.

"He was an advocate for all chil-

A major Riles push as superintendent was to encourage parents and community members to become more involved in schools through site councils and other measures, said Robert Trigg, former Elk Grove superintendent and current president of the state Board of Education. Riles also revamped special education and advocated independent learning programs tailored to individual students.

"He made some major steps in opening the schools to the community," Trigg said.

In 1982, Riles was defeated in his run for a fourth by Bill Honig, who ran a back-to-basics campaign. Honig had been an ally of Riles, but over time grew to believe that public schools under Riles' tenure had lost their rigor.

Honig said Friday that his predecessor made many strong contributions. "He really fought for education, and he'll be missed."

In 1991, Riles created the Wilson Riles Archives and Institute for Education dedicated to evaluating the success of educational reforms.

He is survived by his wife of 57 years, Louise; sons Michael and Phillip of Sacramento and Wilson Jr., a former Oakland City Council member; a daughter, Narvia Bostick of Mechanicsburg, Pa.; eight grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

The family has asked that remembrances be sent to the Wilson Riles Education Foundation, 400 Capitol Mall, Suite 1540, Sacramento, CA 95814, where a teacher scholarship fund has been established in his memory.

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PREFACE

California government and politics from 1966 through 1974 are the focus of the Reagan Gubernatorial Era Series of the state Government History Documentation Project, conducted by the Regional Oral History Office of The Bancroft Library with the participation of the oral history programs at the Davis and Los Angeles campuses of the University of California, Claremont Graduate School, and California State University at Fullerton. This series of interviews carries forward studies of significant issues and processes in public administration begun by the Regional Oral History Office in 1969. In previous series, interviews with over 220 legislators, elected and appointed officials, and others active in public life during the governorships of Earl Warren, Goodwin Knight, and Edmund Brown, Sr., were completed and are now available to scholars.

The first unit in the Government History Documentation Project, the Earl Warren Series, produced interviews with Warren himself and others centered on key developments in politics and government administration at the state and county level, innovations in criminal justice, public health, and social welfare from 1925-1953. Interviews in the Knight-Brown Era continued the earlier inquiries into the nature of the governor's office and its relations with executive departments and the legislature, and explored the rapid social and economic changes in the years 1953-1966, as well as preserving Brown's own account of his extensive political career. Among the issues documented were the rise and fall of the Democratic party; establishment of the California Water Plan; election law changes, reapportionment and new political techniques; education and various social programs.

During Ronald Reagan's years as governor, important changes became evident in California government and politics. His administration marked an end to the progressive period which had provided the determining outlines of government organization and political strategy since 1910 and the beginning of a period of limits in state policy and programs, the extent of which is not yet clear. Interviews in this series deal with the efforts of the administration to increase government efficiency and economy and with organizational innovations designed to expand the management capability of the governor's office, as well as critical aspects of state health, education, welfare, conservation, and criminal justice programs. Legislative and executive department narrators provide their perspectives on these efforts and their impact on the continuing process of legislative and elective politics.

Work began on the Reagan Gubernatorial Era Series in 1979. Planning and research for this phase of the project were augmented by participation of other oral history programs with experience in public affairs. Additional advisors were selected to provide relevant background for identifying persons to be interviewed and understanding of issues to be documented. Project research files, developed by the Regional Oral History Office staff to provide a systematic background for questions, were updated to add personal, topical, and chronological data for the Reagan period to the existing base of information for 1925 through 1966, and to supplement research by participating programs as needed. Valuable, continuing assistance in preparing for interviews was provided by the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, which houses the Ronald Reagan Papers, and by the State Archives in Sacramento.

An effort was made to select a range of interviewees that would reflect the increase in government responsibilities and that would represent diverse points of view. In general, participating programs were contracted to conduct interviews on topics with which they have particular expertise, with persons presently located nearby. Each interview is identified as to the originating institution. Most interviewees have been queried on a limited number of topics with which they were personally connected; a few narrators with unusual breadth of experience have been asked to discuss a multiplicity of subjects. When possible, the interviews have traced the course of specific issues leading up to and resulting from events during the Reagan administration in order to develop a sense of the continuity and interrelationships that are a significant aspect of the government process.

Throughout Reagan's years as governor, there was considerable interest and speculation concerning his potential for the presidency; by the time interviewing for this project began in late 1980, he was indeed president. Project interviewers have attempted, where appropriate, to retrieve recollections of that contemporary concern as it operated in the governor's office. The intent of the present interviews, however, is to document the course of California government from 1967 to 1974, and Reagan's impact on it. While many interviewees frame their narratives of the Sacramento years in relation to goals and performance of Reagan's national administration, their comments often clarify aspects of the gubernatorial period that were not clear at the time. Like other historical documentation, these oral histories do not in themselves provide the complete record of the past. It is hoped that they offer firsthand experience of passions and personalities that have influenced significant events past and present.

The Reagan Gubernatorial Era Series was begun with funding from the California legislature via the office of the Secretary of State and continued through the generosity of various individual donors. Several memoirs have been funded in part by the California Women in Politics Project under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, including a matching grant from the Rockefeller Foundation; by the Sierra Club Project also under a NEH grant; and by the privately funded Bay Area State and Regional Planning Project. This joint funding has enabled staff working with narrators and topics related to several projects to expand the scope and thoroughness of each individial interview involved by careful coordination of their work.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons significant in the history of California and the West. The Office is under the administrative direction of James D. Hart, Director of the Bancroft Library, and Willa Baum, head of the Office. Copies of all interviews in the series are available for research use in The Bancroft Library, UCLA Department of Special Collections, and the State Archives in Sacramento. Selected interviews are also available at other manuscript depositories.

July 1982
Regional Oral History Office
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University of California at Berkeley

Gabrielle Morris
Project Director

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*Deceased during the term of the project

On behalf of future scholars, the Regional Oral History Office wishes to thank those who have responded to the Office's request for funds to continue documentation of Ronald Reagan's years as governor of California. Donors to the project as of March 1984 are listed below.

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Reagan, Neil, "Private Dimensions and Public Images: The Early Political Campaigns of Ronald Reagan," UC Los Angeles, 1981, 58 pp.

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Boas, Roger, UC Berkeley.
Breed, Allen, UC Berkeley.
Brian, Earl, UC Berkeley.
Carleson, Robert, UC Berkeley.
Cristina, Vernon, UC Berkeley.
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Gillenwaters, Ed, UC Berkeley.
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Hume, Jaquelin, "Basic Economics and the Body Politic: Views of a Northern California Reagan Loyalist," UC Berkeley.
Jenkins, James, UC Berkeley.
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King, Warren, "Governor Reagan's Use of Task Forces and Loaned Executives, 1966-1968," UC Berkeley.
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Livingston, Donald, UC Berkeley.
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Thomas, Edwin L., UC Berkeley.
Todd, A. Ruric, UC Berkeley.
Tooker, John S., "Director of the Office of Planning and Research, and Legislative Assistant, 1967-1974," UC Berkeley.
Volk, Robert, Jr., UC Berkeley.
Walker, Robert, UC Berkeley.
Walton, Frank, UC Berkeley.
Walton, Rus, UC Berkeley,
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Wrather, Jack, UC Berkeley.
Wright, Donald R., CSU Fullerton
Zumbrun, Ronald A., "Social Welfare Reform from Task Force to Trial Court, 1970-1973," UC Berkeley.

Participating Institutions

Oral History Office, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Davis, California, 95616.

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INTRODUCTION

Wilson Riles was the chief officer of California's public educational system at the time it was subjected to the greatest stress and turmoil ever experienced. It is high tribute to his leadership that the public schools of the state are now firmly committed both to equality of educational opportunity and to excellence.

The civil rights movement and the increased articulateness of minority groups in the 1960s had aroused the concern of the American public over the wide disparities in educational opportunities and achievements between students from minority groups and those from middle-class "white" families. Court decisions and legislation furnished support for efforts to attain equality of educational opportunity for all children and youth. However, the steps to be taken by the state and development of practical plans to guide local schools in moving successfully toward equity and, at the same time, toward improved quality of education were not and could not be designed by the legislature or the courts. Experience and wise educational leadership was necessary to encourage and assist the dedicated and imaginative teachers, administrators, and parents in the schools and communities, who to a surprising degree developed and are developing solutions to the problems faced in local districts.

Public discussion did not adequately inform Riles about the many conflicting forces with which he had to deal. The prevailing stereotype then and still today is one in which persons who strongly support their belief in the worth and potential of every human being regardless of race, ethnicity or religion are pitted against persons who are firmly biased against persons of races, ethnicity, or religions different from their own. Riles found that the groups that consciously or unconsciously opposed important elements in a comprehensive plan for equity and excellence in education were more numerous and varied in their outlooks and purposes than these two.

For example, he was confronted by some self-selected leaders of minorities who hoped to gain or retain control over their groups by keeping them from entering the mainstream of American political, economic, and social life. By professing belief in a multi-cultured society that did not desire Americanization, they sought to protect their positions in which the rank and file of their minority groups were dependent upon them. They made coalitions with unselfishly oriented persons who had not recognized that equal educational opportunity required an end to racial or ethnic isolation, and an end to "separate but equal" programs. Riles had to develop policies that would encourage the building of programs that would make use of the constructive elements of a minority culture in helping students to learn what is required to become effective participants in American life.

He was confronted by certain other groups who believed that minority students needed to learn only occupational skills. These groups would have the schools concentrate on vocational programs at an early age. Riles recognized that our country is in greater danger from ignorant citizens than from unskilled workers. He worked to develop policies to insure that minorities would not be denied an opportunity for general education while gaining skills required for initial employment.

He was pressured by some persons who favored opportunities for minorities as long as their own children had greater opportunities and achieved more in school. They asked for funding formulas that would provide more funds for schools that enroll "gifted children". They supported policies that would give financial rewards to schools in which the children were demonstrating superior educational achievement, and opposed extra funds for the education of "disadvantaged children".

He met with "working class" parents who thought that better-educated minorities were serious threats to them in obtaining jobs, getting political power and social status. They were joined with some other parents who feared that their children, if in a desegregated school, would acquire the "vulgar language and behavior" often attributed to slum dwellers and other poor children.

He also met with minority families that were making substantial progress toward their goal of social mobility. Many of these were already recognized as "upper middle class". They perceived the schools in which their children were enrolled as good schools, and feared that desegregation would destroy the quality of their schools.

These are examples of the varied groups that Riles found were initially critical of genuine efforts to provide equality of educational opportunity and excellence for minorities. Yet he was able to establish policies that strongly supported these two goals.

How was it possible for a black man, born in the deep South, of a family of limited means, in a relatively provincial educational environment, to understand so comprehensively and to deal so constructively and effectively with people and organizations with such different motives, most of whom opposed some of the essential policy elements for meeting the challenge of equity and excellence in the California public schools? The oral history probes deeply into details of Riles' childhood, as well as his early professional experiences. It presents information that helps us to understand this rare person who was able to channel some of the forces of discrimination and oppression into constructive avenues for societal improvement.

He is revealed as essentially a man who trusts the good will of most people and their actions when they are fully informed. He worked hard to understand the individuals and organizations with which he dealt, and he sought from many sources to gain both perspective and the significant details

of the problems and issues which he confronted. Then, at an almost leisurely pace, he discussed the matters with those concerned, helping them to understand more fully the issues and problems involved and the likely consequences of alternative policies. This way of working usually separated opponents of policies who had ulterior and selfish interests to promote from those of good will, who lacked information and understanding. The latter, fortunately, were usually in the majority.

Since my own professional efforts have focused for many years on equity and excellence, I found this material of greatest interest to me. But Riles was not so absorbed in this subject that nothing else mattered. Not only was he involved in other professional issues, he was also interested in people. He liked many people, in many fields and from many backgrounds, and usually people like him. In the fall of 1977, I led a delegation of state educational leaders (mostly state superintendents) in a visit to educational institutions in China. We were guests of the Chinese Ministry of Education and were guided by officers of the Ministry. Wilson Riles was a star of the delegation. He had read a good deal about China before making the trip and he was able quickly to establish conversation with Chinese educators, students, and others wherever we went.

We were visiting a secondary school where, during a recess period, some of the students were playing basketball. They tossed the ball to Riles, who, without change of pace or of conversation, tossed in into a basket seventy-five feet away. The students were astonished and crowded around him to get further demonstrations of his athletic prowess. Wherever he went in China he was easily able to observe the activities underway and to become part of them.

In a more recent period, Riles was a member of the Board of Trustees of the American College Testing Program. The chief problem of college admission testing today is to shift the purposes from seeking to identify students who will easily make good grades in college to a program that identifies assets of prospective students upon which college teachers can build effective instructional programs. In the past, college admission tests were employed to select students that did not require changes in college instruction to help them achieve academic learning. The common assumption was that the college, like many of our social institutions, was almost infallible and persons were selected who could easily fit into their practices and environment, or, with effort, could learn to do so. Increasingly, leaders in democratic countries are recognizing that institutions are created to serve the people and can be expected to change practices where necessary to serve new groups or to provide new services that are perceived as desirable.

This view is so contrary to the long tradition of college entrance examinations, that when Everett F. Lindquist, who was a professor at the University of Iowa, and I, serving on the board for ETS [Educational Testing Service], recommended developing new instruments and procedures to meet this newly recognized responsibility of schools and colleges, we were outvoted and the

idea was dismissed as both impractical and contrary to the known principles of psychology. Lindquist, then, spent much time and effort in getting the American College Testing program established as an institution to serve both school and college in providing information about the assets of students on which colleges could build more effective instructional programs for the students they enrolled, and information about colleges on which students and their parents could base more informed decisions about college choices.

Although the full implementation of this new direction had not taken place when Riles joined the ACT board and although this was not a problem he had faced earlier, he quickly saw its importance and firmly supported policies that gave encouragement to this new thrust of college admission testing. This is another illustration of Riles' skill in recognizing significant educational problems and becoming rapidly informed about them, so that his efforts could be wisely directed. Few persons in bureaucratic establishments have such broad perspective and these skills.

This oral history provides a more intimate picture of this remarkable educator. It also furnishes one of the bases that can be used to develop principles dealing with the roles individuals have and can play in changing and improving large social institutions. It is a substantial addition to the archives of educational history.

Ralph W. Tyler
Director Emeritus
Center for Advanced Study
in the Behavioral Sciences

29 February 1984
Palo Alto, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Readers of this oral history conducted with Wilson C. Riles will gain a sense of the critical issues facing elementary and secondary education in California in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as how Riles and the Department of Education, the legislature, Governor Ronald Reagan, and the California Supreme Court each addressed these issues. In his introduction to this volume, Ralph Tyler deftly describes Riles's relationship to the primary currents which pervaded American education as a whole from the 1960s on. He enables the reader to appreciate Riles as an innovative statesman for American education overall, and the California experience as counterpoint to the national scene.

The pervasive theme of Riles's efforts in education and in the civil rights movement has been one of "no adversary situations"; he has placed the highest value on a calm and reasoning approach to compromise among groups with different or conflicting objectives.

The first taping session for this oral history was held in early evening, 15 September 1981, in San Francisco's Clift Hotel, at the end of a busy afternoon during which Superintendent Riles had met with certain groups to discuss public school education in the Bay Area. As the oral history shows, in this session Riles introduced the topics and themes which he felt were most notable from his years in the Department of Education: passage of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, discrimination in teacher employment, his own Early Childhood Education program and the concept of compensatory education, involvement of parents and school boards at the local level, and college admissions standards. Riles also contributed notes on how he saw his own role as superintendent and Ronald Reagan's role as governor with respect to education in California. This initial meeting with the interviewee was relaxed; Riles thoughtfully drew on his pipe and kept his lanky frame stretched out comfortably in an easy chair.

The four succeeding sessions were conducted on 20 October, 3 November, and 21 December 1981, and 10 February 1982, in Riles's office at the Department of Education in Sacramento. Riles usually had meetings scheduled both before and after the late afternoon taping sessions, and the interviews were often interrupted by phone calls and assistants' queries. As the reader will see, topics for the sessions followed chronologically after the preliminary session, covering Riles's childhood, teaching career, army service, work with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and extensive discussion of his years in the department since 1958. While the interviewer always sent an outline and materials for discussion ahead of time, Riles's schedule often did not afford him time to review them.

Riles highlighted the 3 November 1981 meeting by showing the film, "One Man: Wilson Riles," to the interviewer. Riles had narrated much of this short, color film which had been produced by the United States Information Agency in 1971 and which documented California's compensatory education program, the modernization of the state's Department of Education, and Riles's task force approach to administration as state superintendent. The film opened and closed with friendly close-up shots of Riles picking up young children and talking with them.

During the fifth session, 10 February 1982, Riles discussed the California Supreme Court's decision in Serrano v. Priest, the equalization of public school finance demanded by that decision, and other issues that were important in his first term as superintendent. The press of his current campaign to re-election to a fourth term was apparent, as his long-time assistant Marian Joseph interrupted the session to detail plans for Riles's appearance at an upcoming campaign event.

The series ended as it had begun, with a more relaxed session away from the superintendent's office; this last session on 16 August 1982 was held at Riles's home in suburban Sacramento long after working hours. The interviewee considered school desegregation and the administrative reorganization he had initiated within the department. He closed the session with candid comments on the election race then fully under way against William Honig, and on the importance of an elected state superintendent.

At Riles's request, the interviewer met with him for two additional taping sessions, so that he might record his responses to questions she had asked in the transcript during his review. These sessions were held in 1983, after Riles had been defeated in his 1982 re-election effort and had established a consulting firm in Sacramento. The tapes from these sessions were transcribed and the material incorporated into this manuscript.

Sarah Sharp
Interviewer-Editor

14 March 1984
Regional Oral History Office
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University of California at Berkeley

BIOGRAPHY OF WILSON RILES

PERSONAL DATA

Born: June 27, 1917, Alexandria, Louisiana

Family: Married to Mary Louise Phillips, 1941
Children: Michael; Mrs. Narvia Bostick; Wilson, Jr.; Phillip

Education: B.A. Degree, Northern Arizona University, 1940
M.A. Degree, Northern Arizona University, 1947

Honors:
Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree, 1965
Pepperdine College, Los Angeles, California
Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, 1971
St. Mary's College, St. Mary's College, California
Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, 1971
University of the Pacific, Stockton, California
Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree, 1972
Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California
Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, 1972
University of Judaism, Los Angeles, California
Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree, 1975
University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California
Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree, 1976
Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, Arizona
Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree, 1976
University of Akron, Akron, Ohio
Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree, 1981
Golden Gate University, San Francisco, California

Awards:
Berkeley Citation for Distinguished Achievement and Notable Service to the University of California, Berkeley, 1973
Springarn Medal, Highest Award of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1973
Distinguished Service Award, Harvard Club of San Francisco, 1978
Robert Maynard Hutchins Award, Encyclopedia Britannica, 1978
Medal for Distinguished Service, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1979
Distinguished Alumnus Award, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1979

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

1940-54 Elementary school teacher and administrator, Arizona Public Schools

1954-58 Executive Secretary, Pacific Coast Region, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Los Angeles

1958-70 California State Department of Education, Served as Consultant and later Chief of the Bureau of Intergroup Relations; Director of Compensatory Education and Associate Superintendent of Public Instruction; Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction for Programs and Legislation

1971-82 Superintendent of Public Instruction, State of California

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

President, Wilson Riles and Associates, Inc.
Member, Board of Directors, Wells Fargo Bank and Wells Fargo Company
Member, Board of Directors, Pacific Gas and Electric Company
Member, Advisory Council, Stanford Business School, Stanford University
Member, National Advisory Council, Scholastic Inc.
Member, Editorial Advisory Board, Early Years Magazine
Member, Board of Directors, Marshall McCluhan Center on Global Communications
Member, Board of Advisors, California Association of Student Councils
Member, Board of Trustees, Foundation for Teaching Economics
Member, National Advisory Council, National Schools Volunteer Program
Member, National Committee on United States-China Relations, Inc.
Member, National Panel, Longitudinal Study of Cognitive and Socio-Emotional Development of Young Children 1983-1988
Member, National Council for Children and Television
Member, Industry Education Council of California
Member, Council, Save the Redwoods League
Member, The Cleveland Conference
Member, The Commonwealth Club of California
Member, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
Member, Phi Beta Kappa
Member, Association of California School Administrators
Member, American Association of School Administrators

PAST ACTIVITIES

Chairman, Task Force on Urban Education, U.S. Office of Education
President Johnson's Task Force on Urban Educational Opportunities
Member, Merit Pay Task Force, Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. Congress
National Advisory Committee on the Teacher Corps
NEA Task Force on Urban Education
Advisory Committee of California Legislature's Joint Committee on Higher Education
California Teachers Association's Human Relations Commission
Advisory Panel of Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching
Ad Hoc Advisory Committee on Financial Statistics for Urban Education, U.S. Office of Education
2nd Vice President, National PTA
Member, Board of Trustees, Educational Testing Service
Member, Board of Trustees, American College Testing Program (Vice Chairman 1981-82)
Member, Advisory Board, California Congress of Parents, Teachers, and Students, Inc.
Member, Center for Public Affairs, Board of Concillors, University of So. California
Melbo Professor of Education, University of Southern California
Member, National Council on Educational Research
Member, Stanford Research Institute Council
Ex-Officio Member, Board of Trustees, California State University
Ex-Officio Member, Board of Regents, The University of California
Member, Council of Chief State School Officers (President 1981-82)
Member, Educational Commission of the States
Member, National Advisory Council on Child Nutrition
Member, Task Force on Federal Education Policy, The Twentieth Century Fund
Member, Board of Trustees, Joint Council on Economic Education

MILITARY SERVICE

Veteran, World War II, U.S. Army Corps

I AN OVERVIEW OF THE SUPERINTENDENT YEARS

[Interview 1: September 15, 1981]##

Notable Education Issues

Sharp: Let's begin by going over the outline I sent you.

Riles: I was trying to think of here--"youth and schooling"--that covers it pretty well. Include work in there, because I started work at a very early age, and I really worked. Then my first positions. My college work in Northern Arizona University, which was Arizona State Teacher's College, and then later Arizona State College. The name has changed.

The decision I made to go to college. I always intended to go to college, but I wasn't sure that I would go when I started, because I didn't have any money. I had to weigh some decisions of whether to go to work, take a job, or go to college. I made a choice right there. Some of these things, you never know--they could go either way.

I did put some time in the service, which you know about.

Sharp: The army air corps.

Riles: Yes. Then you mentioned we would cover the period in the Department of Education, that would be '58, and then '65 to '69. During that period (I suppose this will come out in the interview) I was the first black professional, so far as I can determine, that was ever hired in the department, and that wasn't a million years ago; that

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##This symbol indicates that a tape or a segment of a tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes see page 130.

Riles: was 1958. Where I was placed in the department, that was working for the chief deputy, George Hogan, is real important in, I think, what my perspective in the department has been, what happened subsequent to that. How I related to the superintendent after [Roy E.] Simpson*--that would be--

Sharp: Dr. [Max] Rafferty?

Riles: Yes. Then, of course, my decision to run as superintendent and why will come out. Some of the issues that were broader than education that had an impact on education, as you indicated before, I think will come out. Let me see if I can throw out an example.

Sharp: Yes.

Riles: [pause] The general concept of who had more difficulties became an issue late in the [John F.] Kennedy administration, and certainly in the [Lyndon Baines] Johnson administration, which culminated in 1965 in the passage of the [federal] Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The main title in that act, Title I, was for disadvantaged children, raising the achievement level of disadvantaged children. More money was in Title I of the education act than any other federal program in elementary and secondary. How I came to head that program, with the total responsibility of getting it out and running, how it was done, and the impact of what was done in that program. That program in subsequent years served as models and modifications of approaches to education that have affected the total system, including Early Childhood Education which got its germs in that kind of experience.

Relationships with the educational establishment will come out, I hope. That is, the organized teachers, school administrators, school boards, which is very interesting.

Another thing that would be of interest is the community involvement aspect, as compared with what was going on in the sixties so far as the Office of Economic Opportunity was concerned, the decision in Washington to put power in the hands of community groups because they couldn't find any other solutions. They were naive--the idea that Uncle Sam is going to fund the poor to take on the establishment with taxpayers' money was plainly, flatly naive, but that's another question.

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*Readers may want to see Simpson's own oral history, California State Department of Education, 1945-1962, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, 1978.

Riles: And how, in education, that I viewed involvement at a level of cooperation rather than an adversary situation.

I don't want to lose sight of those kinds of things because I think they're important.

Then, of course, as an ex officio member of the University of California regents and the state universities and colleges was an experience that I think fits in that, in particularly one or two key issues that I took strong positions on. One, the entrance requirements back in 1977, got a lot of publicity. That issue was resolved, but then it did not resolve the whole issue of access to the university. Who goes and how, and what is expected of high school students in order to successfully do college work is something now that is being debated, and something I've talked to the education committee of the regents [about], and something that Dave [David S.] Saxon is now working on now. It's very interesting how these things move along.

One of the reasons I thought it would be a good idea to talk to you was because it's amazing the discontinuity that happens. New people move on the scene; they don't have any sense of history. It's interesting. People raise an issue as if it's brand new and a new insight. People have considered that and took steps for whatever reason before, and it would just seem logical before someone starts marching off in some direction to take a look--has this been faced before? If it was, what was the context in which it was faced? What were the issues that were debated, and why did they decide to do it this way? That seems simple, a simple question, but you'd be amazed how few times that is done. Instead, issues are rehashed every fifteen or twenty years as if they are new and have never been addressed. Periodically there is a reading crisis, or math, or vocational education crisis. Periodically there is a debate on whether instruction should be individualized or whether every student should jump through the same hoop at the same time.

In any case, I think as we go along most of these things will come out.

Sharp: As we go through this, when we're meeting, jot down whatever notes that come to you, whether it's part of the topic that we're talking about or not. We can incorporate questions or thoughts that come to you throughout the sessions. We'll be meeting often enough that we have plenty of time to do that.

Riles: All right. Do you have a process by which, on some of these things, you can check a date or re-check a date? I always live in fear that I will miss a date or something like that, that it has escaped my

Riles: memory. But on everything that I tell you, and I'm not certain about the date, I will say, "Here's something that ought to be checked in that context."

Sharp: Sure. I'm editing an interview I had with Senator [Albert] Rodda* now. I'm checking a few things that he asked me to, because he wasn't sure about some of the dates or some of the people, or whatever. It's pretty easy for us to do.

Riles: He carried a bill for me, one of the first pieces of legislation.

Sharp: Which one was this?

Riles: I don't remember the number, but it had to do with setting up a Bureau of Intergroup Relations [within the Department of Education].**

We had a commission called Discrimination in Teacher Employment, and they had a civil service examination for that, which I took and passed. That's how I came to the Department of Education. So I was consultant in what was called Certificated Employment Practices, and executive secretary of that commission. I worked at that for a number of years.

Then, in the early sixties, I felt that what ought to be done in the department was broader than just teacher employment practices, that what we needed was leadership at the state level, and in intergroup relations--how people related to each other. The whole question of school segregation was how do we help, how do we assist, and how do we advise. So that meant broadening my role, and that meant needing legislation. He carried that bill.

Sharp: He is a very interesting figure. He has been in education a long time.

Riles: Oh, yes. I'm sorry that he lost; that was a great tragedy. It relates who is effective in office, to never take anything for granted.

Sharp: If there are other topics that I've left out, just write them down, or tell me the next time you see me.

Riles: I'll be pleased to help out in any way.

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*Albert Rodda, "Sacramento Senator: State Leadership in Education and Finance," in The Assembly, the State Senate, and the Governor's Office, 1958-1974, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1982.

**See pp. 4, 50-51.

Sharp: I wanted to ask you about a couple of highlights. When you were equal opportunity officer, I wondered what you thought was the major highlight of that particular position?

Riles: There were two areas in which I worked before I became the Director of Compensatory Education, and broadened my responsibility, at least my responsibility was broadened. But under my unit still came the areas I had started in equal opportunity. Number one, I mentioned that I came to work as a consultant in Certificated Employment Practices.

By the way, the AFT, the American Federation of Teachers, really are the ones that sponsored that legislation before I got there. It wasn't an equal employment opportunities commission. It's interesting that it came afterwards that there was a state equal opportunities commission.

This [the Commission on Discrimination in Teacher Employment] was an effort by education to do something about eliminating discrimination in teacher employment in the state. They did not approach it on the basis of compliance law, as did the Fair Employment Practices Commission, which came a year or two afterwards. Part of this was because the department had prior to that time viewed itself to assist and help. So the legislation said there would be a commission established to assist and advise school districts in problems of discrimination in teacher employment. That was roughly what that original legislation was.

They needed then a staff person. That's why they set up a civil service examination that I took, and I passed it, and was appointed.

Now, since there was no direct law on the books (and I think this is a highlight, something we might want to examine during that period), since we didn't have cease and desist authority to order cease and desist from what was not being fair, I approached the tasks, in order to get the job done, on the basis of really advising and working with school superintendents and boards [of education] to move forward on eliminating discrimination.

Indeed, I tried to approach it in a positive way, that when you fail to employ the most qualified teachers, you weren't merely denying a deserving person a job, you were denying the youngsters of having the best teacher available.

I think that is a philosophical approach, which I believe in and which I still think we ought to utilize. Even though now we have laws on the books that say, "You can't do this," or more directly

Riles: try to deal with the problem, my idea still is--not that we shouldn't have laws, yes, we should have laws--to rely solely on the law, on the legal approach, to achieving a goal that is a human goal, means that you're really not going to get the job done. You can get tied up in legal entanglements.

To assume that an individual out there is automatically against equal opportunity or fairness or justice, or however you want to put it, is the wrong approach. It is better to assume that the person wants to do the right thing, and to determine why aren't they. It may be fear, maybe they don't want to rock the boat. It may be lack of knowledge.

How you help the individual and give him support and guidance are some of the things that I can talk about, which I think are significant in our approach, particularly significant since I think we did our work so well that there was little the Fair Employment Practices Commission had to do when it was established in the area of teacher employment.

Sharp: Well, that will be real interesting to get into.

Riles: Now, on the business of intergroup relations, out of that [the Commission on Discrimination in Teacher Employment] grew, as I told you, the Rodda legislation to establish a unit that broadened itself, so that we went further in the area. We began to deal with problems of school integration. Again, we attempted to approach this from a rational, educational level. I say rational because I think it was, rather than the mechanistic kind of approach where you just start busing kids all over the place and so on.

As I look back, because of the whole national structure, the massive resistance in the South, the situations that began to develop court cases in California, maybe we were not able to move rapidly enough. But I don't think that was it.

I think that the civil rights group rightly and patiently went the legal route, and the courts got into the action without paying enough attention to the human relations, intergroup relations, the kinds of feelings that parents have, both black and white.

See, it takes more time, and it's more difficult to educate, to bring along, to build a kind of relationship where a program is successful. It takes more time to do that. But I think if it is done, it is more effective than saying, "Well, we're going to pass a law to do that." People don't--

Sharp: They don't like that.

Riles: I think the Los Angeles Crawford case is a good example of that. So I think those two things in that area are certainly philosophical and significant items that ought to be pointed out. We ought to point it out in the context of, and I will try to keep it in the context of, what was going on nationally.

Sharp: I want to ask you about all of that, because I know that you were involved later, when you became superintendent, in federal legislation that affected California.

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Riles: Another topic to include would be the problem we ran into with Governor [Edmund G., Jr.] Brown, when we do Governor Brown, when we tried to expand Early Childhood Education. We really got childhood education established under [Governor] Ronald Reagan, with the intent of expanding that to all of the schools. The whole idea was to get youngsters off to a good start.

All of the literature and so on said that children are far more capable of learning at a young age than we give them credit for. The whole idea of basic skills and so on ought to be learned early. Of course, our conceptual framework for that and the funding of it, we were able to sell to Ronald Reagan and began to move it forward.

As we moved it, and we would phase it in, there's a very good reason why we decided to begin relatively small with 12 percent of the youngsters. My philosophy is that you can't manage a system, no matter how innovative you are, which is as large as California's, in over a thousand school districts. At that time, there were 190,000 teachers. And you know all the players that go into that: fifty different county [school] superintendents.

Even if you had the power to order something done, it doesn't mean that it would automatically get done if you ordered it. An example of this was what was done with the so-called new math. There was a ten-year study by top math scholars on revising the curriculum in order to update math in the context of the new computer age and all of that. Then they produced textbooks, and they attempted to implement this statewide and nationwide. It was a near disaster because, in the first place, teachers did not understand the new concept. But more importantly, the parents didn't. Junior comes home and Sally comes home talking about sets and all of that, and the parents have been accustomed to the times tables.

Sharp: The parents look really foolish because they can't help the kids.

Riles: That's right, that's right. So we decided, don't try to do it. Let's begin small. Let's make sure we involve parents, and let's just phase it in. Let's deal with those who are ready to deal with it.

Riles: Now, when we had that in place and moving, we knew we had to deal with the secondary. We put together a task force, called RISE, Reform of Intermediate and Secondary Education. We worked it through the legislature, which is a tough job in itself; we got funding. Jerry Brown had just been elected, and he vetoed the bill.

This brings in my view of why a state Superintendent [of Public Instruction] in California ought to be elected by the people. I was able to come and call a press conference, and take on Jerry Brown. I couldn't have done that, had I been appointed by a board appointed by the governor, as the board [the State Board of Education] is now appointed.

There was one instance where I took on [Governor] Reagan on Proposition 1 [in 1973], and opposed him.* It never made a difference with our personal relationship, which remains good up until the present day. As a matter of fact, a week from last Monday I met with him as president--he is president, of course, now. I would not have had that appointment had it not been for the positive relationship that I was able to establish with him while he was governor, even though I'm a member of a different political party.

So the fact that superintendents in this state are elected is, in my view, very different.

Sharp: We'll get into that because I think even though the position of the superintendent is a non-partisan position, there is still an important element--

Riles: You see you are limited in your power to order things done. But if you are elected by the people, as you are, you have a leadership role to play, an advocacy role to play. Your relationship with legislators is enhanced because you're elected just the way they are, or with the governor, or with the attorney general. They can't say, "Well, you don't know what you're doing, because, you know, we are representing the people." I represent the people too. So, you can talk with your elected people as a peer. I didn't know that prior to the time I became superintendent, didn't know how important it was.

A number of states have changed it, and there have been a number of initiatives and attempts to change it in California. But the people have always come forward. I don't think they really understand all this, but they feel that they want to have something to say about this.

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*Proposition 1, which appeared as the sole ballot measure in the special election held on 6 November 1973, was Governor Ronald Reagan's plan for an amendment to the state constitution that would limit property taxes.

Sharp: I'll ask you two more quick questions. The issue of compensatory education for children in the K through twelve grades is a complex one, because there were so many programs that fall under that general topic. But I wondered, as director of that office, what seemed to be the most important thing that was accomplished?

[Dr. Riles answered this question in a follow-up session.]

Riles: There were two things that I think were accomplished in California. One, of course, there was sensitivity to the idea. California took the lead on that, and I can't take the responsibility for that original sensitivity.

But then secondly, after being asked to head the program, I took the program very, very seriously. The State Board of Education, particularly, gave me authority to move on it, and we were able to put together a good staff, people who were committed to really raising the achievement of those youngsters. We gave leadership to the whole issue. We defined goals and objectives. We worked with school superintendents and boards and really became the leader, the leading state in the union in carrying out the concepts of the programs.

Even today, my friendship that was developed with [U.S.] Senator Carl Perkins, who was one of the initiators of the [federal] Elementary and Secondary Education Act, we've remained friends over the years, because he was so pleased with what we did in California.

[transcript resumes]

Riles: The idea that came out was simply this: many of our youngsters are failing. Who are they and why? When you look at the data, it becomes very clear that the youngsters who are failing or the youngsters who tend to fail most often, certainly from a statistical standpoint, are those youngsters who are poor, come from poor homes, disadvantaged homes, whose parents are outside of the mainstream, whose parents are not educated, who do not know the system, and so on.

Now, the question then comes: what can education do about it? Therein lies the idea of compensatory education. There should be programs in the schools to compensate for those disadvantages. Those pilot programs were not in long enough to really prove anything, but the concepts were there.

When the people put together the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, there were five titles in that first act. One was Title I, which, in the legislature, says for programs to

Riles: raise the achievement level of children from low income families. That was there because the data showed that poverty was a primary criteria that would indicate lack of achievement. It's still true today.

I went through an exercise once where I lined up the fifty-eight counties of California by average wealth of the population. If you lined up the average grade point average of the students--

Sharp: It would be close?

Riles: It would be very close. I would just follow right down.

There were other titles. Title V was to strengthen the management of departments of education to get money so that they could have other staff. You had Title IV which set up centers to do experiments around the country. You had Title III which was to support innovations of all kinds, and so on. But most of the money was in Title I. California got $70 million which was at that time more money than California received from the Vocational Education Act. Our share from the federal government for vocational education was about $50 million. That was the major program. But here comes in a program with $70 million [the Compensatory Education Program]. The program had grown considerably since that time. This is something I told the president, now you've got a whole pot pourri of federal programs dealing with parts of this whole subject: the Migrant Education Act, the bilingual act. All focused on some problem in elementary and secondary education that ought to be addressed. Fragmented, yes, but that's what you got.

One of my efforts has been to see how you coordinate this. You see, you can't divide a child and say, "Here's a child who is poor, so we have a program for him. Here's a child who is bilingual, so you have another program." Or it may all be the same child. That was part of the problem. It's hard to deal with it, literally, because if parents feel that their children were left out and ignored, they simply learned that they could bypass local boards, go to the legislature, get some money to fund whatever it is they wanted, and then they built a constituency around that. And believe me, parents whose children are in separate categories are not likely to talk to each other.

Same thing's happened with gifted. You have a gifted program. I always say that every middle-class parent thinks that his child is gifted.

You had a whole plethora of programs. Our job in the department has been to try to coordinate the programs so that the needs of all children would be met. One of the things in school improvement,

Riles: in ECE [Early Childhood Education], was to say, "Look, let's put these together. You see, one of the procedures in Early Childhood Education was a process that you had to go through. One process was for the parents and the teachers to take a look at their school and identify the needs of the children in that school, whatever they were. Then, take a look at all of the funding sources in the programs, and then design a total program for that school that met the needs of the children in that school, rather than not having any sensible way of dealing with the problem and just piling program after program. But that is an issue.

Now, so far as the federal government, they're talking in terms of block grants. And indeed, they've gotten some through. They were not able to put programs for the handicapped in block grants, or for the disadvantaged yet, or for bilingual education.

Sharp: So that's starting the process all over again ?

Riles: Yes, those are outside of the block grant. But the block grants now include most of the other programs, including metric education, you know--you go on down the line--gifted, and so on. The block grants say we are just going to give this money to the school district, and as long as you spend it for something that's designated in this block, you can do it. The federal government's not going to tell you which one, because you have diversity.

This sounds very good on the surface. But in the first place, they cut back the amount of money you have, so that means less money. What they really effected, they got the monkey off their back. What you did is set in motion what will happen. What will begin to happen this year is that you'll have all these groups fighting with each other at the local level for part of the action.

Now, I say that we in education, the people who are operating the programs, must demonstrate that the needs of all youngsters are served. If the needs of all youngsters had been served, you wouldn't have needed categorical programs in the first place. But they were <u>not</u> served. The parents finally learned the political system enough to go and have money designated for that.

Parents of the handicapped children do not believe that if you take off the restraints that their youngsters are going to get this. So I understand that. I keep saying to superintendents and boards, "All right, talk about flexibility, freedom, no regulations, but the way to get that flexibility, freedom, is to demonstrate every educational need will be met."

Sharp: It's going to be a long struggle.

Riles: That's going to be a long struggle.

Ronald Reagan as Governor and President: K-12 and Higher Education Concerns

Sharp: The Reagan years are so interesting because of the complexity of the issues in education, both [grades] K through twelve and higher ed. It all seemed to come to such a crunch during the Reagan years in terms of people's awareness of the variety of educational needs that kids had, the legislature attempting to do something about all of that, and the more serious [political] understanding and visibility that the college students were having on the campuses.

We'll get into topics that were pretty heatedly debated, whether they were Early Childhood Education, or SB 90, or what to do about campus unrest.

Riles: Let me throw out just one or two concepts that you may or may not want to go into more detail later. Number one, Reagan was elected because he took a very hard line on student behavior decline that the university had. The whole university-type thing--I mean, Berkeley and the beginning of all of it--Mario Savio and so on. I imagine you were around about that time.

Sharp: Actually, I was in Kansas at that time.

Riles: Oh, were you?

It was really a kind of student rebellion in the sense that the institution was really being challenged. There was the view that the university was caving in. Of course, that was a campaign issue. When Reagan was elected, I mean, he proceeded to do something about it.

The person he hired as his educational liaison person was Dr. Alex Sherriffs, who had been at [U.C.] Berkeley, and who was a liberal, by the way, and was sympathetic to students in the beginning. But they, in Sherriffs's view, became so <u>utterly</u> unreasonable, and Sherriffs felt the rug was pulled out from him. That had really turned him off. Of course, that is the person that Reagan hired.

I don't think I'm stretching the point to say that Reagan came in with an idea of straightening the university out. Reagan didn't have that antipathy for elementary and secondary [education]. Nor did Alex Sherriffs.

Riles: I became acquainted with him [Reagan] very early in the game. Reagan was a reasonable person right after he was elected. I would like to walk through with you at our next session, or whenever you like, the tactic I used--I knew I had to work with the governor.

So even though I had heard that Reagan had supported my opponent, Max Rafferty, the incumbent, I met with him prior to the time that I took office, after I was elected, and established a kind of rapport with him. It would be interesting to tell you about that first conversation. All right, that's one.

Number two, I think it led to the fact that he came to the conclusion that I was an elected representative for education. He respected that. We set up a way of operating where we would communicate with each other. But the leadership for education, elementary and secondary, he agreed that that was my arena.

Sharp: Did Dr. Sherriffs act as the leader for higher education, then?

Riles: Yes. Well, he still had a liaison role there. But his influence was on having the Reagan administration be tough on the University of California, as over against the state colleges. The state colleges grew and flourished under Reagan.

Sharp: Some would say at UC's expense.

Riles: At UC's expense; there is absolutely no question about it. However, Charlie [Charles J.] Hitch, who was president of the university, saw his role to hold the line. After all is said and done, although there was a lot of rhetoric in that, for whatever reason, the university was not dismantled.

I can say one other thing (this is second hand), the people around Reagan were more intent on laying the ax to the university than he was. He wanted the university administrators to straighten things out. I've heard that in Reagan's cabinet meetings there were many times someone was up charging, and I've heard that he would say, "Now, wait a minute, we don't want to go that far."

Now, in elementary and secondary area, we'll always have the rhetoric of elementary and secondary schools ought to be turning out better this, and that, and the other. I started out with a reform situation and was able to bring him into it. He was a strong governor--it was very difficult for the legislature to deal with Reagan, and it's very difficult for the Congress to deal with him.

Riles: There's a reason for that. Once he says he's going to do something, it's not just campaign, political rhetoric. He sets out to do it. But how was he able to do the things that he wanted to do to the extent, and how is he able as president?

In the first place, he tends to believe--I don't think tends to believe--he believes that government should be at a minimum. He believes strongly that the private sector can do it better than government. He doesn't have a program as such that requires money to finance. He believes in less money. Every president and every governor that I've ever heard of had a program that they wanted to put through which required money, and therefore required the support of the Congress or the legislature to do it. But how do you deal with a person who doesn't want anything?

Sharp: Especially when it means dismantling--

Riles That's right! So they don't have leverage. The state didn't have leverage on Reagan, because he spent his time vetoing legislation that came through that called for money. See, Pat Brown before him had programs that he wanted to implement. So when you got a program that you want to implement that calls for money or some other major program, then the democratic process says, "Okay, if you assure that you will sign my bill, then I will support your legislation." But if you don't have any legislation, you don't have--[laughter]

Sharp: Don't have a choice.

Riles: This was a very interesting, and it's still an interesting aspect of the Reagan administeation.

Sharp: So you really see a lot of similarities between his record as governor and what he's doing--

Riles: What he's beginning to do as president. Absolutely. It's very interesting. I have used that statement that [Thomas] O'Neill, the speaker [of the House] said after Reagan was elected, "Well, Reagan's going to find that he's been playing in the minor leagues. When he gets to Washington, he's going to be in the big leagues." By the time Reagan put through his tax-cutting programs, and cut all these programs, some reporter asked O'Neill, "What do you think about Reagan now? Do you think he can play in the big leagues?" "Yes, he demonstrated he can play in the big leagues."

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Riles: I found that it would be reasonable, certainly, if you approached it in the context, somewhere within the philosophical context where he could buy. The problem now as president: it's not as easy to get

Riles: to him, really talk to him, because he believes in delegation. He has people around him. Having gotten his program though, having set up his supply side economics, [he's stuck with that].

[Dr. Riles later furthered explained his comments.]

Riles: The job of president is much more complex and expansive. He has always believed in delegation of authority. Having delegated authority, some of his people take action that doesn't make sense at all, and then he's stuck with that. He is an individual that really relates to people on a personal level. He could do that as governor in many cases. He cannot do that as president. That's one of the differences.

For example, I recall, if I had a problem, as I've said, I had access to him. I could go and sit down and talk to him about it, reason with him, and show him the implications of it. And nine times out of ten get his endorsement. Well, who can go and sit down with the president? It's just impossible to do that. So you have this vast bureaucracy out there. He's not close to it. He's relying on these people he's delegated it to. You have a different situation.

So I have to come down honestly and say that he was a much better governor than he is president of the United States.

[transcript resumes]

Sharp: Do you think his delegating has grown with him? Did he do it not so much as governor as he does now as president?

Riles: I think the amazing thing about him as president: he's naturally delegating more because the federal government is bigger. To be able to do that is marvelous. Horseback riding every Wednesday as he did as governor. He has his schedule--every other president was worn to a frazzle in two months. He's not. I saw him the other day: healthy, even though he had been shot, you know. Healthy, and seventy years old; he gives us all hope. So, yes, he delegates.

But then there's something else that I marvel at. Whether you believe in what they do, or what their philosophy is, the staff work around him is impeccable.

Sharp: I interviewed him twice. I was very impressed by the people who I was in contact with. It's an amazing sort of facility, to acquire such long-term excellent staff--I mean, you can acquire people long term that aren't so good--and they stick around.

Riles: That's right, and they're kind of organized in the way they operate. I knew precisely what time I was going to see him, because someone called. The person who was in charge: "If there's any problem, let me know." I guess you call it the western White House, down in

Riles: Century Plaza. The switchboard is open twenty-four hours. I got there a little early, and I sat and talked with the men who were planning when he would leave to go back to Washington, which was the next day or the day after. Nothing left loose. I knew when he was governor, his advance staff was always there, planning that visit; what it would be and what would happen. I talked with one of the fellows there as I was sitting, waiting to go up. He told me that he had to leave immediately after that day to go to New York to advance his stay there. Everything coordinated.

So when you see him, or people talk about how hard he is at work, all of that is organized, and organized in a way where he can deal only with the major issues. For someone to infer that he has given all of this over to someone else is not so. Yes, they have responsibilities. They influence the president, but he has these people who have been around him long enough so they think they know what he would likely say.

I don't think Congress, I don't think Washington, was prepared for the man. He was on the offensive, and so on. Unlike [Jimmy] Carter, who brought his people up from Georgia and tried to run Washington like he ran Georgia. For example, Carter didn't call on Congress to come and help put his programs through. I mean, Reagan, when he really wanted something, he got on the phone and called them, Democrats and Republicans alike. Twisted arms.

Sharp: Things that he learned in California.

Riles: Yes.

State Standards Versus Local Options

Riles: Education, as we look at and talk about this, especially with elementary and secondary, the pendulum swings back and forth. One has to always keep in mind that the schools, the elementary and secondary schools, do not and should not lead out and make determinations for anyone. Schools reflect what the society is and what the society wants. You get definite signals, and sometimes you get uncertain signals. But whenever the signal is definite, the school responds, responds immediately and effectively.

When I first came to the department, the great concern was "Johnny can't read," and "Johnny can't spell," and "Johnny can't do sums," and "Johnny can't do that." Why was that a deep concern?

Riles: Committee hearings--we had them all over the place. Because the year before I came, the Russians put up Sputnik: no one could say that [Joseph] Stalin and [Nikita] Khrushchev were lying and bragging.

Sharp: It was definitely up there.

Riles: You could see it flying over California every afternoon!

Sharp: That was really that important? I've read about it, and people have exclaimed at Sputnik's being up there and a real point of turnaround for education.

Riles: The shocko was this: even after going through World War II the allies of the Russians, the philosophical battle with communism and free enterprise, democracy, was always there. In the McCarthy era, World War II, there was an anti-communist feeling. There always has been because it poses a challenge to our way of life. Without saying it, even though Russia played a great part in the war, the idea was that these peasants really didn't know how to operate a tractor. The tanks would break down. In short, they copied other things poorly. They weren't smart enough, scientifically, to put up an unmanned satellite.

So when the thing [Sputnik] went up, it so shocked and frightened America that you would hear, "God, we are behind, and these people are going to take over the world. Their scientific marvels astound us!"

No one put this into words, but then you had to look for someone to blame. Why didn't we put up a satellite first? Who is to blame? Well, we can blame the schools. Didn't teach them to read, that type of thing.

Well, the fact of the matter [was] there was no commitment by anybody to do this emphasis. There was no commitment, then no one did it. I told you about the laws that the federal government got involved. Immediately after the Sputnik went up, you had another federal law: NDEA. That was only the third major thrust into elementary and secondary education. Now, what is NDEA? Notice the title will tell you so. The National Defense Education Act, in which they provided money to emphasize the basic skills: science, and so on and so forth.

Then following that, in other programs, that became a total commitment--Kennedy was elected--to catch up in space. It was a commitment of the schools, commitments of the university, the commitment of the scientific community. We put a man on the

Riles: moon--the only nation to put a man on the moon. What was the difference? [strikes desk for emphasis] There was a commitment to do it! Schools respond, everyone responds, if there is a commitment.

Now, within four or five years after that commitment was made, we had more engineers than we could actually use. There was a commitment, there was a payoff, and that was done. Now, we made a commitment to raise achievement level of minority kids. They haven't closed that gap completely, but I want to tell you that in the early fifties--I have these figures in my files, they need to be checked--only about 30 percent of blacks were graduated from high school. Today, over 70 percent. They are approaching the number of the general population.

Sharp: It's still not at it.

Riles: That's right. So you see, whenever a commitment is made, you can do it. But if there's no commitment, people just go along as it was.

In the sixties, we went through a period of "everybody do their own thing." Relevance is what we were talking about. If it's not relevant, you don't do that. Who determines relevance? The students determine relevance. The "me, too" generation. Parents began to say, "We don't want too much pressure, but we want a wide range of options."

In 1968, I believe it was, the legislature passed a bill, Senate Bill 1, which took out all the required courses in the education code. It says, "Let's leave it up to local school districts to determine high school graduation requirements." That was a move.

Now, they're beginning to say, "Let's set state standards."

Sharp: That goes the other way.

Riles: Yes! It shows you how it switches. I say, "Look, we can't have it both ways. You believe in local control. You don't want state mandates. You like local officials, They operate the high schools. They hire the teachers. They manage the districts. It's close to you as people. You determine what you want for your kids at the local level, and hold the people accountable."

Do you know what happens? Everybody believes in local control as long as the locals have funds. Give them exactly what they want. When they disagree with the local authorities, then they go up to another level to get the answer that they are looking for.

Riles: I was on a television show here [San Francisco] in the morning on Channel 5, I think, "People are Talking." I was on it last week. They threw all kinds of questions at me. One mother said, "Why doesn't the state set the standards, what courses should be taken, and so on?" I said, "I don't want to answer. This is in the hands of your local boards [of education] and you alike. If you want it different, then you should go to them and have it changed. The state is big and diverse; it's not possible for us to sit up in the Department of Education and make all those determinations. If we made them, we'd make it for everybody the same. Maybe it ought to be different. At any rate, don't you believe that the local boards can do it?" She said, "No. I don't trust the people."

See?

Sharp: Yes. Although she might not be so satisfied if you did it.

Riles: No, if it was not what she wanted it to be! Well, this is part of a democracy. But I think those of us in leadership positions need to educate over and over to accomplish a task. When we get into school improvement, you're going to see how I thought these philosophies of setting a framework where people can make the determination in a non-adversarial way were the way we had to go.

There was a time in our history when that was the way it was done. We had local schools in the first place, because the city fathers and mothers and village fathers and mothers would get together and say, "We want a school. We want to hire a teacher. We are going to provide a building." They were involved, and it was theirs.

As we grew and grew and society became more complex, we still elected the school boards, but in Los Angeles [for example], they have over six hundred schools. How can one individual at one of those schools feel that they can influence a seven-member board on some of their issues? Realizing this, my thinking was, "Gosh, parents are most interested not in what goes on in the downtown office, but what goes on in the schools where their children are. How can we provide a procedure whereby they can be involved at that level?" That's one of the concepts of our Early Childhood Education.

Secondly, middle-class parents are not intimidated by school people. Once you open the door for them, they get in. Although the school people at first are a little uptight and afraid--"Who are these people running around here? Are they going to tell us--," they begin to find that once the parents are involved, their sole concern is their children. They become the most supportive element

Riles: the school can ever have. Even if you look at the statistics on the image of the schools nationwide, you look closely at that Gallup poll, the people who think less of public education are people who don't have children in it.

Sharp: It sounds like we're going to have a lot to talk about.

Riles: Well, you get me wound up; you're good at it!

##

II BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

[Interview 2: October 20, 1981]##

Louisiana Childhood

Sharp: There was quite a bit of material that I wanted to cover today. It's basically divided into three different sections: your childhood and adolescence in Louisiana, then coming out to Arizona, and then out to California. Covering that early period of your life.

I got a lot of information from an article that was published in the Bee that you had sent down to me.* A lot of my questions sort of take off from that information.

I wanted to ask you about your family life in Elizabeth. Tell me a bit about some of your other relatives besides your parents.

Riles: All right.

My father [Wilson Riles] was a foreman in a turpentine camp, which is to say that he had a crew of men who went out and did what they called chip boxes. Actually, what it was, was they had an instrument that would make a "v" shape on a pine tree. In the South, the long-leaf pine dripped gum. They would chip these boxes and put little tin cups underneath. When the sap rosin dripped out of the tree, they would dump this into kegs and fill up barrels, and the barrels would go off to the distillery.

Of course in that kind of work it meant that you had to move around in the forest, and actually these were camp situations. I was born on one of those camps in Rapides Parish [Louisiana],

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*See "Wilson Riles: He's Come Long Way," by Sigrid Bathen, Sacramento Bee, 21 June 1981.

Riles: near Alexandria. You hear me use the word Alexandria as the place where I was born. That was the nearest recognizable city, and that's why we got to that.

As I've indicated to you, I was the only child. My earliest recollections are that we were a very close family. I always felt the love of my parents, and so on. As a matter of fact, I can recall that people said that I was a spoiled child (I guess because I was an only child), but, to me, I felt very secure with my family.

They eventually moved from Camp 8, as I recall was the name of that camp--I suppose they are numbered, but that's the one I remember. Then we ended up in a place called Elizabeth, Louisiana. It was at that place that I recall entering school. I'd gone to school somewhere before that, I presume, at Camp 8, but I don't think I was old enough really to go to school. I was just taken to school with some of the older children.

I had never met any of my blood relatives until after my father died. My mother [Susie Anna Jefferson Riles] died first, and then--I guess it was a couple of years later--my father died. Between the time of death of my mother [and my father], I lived for a while with my foster parents, we kind of adopted each other later, Mr. [Leon] and Mrs. [Narvia] Bryant, who had known me from childhood. As a matter of fact, Mr. Bryant worked for my father. They were a relatively younger couple and had no children, but I always recall being over at their house anyhow.

My father remarried, but I don't think it worked out very well. I stayed a very short time with my father in a place called Oakdale, Louisiana, which is about twelve or fifteen miles from Elizabeth. Both those towns are in Allen Parish, Louisiana.

After my father died, my uncle, my father's half-brother, whose name was Stanford Calloway, came and took me to live with him. He was a cement finisher, which was a skilled job at the time, particularly for a black. He moved around in his work because at that time Huey P. Long, who was the governor of Louisiana, had a highway program in which the roads were being paved all over the state. Long became very well known because of his developmental programs, and if you have paved highways you have to have bridges. My uncle worked for a construction company that went from place to place. When they completed one building job, then they moved to another.

I recall only once visiting my father's home town, which was Cairo, Georgia. I remember on one occasion my uncle drove back from Louisiana to Cairo, Georgia, and I met my grandmother, another

Riles: uncle, and a few other people there. It's rather vague to me. My uncle came back to Louisiana and he married. He lived in a place called Kenner which is a few miles outside of New Orleans, and I went to live with him. I recall having to ride a bus into New Orleans in order to go to school.

Sharp: This would have been high school?

Riles: Keep in mind that at that time, high schools only went to the eleventh grade in Louisiana. In other words, it was a seven-four system. I believe this was in the tenth grade. It was called a junior high school, for some reason, J. W. Hoffman.

Sharp: How was it decided which high school you would go to?

Riles: It was very strange. Somewhere along the line, even at that age when I was in Elizabeth, I made up my mind I wanted to go to a good high school. At that time high schools were rated in the state--A, B, C. There were only four Class A high schools for blacks in the whole state. One was in Shreveport, one was in Alexandria, one was in Baton Rouge, and one was in New Orleans. That high school was McDonogh No. 35 and I wanted to go there. This is not very clear to me, so I'll have to research it, but it seemed to me, in order to go to McDonogh 35--it was only the tenth and eleventh or only the eleventh that you went there--you went to junior high school first. Then you transferred there. Maybe it was the ninth grade that I went to Hoffman. At any rate, I went to Hoffman during this period.

Then my uncle's job finished at Kenner, and we had to move to another job, where there was no high school.

Oh, I can remember my grandmother having come out from Georgia and living with us.

I was very annoyed that I would not be going to school. As a matter of fact, I had decided that I was going to go to school. That had been drummed into me someplace in Louisiana.

In order not to create any conflict and get into an argument, I left--hitchhiked back to Mrs. Bryant and Mr. Bryant. Then the rest of the year I worked. See, I had to quit school because he was moving. I worked at a sawmill, and any other kind of odd jobs I could get. People gave box suppers at the church. I can recall them buying a suit--one suit--and giving me $50 and a ticket.

Sharp: To go back to New Orleans?

Riles: To go back to New Orleans. An older fellow who was a friend of my father's had a little shack there near the railroad track, and he's the one that gave me a place to sleep. He said, "You know, if you can hustle your food, you can hustle it. There's a wood stove." And I could make it.

So I re-entered J. W. Hoffman and looked for part-time work. I eventually got a job working for the driver of a milk truck. The driver worked for the dairy. It was called Godchaux's Bell Point milk. It was supposed to be special raw milk coming from special herds of cows and so on. I don't know how true that was, but that's the way it was painted. In any case, I had to really beg him for the job. I've always been big for my age. I'd heard he was looking for someone to hang on the side of the truck to take milk in, and I was a rather big boy. But I prevailed on him that I needed the job. He hired me for two and a half [dollars] a week, and he gave me a bottle of milk at the end of each run. I started work at 2 a.m. and worked till about 7.

Sharp: When did school start?

Riles: I made it to school by 8:30 or 9.

Sharp: Did you keep up your relationship with the Bryants?

Riles: Oh yes. As a matter of fact, we wrote, and it was considered to be home for me. When the summer came, I went back to Elizabeth and worked during the summer.

Then I came back and went to McDonogh 35 the next year. I got my old milk job and by that time he'd increased me to $3 a week. In addition to doing a little caddying occasionally on weekends at the New Orleans Country Club. That was how I made it. That was during the Depression, of course. Two-and-a-half or $3 a week seems like very little money. It is, but if you had a place to sleep, you could take 15¢ or 20¢ and buy a meal.

I recall that I did cooking for myself.

Sharp: What did you cook?

Riles: I was just about to mention--something that I seldom eat today, and that is split peas.

Sharp: Did you have to soak them first?

Riles: Yes. You know, you take split peas--you can soak them, you can boil them and have soup out of them, you can let them get cold and you can slice them. I've had them about every way you can have them. Now, I neither eat split pea soup nor do I drink milk.

Sharp: You got your quota.

Riles: I had my quota.

At any rate, when I finished high school, I got a letter from Mr. Bryant saying that he had gotten his pension money. [President] Franklin D. Roosevelt at that time gave pensions to World War I veterans, of which Mr. Bryant was one. He decided to take that money and move to Flagstaff, Arizona. Mrs. Bryant had some relatives that were working in the sawmill in Flagstaff. They wrote and asked me, did I want to go to Arizona? I of course said, "Yes." It sounded like a great adventure. I came back to Elizabeth, and we took the Santa Fe train to Arizona.

Sharp: How long did it take on the train?

Riles: It must have been three days, two nights, or something like that.

Sharp: Was there a formal adoption?

Riles: No. No papers, none of that. It was just understood. I presume among blacks generally in those days, none of this was ever formalized. You had an extended family kind of situation. In this case, although these were not relatives, it was just understood that if you knew people, you would work with them, take care of them. It never crossed my mind that what they had wasn't mine and vice versa.

Sharp: What did you call them?

Riles: I never called them Mother and Father. It was always Mr. Leon--his first name was Leon. Her name was Narvia Bryant, and I called her Mrs. Narvia.

Sharp: What was the role of the AME [African Methodist Episcopal] church?

Riles: We were members. They were members and my parents were members. In a small, backwoods Louisiana town the church played an important role in the community--a socializing role. People went to church on Sunday. Mrs. Bryant was a member of the choir. Interestingly enough, he was Baptist and remained so until his death. My parents were Methodist, AME, and so was Mrs. Bryant. If there were ever any needs to be taken care of, people tried to help each other. They knew I wanted to go to school, and they'd give little box suppers and things like that to support it.

Sharp: Did you find an AME church in Flagstaff?

Riles: Yes. I went there.

Commitment to College, Teaching, and Desegregation in Arizona

Sharp: Tell me about your decision to go to college.

Riles: I had planned to work in Flagstaff for a year. It was September when we came out, the first of September. I'd hoped to get a job at the sawmill or someplace and work, save my money, and then go to college--maybe on the coast. You know, you hear of places like UCLA* or USC** and so on. I never heard of Arizona State Teachers College.

I heard or read in the paper that they were going to build a new post office in Flagstaff. I went down to the contractor's and applied for a laborer's job. The fellow said, "We don't know whether we can fix you up, but come back on Monday." That was Thursday.

Friday I was out just walking around the city, and I passed a little school called Dunbar School. At that time it was a one-room school. The kids were out playing. I stood around chatting with them, and the teacher came over. She recognized I was a stranger and we got to talking. She wanted to know where I was from and so on, and I told her. She asked me, did I plan to go to college, and I told her yes, but I would need to work. She said, "Why don't you go here?"

I told her I didn't know there was a college here, but I didn't have any money, no money for fees. I really needed clothes, and so on. She said that here the students don't do a lot of dressing. A pair of Levis or cords and a sweatshirt would be all I needed. I said, "But I don't have any money." She said, "You ought to consider going. Let me send you over to the registrar."

She sent a little girl to take me over to meet the registrar. I went over and met the man, Dr. [Vaughn] Wallace I believe his name was. Evidently she had called him. I thought she was out of her mind or being very naive, because I didn't have one penny in my pocket.

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*University of California, Los Angeles

**University of Southern California

Riles: He said, "Mr. Riles, we don't know you, but we respect Mrs. Murdock,"--that was the name of the teacher. (She was a black teacher, by the way.) "We are willing to give you a chance. We have a new program here, a federal program, called the NYA, National Youth Administration. We can give you a job on the campus and pay you so much an hour." I forget whether it was 25¢ or 30¢, but at any rate, I could earn up to $15 a month. He said, "That would be enough for you to pay your fees and buy your books. Since you're living at home, you can make it if you want to try."

So I thanked him. I had to make a decision, school was starting on Monday, whether I was going to go and enroll in college or whether I was going to try to get this job. Somehow I made the choice to enroll in college, and that's how I got started.

Sharp: Did you talk with the Bryants about all of this?

Riles: Yes, I did. They always supported my decisions. They wanted me, of course, to go to school, but they didn't coerce me.

Sharp: Did you think that you wanted to be a teacher?

Riles: No.

Sharp: Were there other courses of study--

Riles: I really thought I wanted to be an artist. I used to draw a lot in school. I remember at J. W. Hoffman School I did cartoons for their paper. So I thought maybe that's what I wanted to do.

Secondly, I thought of law. But, number one, I took a few art classes and I soon found out that that wasn't what I wanted to do. They did not have a law school in Arizona at that time. At that time--at least in Arizona--you read law under a practicing lawyer.

Since it was a teachers college, most of the youngsters who went there were geared in that direction. So, somewhere along the line, by the time I became a sophomore, I made a commitment to go into education.

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Sharp: Did you have a lot of preconceptions about teaching?

Riles: I don't know how to explain it, because I'm not sure that this was generally true throughout the South--certainly not in small towns, rural areas. I think maybe I might be able to attribute some of this to Dr. Forest Paul Augustine, who was the principal at the school in Louisiana, at the elementary school in Elizabeth, Louisiana.

Riles: He spent a lot of his time motivating us, telling us such things as, "Get an education, no one can take that away from you. It's going to be tough." He told us about his experience, how he had to work his way through and struggle and so on, but he made it.

So it never occurred to me that it would be easy. It always occurred to me that it would be tough getting through school. But it never occurred to me that it was impossible to do, so there was this kind of background. You have to understand that the status of blacks in the South was rock bottom. I assumed it was a teacher's way of encouraging us and pushing us, leading us and guiding us, pressuring us to achieve.

It was that type of situation that I came up in and experienced. Of course when I made a commitment to become a teacher, I saw it as an opportunity and an obligation to stimulate other disadvantaged boys and girls as I had been encouraged. The highly idealistic and humanitarian aspects of teaching were simply a part of my life. I knew I would be working with boys and girls who came out of the same background that I came out of.

Sharp: Did you assume that you would only be working with black children?

Riles: Yes, primarily, at that time. Of course, the situation was beginning to change. Arizona had a kind of mixed situation. The elementary schools by law at that time were segregated. The high schools were in a maybe yes-maybe no situation. In other words, the only segregated high school you had was in Phoenix. That was an all black high school at that time. But you had this black elementary school in Flagstaff, and that was the only one you had in northern Arizona that I can recall. Oh, there was one out at McNary, which was a sawmill town on an Apache reservation in Apache County. So it was only in your areas where you had larger concentrations of blacks that you had separate black schools in northern Arizona. For example, in Prescott there never was a school for blacks. In Winslow, Arizona, there never was.

Even though the law required segregation in the elementary grades, it just didn't make any sense if you had only a few black students. And as long as no one pushed it, the few blacks went to the regular schools.

Back in the early fifties, after World War II and after I had served in the service, and I indeed was a teaching principal in Flagstaff at Dunbar School, the talk and the push to do away with separate schools began. I worked with the NAACP.* As a matter of

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*National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

Riles: fact, I was president of the local chapter. We began working, pressuring our legislature in Arizona to modify this law. I think we started in '52, and we came very close, but we didn't make it. The next year we worked at it again--this was in 1953--and we struck down the mandatory segregation law in 1953.

Of course the [Earl] Warren court issued, in 1954, the [United States] Supreme Court decision.* I think Arizonans were proud that they had gone ahead an removed mandatory segregation from their laws prior to being ordered by the Supreme Court.

Sharp: How did you manage to do that? It seems a pretty striking feat.

Riles: In the first place, there always were relatively few blacks in Arizona. So, I presume that whites didn't see any threat in dealing with traditions and habit. Secondly, you had a number of whites who had social consciousness. Even in the NAACP chapter there were whites as well as blacks.

Even the conservatism in Arizona was a different kind, and I suppose it still is a different kind of conservatism. Conservatism that's individualism and that type of thing, not right-wing radicals. Even Mr. Conservatism himself, old man [Barry] Goldwater, he really was a free enterprise, rugged individualist type, but not a racist, no racist.

So you had a climate there, if you worked at it, which we did, in which you could move the direction, surely on the basis of logic and what made sense, rather than on any kind of pressure tactics. As a matter of fact, we would have gotten this bill through that first year, except when the thing was in the senate or the assembly--I forget which place--the teachers and principal of a junior high school, which was the only black junior high school in the state, in Tucson, raised the question of what was going to happen to them as black teachers. No one had ever faced up to that, you see. I had taken the position--because you see, I was a teacher and principal too--that segregation was not a good thing by law. I would never let anyone mix up whether I would have a job or not as part of the issue. The issue was to do away with segregated schools. To me, the fight for employment rights--qualified employees--was another fight.

We got to work, or someone got to work, between then and the next legislative session, and convinced those teachers that they shouldn't kill the whole program on the basis of their limited job.

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*Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

Riles: Plus, it seems to me that there was a court case or something that dealt with that problem. In any case, once that issue was removed, then the legislature acted. People felt good about themselves.

It was at that point, though, that I was promised by the superintendent, Sturgeon Cromer, that there would be a principalship for me once they did away with separate schools. I worked closely in the inside with him.

Sharp: Who was he?

Riles: He was the superintendent in Flagstaff at that time.

In any case, it's very interesting to look back over those years.

Sharp: Why did you become an activist?

Riles: In those days, if you were educated and you were black, you just had to be an activist, or accept the status quo. And the status quo in almost every case was untenable.

Plus, particularly in small towns like that, when I was practically the only black with a college degree--maybe three or four others in the whole town--people looked upon you for leadership. You not only worked with their children, but they expected you to build bridges of understanding between the other segments of the community and try to move things forward for the betterment of the group. So, in those days, it was not unusual for a person in my position to serve as a leader.

This doesn't mean that every teacher, every educated person black would do that. There were many that didn't. But, again, coming from my background, I felt that I had a responsibility to help, to lead.

I have to quickly say that my approach was not the kind of approach that you saw in the sixties. My approach, for reasons I think we'll go into, was to build understanding among people, to respect each other, through fairness, justice, not violence, threats. Those were a product of a thing that developed in the sixties that I thought was counterproductive. Then again, that was my judgment.

Marriage; Additional Teaching

Sharp: Were you married at this point?

Riles: I got married in 1941.

Sharp: That was before you went into the service?

Riles: That was before I went into the service. I graduated in 1940 and took a job in a one-room school--

Sharp: That was Pistol Creek?

Riles: That's right. The next year, I married, but by that time, I had taken a teaching principalship in the town of McNary. Louise Phillips and I had met, I think, during the summer of '41. We saw each other from time to time. I think maybe I had met her earlier than that, because when I came to Flagstaff for the holidays--Christmas or something--in '40, I might have met her then. But, at any rate, I saw her during the summer. We started going together, and we got married in November.

Sharp: Did she know the Bryants?

Riles: She had met them during the time she had come up to Flagstaff.

Sharp: She was a teacher, too?

Riles: Yes.

Sharp: Why did you go into the Army air corps?

Riles: During the summer of '41, I came to Flagstaff, and I wanted a job. That was a very interesting story. They started drafting people in '40 or '41, and I wasn't drafted. As a matter of fact, I went to a draft board--you have to be examined and so on (this was while I was teaching out there)--and I supposedly had a heart murmur. At any rate, I was put in 4F. So during the summer of '41, I looked for a job. I ended up being employed. There was a story behind that that I maybe should put on record.

I looked for laborer's job. My wife, Louise, said, "Why are you looking for laborer's job? You've gone through college. Why don't you just look for a job!" She was always wanting to tamper with my conscience and pressure me to be aggressive. So I decided to apply for another job.

Riles: George Babbitt, whose nephew is now governor of Arizona, was a friend of mine. He was a postmaster who often gave me assistance and counseled me. They were building an ordinance depot out in Belmont, a few miles from Flagstaff. A lot of activity was going on. I went out and I told them I would like to get some work for the summer. Babbitt said, "Mrs. Quackenbush used to work for me, and she's out there now working for Wade Church, the personnel director. Go out and talk to Mrs. Quackenbush." So I went out and talked to Mrs. Quackenbush. Mrs. Quackenbush said she'd talk to Wade. So I went out and I put in an application.

At any rate, I got a call a couple of days later to come and go to work. I sat down and talked to Wade Church--he called me in the office. He said, "I know that you assume that men of your background don't get an opportunity to be treated fairly in employment, but I want you to know that you are going to be treated fairly. I'm going to hire you as a personnel assistant. You're on your own. If you have any problems, let me know. As long as you do your job, you're going to be backed up."

Sharp: Did that surprise you?

Riles: Completely. That was not among the thinking in those days. That was unusual. I began work there and, in the first place, I got $40 a week, which was a lot of money at that time. My first job at that little one-room school was $100 a month. As a teaching principal in '41-'42, it was $120 a month. Here I was getting $40 a week.

I worked that summer. I did a good job. I got along well. I decided that I was going to get into war work, but I had a teaching contract, and I thought it was necessary for me to go and fulfill my contract. So I did.

To California: The Army Air Corps, First Child

Riles: Then the following year I decided to come to California and look for a job in the war industry. I brought Louise, who was pregnant. We finally found a room out on the east side of Los Angeles. I think the woman who rented us a place was worried that I might go into the army and leave this woman there with a baby. We finally ended up finding a place out at Santa Monica, and I looked for a job.

Riles: I came up to Oakland and looked at the shipyards, but I didn't like it up there. I worked for a while at a garage in Los Angeles, kept books for them. I made a little money in a couple of mob scenes for the movies. You show up and sit in the stadium or wherever they have you, and you're part of the background scenery.

I finally ended up working for North American Aviation as a shipping clerk. I was there no more than a couple of months when my draft status was reclassified. I went down to have my examination, knowing that I had a heart murmur, and they didn't find the heart murmur. It occurred to me that maybe I had that heart murmur because teachers were scarce to get. The local draft board in McNary, Arizona, as long as I stayed there, probably would have found it. That was my guess. I have no way to prove it.

At any rate, I found myself in the service, drafted.

Sharp: Had your child been born yet?

Riles: No, that's another story. While there, at the reception center at Fort MacArthur, California, which is out in San Pedro, one day they called us out and said we had a choice. This was in '43. We had had to take the army general classification test, and those that made certain scores were called up. We had the choice--we could stay in the army, or we could go to the army air corps, or we could go into paratroopers. I wasn't interested in staying in the army. I wasn't interested in paratroopers. That didn't appeal to me, but the air corps did. That's how I decided that that's how I would do it.

In the time that's left, let me back up just a little bit and deal with this problem of Louise and the baby. I knew I was going to go into the service. We had our doctor in Santa Monica. I paid my fees in advance, made all the arrangements with the doctor because I didn't know when the baby was coming or what time I would have to go in. It was an awful time, because it was getting closer and closer to the time that the baby was supposed to come.

I had to have a hospital. The doctor told me his hospital was in Culver City. I went down to the hospital to pay the fees. I noticed the woman behind the desk fooling around, but I didn't pay much attention to it. Finally the person behind the desk came back and brought what I assumed was the head nurse. She said they were sorry, they didn't have any colored wards. I said I didn't need a colored ward, I needed a room for my wife. I told them I might have to be in the service, and the doctor had told us that this was the hospital where he practiced. He told us to come here and pay the fees and make the arrangements. Well, she was sorry, they didn't have a place for colored.

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Riles: I recall Louise talking loud in the lobby, and I was trying to get her out. I didn't want her to have the baby right there. But in essence, she said to them, "Here my husband is about to go into the service to fight for this country, and I can't have a room to have this baby. I hope the Japs come over and bomb the hell out of all of you." [laughter]

Sharp: So what happened?

Riles: I then went to some hospital in Venice and paid the fees and made the arrangements. The next week, when Louise went back to her doctor, the doctor said, "We heard about what happened, Mrs. Riles. But Culver City Hospital is still my hospital, and I have dealt with the situation you ran into, and I want you to go back."

Sharp: Was the doctor black?

Riles: No, he was white. Then I had the unhappy proposition of collecting from the Venice hospital and then going back to the damn hospital where Louise had cursed them out. Needless to say, I was very worried about it.

The day I was to ship out to Keasler Field, Mississippi, to take basic training before going to army air corps basic training, I was at the station and I kept calling the hospital. I finally called and the baby had been born. I took a cab and rushed out to Culver City to see her and the baby, and then had to go back to catch a train. Naturally I kept in touch with her and wrote and so on.

In spite of that original incident, she was well treated in the hospital. As a matter of fact, the head nurse had a picture with the baby. In other words, maybe they overcompensated. I don't know, but they did treat her well. There was no problem, although I worried about it because of that incident. Culver City Hospital, by the way, is the same hospital in which Shirley Temple was born.

That kind of thing wouldn't happen today. I didn't expect it then, because I never would have gone there. I think it illustrates some of the kinds of problems you have to deal with that have nothing to do with anything except prejudices, tradition, misconceptions, and so on.

But you asked how I got into the air corps. I chose the air corps--because I did have a choice. I think I was about twenty-five years old then. Most of the people were younger and hadn't gone through college, but I had gone through college. I can tell you that story at another time.

Riles: By the way, I had expected and hoped that Louise would stay in California while I was away in the service, because I knew I would come back to California. I had made up my mind I wanted to live in California. But she was lonesome there, and her people were in Phoenix. She eventually went back to Phoenix. She came down to Tuskegee [Alabama] when I finally went down to Tuskegee. The Tuskegee army air field is where they trained black pilots?

Sharp: Black pilots?

Riles: That's right. You had a separate unit for blacks at this time, which is another story in itself. At any rate, she came down a couple of times to visit me there. Then she started teaching in Flagstaff at the same school where the woman told me about college.

Before I got out of the service, the superintendent, not Cromer, but another superintendent, had told her to tell me that he had a job for me. I still wanted to go back to California, but she convinced me that everybody and his brother that had ever been to California would be going back, and I had a job offered to me, and she was tired of working, and so on and so forth, why didn't I come back there. So I ended up coming back there. I worked there from '46 or '47 until 1954, when I returned to California.

I have lived in California since that time. You can see, having been drafted in 1943 from California, my draft record shows that I have been a Californian since 1943 rather than 1954 when I returned to live permanently. That's a story that may be of some interest to you, and we can pick up that at another time. Do you have a last question?

Sharp: No, I'll let you catch your breath before the next group of people swamp you. Thank you.

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Work with the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Martin Luther King, Jr.

[Interview 3: November 3, 1981]##

Sharp: I wanted to talk about your Fellowship of Reconciliation experiences and some of that work. The first question is really a pretty simple one, how you became the executive secretary of FOR?

Riles: I'll try to brief it, because there's a little background to it. In being a teaching principal in Flagstaff, I met a fellow, Charles McEvers, who worked for the American Friends Service Committee. The American Friends Service Committee is a Quaker-related organization, founded by Quakers and operated by Quakers, but not only Quakers, also religious pacifists of other denominations.

Riles: They set up a project in Flagstaff. They had sent one person over there and his family. His headquarters were there, but he worked with the Indians. They work in a very low-key way to get to know the people, find out what their needs are, and try to support their needs. You have the Navajo reservation near Flagstaff, and the Hopi reservation.

I knew some of the people, and would go out on the reservation frequently. They set up a little committee there, and asked me to be on it, and I served on that. Through that experience I came to know him, and I met some other Quakers who would come through, members of the American Friends Service Committee. They used to have an international relations conference at Whittier College [in Whittier, California]. One summer I was invited over to that conference and attended it.

I began to get acquainted with Quakers and friends of Quakers, and it was a new experience for me. I had read about these people before, but had never really come across a group of people that, in my view, really meant what they said about their faith.

Sharp: Especially about non-violence?

Riles: That is right. They had a whole history. And non-violence didn't mean something passive, not injuring your fellow man. It meant trying to be understanding and trying to be convincing and taking the kind of action to change to being right.

By the way, I even read in history where these people, even during and before the Civil War, didn't believe in slavery. They opposed it consistently and were part of the underground railroad. It wasn't just a new-found thing, their belief in the brotherhood of man, it was something that had run consistently through their belief. I thought the whole concept of Christianity, belief in the principles of the Sermon on the Mount and so on, they were living it out, or trying to live it out in their own lives.

It came at a time in my growth and development where I needed, I guess--cynicism had set in--to meet people who really believed. I even thought about becoming a Quaker, but you just don't become a Quaker. It's a long process that you go through, and I think that's good. Because as I learned about them, I began to view my own denomination and others in a different light.

My father and mother were Methodist. We belong to what was called the African Methodist [Episcopal] church. When you began to look at it, you began to find Methodists who believe in their faith, too. Not all, but some. You also begin to find that all Quakers don't follow the traditional line.

Riles: But, at any rate, it was a renewal of faith. Through that contact with other Quakers, I began to meet people who were pacifists, believers in non-violence. The FOR was an organization that included not only Quakers, but other people who believe in those values of non-violence and goodwill and all of that. The FOR was a kind of interfaith non-violent organization.

[In a follow-up interview the interviewer asked Dr. Riles how he reconciled his role in the army air corps.]

Riles: Before I went into the service, although I had fleeting concern about war and killing, it had always gone on, and I had never met anybody that reacted any other way. In addition to that, what happened in an emergency like happened in World War II, the whole country is caught up in a crisis situation. Nothing has happened, in my experience, since that time. Certainly Korea and Vietnam, and so on, these were wars away someplace else, and really under no stretch of imagination did people in America consider this a threat to America. You know, except on a long-term, maybe philosophical, basis that could be argued.

But in World War II, it was different. It was different because when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, everybody was putting out lights in San Francisco and Los Angeles, because they thought the West Coast would be next. So you had that.

By the time 1943 came, and I had not been drafted, I began--the whole atmosphere made me feel like I wasn't doing my share. But then I went in, and I served, and, since I didn't go overseas, I didn't go into combat, my experiences were not that traumatic. Everybody's upset and moved and pushed around and doing without this, and so on and so forth. But really, it was not traumatic.

But then for the first time, I guess I was at that age where I began to think, doesn't anybody believe--I mean, if you're a Christian, if you're of that faith, the basis of that faith is the Sermon on the Mount. Christ talks in terms of loving your enemy! If you're struck on the right cheek, turn the left.

Sharp: Yes, whatever that means.

Riles: And here people blithely participate in violence. So my first reaction here was to become cynical about the whole thing and say, no one believes that. Then along come the Quakers. Along comes this experience in meeting a Quaker. I can't understand this guy, because apparently he really believes in what is written in the Bible, and is out there acting it out! [laughs]

Sharp: Yes. And right here.

Riles: That's right. Then I began to find that there were conscientious objectors and all of that during the war. Very few. But people who had not violated their beliefs. They were no threat to anybody, but they stood by their beliefs. Many suffered for it. It was at that point I began to read about the Quakers and read about Gandhi and read about these people who used non-violence in a creative sense. Not a passive sense. Not a cowardly sense. It took more courage for Gandhi.

Sharp: Yes, and that there was this choice.

Riles: That's right. So that explains when you raised the question, how was that not consistent with me serving? That was the context in which it was. Maybe I told you more than you wanted to know.

Sharp: No, that's fine. [laughter]

[transcript resumes]

Riles: I met Glenn Smiley, who was at that time the Pacific coast secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation with headquarters in Los Angeles.

Sharp: Did he draw you into the FOR [Fellowship of Reconciliation]?

Riles: Yes. He was offered a job at the national office, which was in Nyack, New York. I think he must have been told, "You can come to New York, but you've got to find someone to replace you out there [in Los Angeles]." In any case, he came to me and offered me the job. I was very reluctant to take it. I hadn't thought in those terms, but he invited me out to Los Angeles to meet the FOR committee. They liked me, and I liked them, and I took the job.

So in 1954 I moved out there to Los Angeles and became Pacific coast secretary. Most of their staff, including Glenn Smiley, and the national executive secretary at that time, whose name was John Swomley, were ministers, clergymen. I was not a clergyman, I was an educator. So my approach to the office when I was secretary was different.

I worked with youth groups. I always participated in summer camps and gave the Fellowship of Reconciliation point of view. I made speeches around the state and around the area, which was a regional kind of job. It included Oregon and Arizona, I guess, Washington. I participated in intergroup relations type of activities. I met with other groups that were working on race relations, groups like the Southern California Conference on Community Relations--George Thomas headed that group. I, of course, met with the American Friends Service Committee, was involved with them, whose headquarters are in

Riles: Pasadena. I worked with the NAACP. When I say worked with them, I mean these were joint projects. I worked with the American Jewish Committee, B'nai Brith, organizations of that type.

Sharp: What would you say the main goal of the FOR in California was when you were executive secretary?

Riles: It was to improve man's humanity to man, to face up to problems of injustice, but to use techniques to change that were not confrontation types of things. The Quakers have a word that there is that of God in every man. So the question was, how do you appeal to the good in people? People don't just normally want to be bad or discriminatory or mean. There are reasons why that is so. If you can find a way to appeal to that which is the best in people, most of them then will do the kinds of things that you want.

I'll give some examples that have carried over in my own approach. Before I forget it, the Fellowship of Reconciliation was very interested in the Martin Luther King movement, because here was the first time that outside of India non-violence had been used effectively on a large scale. [Mohandas] Gandhi was able to free the Indian nation from domination by Great Britain not by war but by non-violent resistance. The concept of reconciliation is not to capitulate to evil, but to resist it. In the resisting, you don't become a perpetrator of violence in the process.

Do you have racial oppression in this country? Since its founding. How do you deal with that? Martin Luther King found himself really thrust into the leadership of that Montgomery [Alabama] movement down there.* One of the people who advised him early in the game was a Quaker and a former FOR member by the name of Bayard Rustin, whom I knew. As a matter of fact, I invited him one time when I was in Arizona to come and speak to the college.

I went down to Montgomery in the early, early days and spent a week down there, going to the church where Martin Luther King gathered his people each night; they were boycotting the buses. That movement--people just didn't know how to handle it. I met with King, [Ralph] Abernathy, King's assistant, and I took upon the responsibility of not trying to direct the movement, but to interpret it. On the West Coast, in my speaking, I interpreted the concept of non-violent resistance.

When we get off of this, I will tell you some of the concepts that I have, since that experience, used, I think, very effectively, in a very constructive way. I was with them four years, you know, until 1958.

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*For another view of Martin Luther King's desegregation efforts in Alabama, see Tinsley E. Yarbrough's Judge Frank Johnson and Human Rights in Alabama, University of Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1981, especially pp. 50-56, 112-116, and 120-123.

[In the follow-up interview, the interviewer asked Dr. Riles to add a passage explaining these concepts.]

Riles: What I meant by using some of the concepts of non-violence was that I found that it doesn't have to be in any major social change or upheaval. It goes down to how you relate to individuals as human beings. Even though you may disagree with them, or in some cases, may be some kind of adversary.

I remember an incident walking down the street and meeting a fellow who called me a name, a white. I would, in other years, have been resentful, or maybe got in a fight or something. But for some reason I was at a stage in my life where I stopped. I went over to him, and I said, "Why would you call me a name? I've never seen you. I don't know you. I've never done anything to you." And just calmly asked him, "Well, why?"

Faced with that, he was surprised. You know, you expect someone to come over to try to hit you. But I came over inquiring, "What is the problem?" [laughs] It became very apparent that he had no reason except maybe he had gotten up on the wrong side of the bed that morning, felt compelled to strike out at someone he felt may be weaker. He ended up asking for pardon for his behavior.

Now, what I'm really saying is if one is secure enough, or begins to grow secure within himself, you can begin to understand that people are not naturally mean and all of those things. Or even prejudiced. Without a reason that bears upon them.

If you can somehow find out what pressures--and often you can't deal with them. But if you can begin to find out what the pressures that cause people to strike out, and particularly at someone they feel is a minority or someone who is in disfavor, and relieve those kinds of pressures, then you can change. I think that's what the Quakers meant by, "There is that of God in every man."

Now, of course you can't take that to the ultimate scientific end and in every case change people's behavior. But the whole idea of appealing to that which is good in people, I used, without calculating it, when I started working on discrimination in teacher employment. Or on other civil rights kinds of things. Or in my work as a state superintendent. Wherever. Instead of first assuming that everyone is a bastard who opposes you, and you're ready to pick up a club and knock them over the head, my style was to sit down and try to analyze what the problems were, the issues, the viewpoints, and why, and then see if you could negotiate this thing where you would achieve the good ends that everyone wants in an amicable way by appealing to the best that is in people.

Riles: Unfortunately, I must say, not enough of this kind of thinking goes on in our country and in our world or anywhere today. But if we're going to survive as human beings and, as Martin Luther King used to say, "not die as fools," [laughs]--

Sharp: That's pretty powerful.

Riles: --somehow we'd better begin to learn to relate to people.

Sharp: But it still strikes me that since 1958, through 1982, you were still working with the Department of Education, the State Board of Education, the state legislature, and two governors that, as a collection, are not the fastest-moving bodies around.

Riles: [laughs] An understatement.

Sharp: So you have certain principles of respect that you address these different bodies with in terms of seeing what they really want, and trying to understand and negotiate in terms of moving legislation. With good ends in mind, in terms of compensatory education and equalizing finance on all school children. But the reality is that people just want certain things in terms of education for their kids. It seems to me that the principles that you started out with, I guess I'm still not sure how you were dealing with these huge bureaucracies.

Riles: In the first place, you have a massive bureaucracy--and I speak of bureaucracy not necessarily in a negative sense; it's just how the situation is organized in people's self-interest, and it's not going to move fast. It's not going to improve very quickly, and it's not going to deteriorate very quickly. I mean, it has a kind of life of its own. I could go into a long dissertation on why that is so. It has both good and bad features.

So the question then comes from a person, and I've often been asked what is the role of a superintendent, an elected official in non-partisan office. What the role is, is to move the system and make it as sensitive as you possibly can to the needs of the citizens you're there to serve. If you think you're going to revolutionize it overnight, there are too many checks and balances, checks and balances that are built in. If you can make some progress, you can change a few minds, then you should be pleased that you had an opportunity, and you've done it. You see, our structure is slow, and [there are] all kinds of interests, for all kinds of reasons. People think in terms of their own little thing, whatever it is.

But one can get the players together, one can say, "All right, we need this. Let's see if we can get together and, for the moment, put aside differences toward this end."

Riles: I haven't said very much on that, but that's what I was trying to deal with.

[transcript resumes]

Sharp: Were you tempted to stay in Montgomery?

Riles: I was invited to go on Martin Luther King's staff as an administrative assistant, but in the first place, I had a family, a wife and four kids. My wife did not think that it would be wise for me to go down to Montgomery and be on the staff. But I was tempted. The answer is yes.

Sharp: Because it seemed so idealistic, or it seemed so perfect?

Riles: Because it was an opportunity. It became a movement and provided a tool to correct or begin to correct the injustices in the South in a way that no one had come upon before. Obviously, you could not correct injustices by force, because the blacks in the South did not have the means of winning by force. In my view, even if they had the means, that was not the way to do it. But here was a technique which said, "We are not going to subject ourselves to oppression. As long as these buses are segregated, we're not going to...."

The buses were really more than segregated. It started out by Rosie Parks sitting in the back of the bus. The practice down there was, if the front of a bus was filled up, then white people would come and ask you to get up, and you'd have to stand. She had done that for years. But one day she was coming home from work--I guess, tired--and a white man came and said, "Stand up; I want to sit down," and she wouldn't get up. They stopped the bus, arrested her, and took her to jail.

Blacks had gone through that for years. The moment they heard she was in jail, they just kind of rose up. That's something you didn't have to interpret to people.

The ministers decided, "You know our people are upset about this, and we'd better get into control of it," so they just happened to elect Martin Luther King to head the movement.

This whole concept of non-violent resistance, I thought, was very, very significant and very important. Yes, the temptation was very great.

Sharp: I hate to leave this, because I find it really fascinating, but I want to ask you lots of other questions.

Riles: Okay, we can come back to it.

III DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, 1958-1969

The Desegregation of Teaching in California Public Schools

Sharp: In our first session, we talked about how you came into the Department of Education in '58 through civil service, essentially, and then were selected by Roy Simpson.

Riles: By the way, it was that George Thomas (Thomas was executive secretary of the Southern California Conference on Community Relations) that I used to work with that I mentioned before, who is the one who came to me and said, "Why don't you take the civil service examination?"

Sharp: He just saw that as a real avenue for you?

Riles: Part of the role of the Southern California Conference on Community Relations was to open up job opportunities, or to try to place people, that is, minorities, into jobs. Thomas saw this as an opportunity for a job for which I was qualified and suggested that I take the civil service examination. I think I told you my reluctance to leave Los Angeles.

[interruption]

Sharp: The rest of our time, we'll be talking about your years in the department, 1958 through 1970. That's obviously a big topic, so I've broken down the questions basically by your job titles.

Your first job, as I understand it, was as a consultant in the Certificated Employment Practices area. How did you approach your job?

Riles: It was a brand new idea. Into the education code the legislature had passed a short law which said, "There shall be established in the Department of Education a commission on Certificated Employment Practices." That was it. I think that was passed in 1957 originally, and it wasn't funded. So the superintendent, [Roy] Simpson, wanted

Riles: to carry forth that. (At that time, the legislature met every year to pass bills and every other year to pass the budget.) Simpson made a budget request to fund that and, of course, to set up a commission of people.* And, of course, you needed a staff person to work with that commission. That's why I came.

I had to begin from scratch because there was nothing like it. This was before the Fair Employment Practices Commission.** This only dealt with teachers. So my style in working with the commission and being a consultant, to go around and do the job, was to propose to the commission, keep them up to date on what I was doing, do studies on the status of employment discrimination in the state, and to urge people to comply with the intent of the law. That was my approach.

[interruption]

Riles: Let me give you some examples. We conducted, in the department, the first survey of the number of minorities employed as teachers. How did I go about that? I often think about this as new (or old) employees come into the department. I am not a statistician, and I knew very little about surveys, but I talked to people around the department, and you had a research unit in the department. I got acquainted with them, and, indeed, asked them to help me, told them what I wanted, the ideas I needed to get to do my job. In other words, I took the position that if you were going to do a job, you needed to know what that job was, what the extent of it was, what were the problems.

They helped me design a survey. We sent it out and got it back. Then I put together the data, and it was very interesrting. I didn't try to embarrass anybody about it, but I had the data. Through that I found that the practices of school districts varied. Some, apparently, had employed a number of blacks and chicanos and Asians; some had not.

I started first with those who had. I went around to find out what their experiences were. George Hogan, who was my immediate boss, gave me freedom to do that. As a matter of fact, he told me that I

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*Later, this was the Commission on Equal Opportunities in Education.

**Readers interested in additional information on the passage of the Fair Employment Practices Act will want to see an oral history conducted with Tarea Hall Pittman, NAACP Official and Civil Rights Worker, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1974, especially pp. 86-121.

Riles: could do my work more effectively if I got acquainted with the people who did the hiring, the superintendents, and have them know me as a person, rather than as someone just walking in from the Department of Education. He, indeed, took me to conferences and meetings, and introduced me around, so I was able to move with deliberate speed on it.

[Interviewer later asked Dr. Riles to consider Hogan's support.]

Riles: You asked why was Hogan so supportive. There were three reasons, I would judge. Number one, he was loyal to Roy Simpson. Being Simpson's deputy, he wanted to carry out what Simpson wanted him to carry out.

Secondly, George Hogan was quite philosophical and committed to carrying out what the law was. It was the law that at least permitted this program to be established.

Third, it was the type of person he was. I remember a story him telling me in the beginning. He says, "We've asked you here. We have confidence that you can put this program together." He says, "I'm going to be very honest. I come from Humboldt County, and there are no blacks, or were none, up there when I grew up. I didn't know blacks had any problems." He said, "Now, I knew Irish were discriminated against. I'm Irish," he said. [laughs] "But I didn't know blacks had any problems."

So he was going to rely on me to give the leadership, and he would help in any way he could. So it was in that context.

[transcript resumes]

Riles: Let me give you an example. Paul Salmon, who is now executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, was a [school] superintendent in Covina. I had heard that he had employed a black teacher. Covina was, for all intensive purposes, all white. Not only was she a black teacher, she happened to be a graduate of the college I went to. So I went down to visit him, and sat down and talked to him. The question finally got around to, why did you employ a black teacher in an all-white community, with an all-white board? How did they react to it? How is she doing?

He was able to tell me. In the first place, he grew up in Covina. Everybody knew him well. He employed her because she was the best person available. She had good credentials. That's why he wanted to employ her. When he recommended that to his board, his board kind of dragged their feet a little bit and said, "Paul, you may be asking for trouble, but if that's what you want to do, go ahead."

Riles: He started out by, instead of just assigning her to one class, he assigned her to be a kind of resource teacher, where she went to all the elementary schools. Of course, no one could say, you're hiring here and not there, and so on. That exposed all of the kids and all of the schools and her to that situation initially. I assume that later on he assigned her permanently.

There were others. Stockton was another district that had moved pretty well. San Francisco was another. Los Angeles, they had had some movement. San Diego. Dr. Ralph Dailard was superintendent there. They had made movement. Other places had not; it was rather spotty.

[Interviewer later asked Dr. Riles to more fully explain this process he went through.]

Riles: What I did, what I was speaking about here, was that, in a nutshell, the picture was mixed on the employment of black teachers. Some districts had employed a few, and some had employed none. My approach to this was first to take a look at the state and see what the problems were and how far they had gone. First to look at those districts that had employed black teachers, to find out why they had employed them, how it had worked out, in order to gain information that might be useful to those districts that were reluctant to move. Because if it has worked well in some places, then you have leverage to eliminate the fears of people.

You see, again, why didn't districts in the first place, from every logic you can say, hire the best qualified people? Why? Well, the first place, some were afraid [laughs] that it would bring criticism, problems, and no one wants another problem. Okay?

So how then could I learn that Paul Salmon, for example, in Covina, had moved in this direction? I went to him as an example to talk to and find out why and under what circumstances, how the person worked out. Then with this information, I could and did move others to move along.

[transcript resumes]##

Riles: [If you deny] a teacher a job because of skin color, you're denying the kids. Kids deserve the best-qualified people available. When you deny them that, you're not getting them the best-qualified people. That was one point.

The other point was, we live in a multi-cultural society. A youngster is deprived that grows up in society and does not have a chance to relate to people as people. That and other reasons were my selling points. Not just the legalistic ones.

Riles: Now, what happens? In a little while, people begin to call and say, "Look, we're thinking about this. We want to hear you come and speak to us. We'd like to know how to move on it." I remember a district in southern California, I don't remember the name right now, in which the superintendent called me down. First he wanted me to meet with his staff, his administrators, and then he wanted me to meet with his board. We had dinner together. Then his board, young men and women, really got right to the point. They said, "We've hired an Asian teacher or two, but we've never hired a black teacher. We are not prejudiced. We want to do it, but we don't want to upset our community. What do you recommend?"

Well, this is my chance. So I said, "Look, in the first place, make sure that the person you hire is well qualified. You don't want to be sidetracked by making a mistake. You can make a mistake in this time and place with a Caucasian teacher, and you can correct it. But if you make a mistake with a minority teacher, the first one you hire, then you throw back the whole opportunity and delay your opportunity, because you have doubting people who say, 'I told you so.'"

The question was, "Where do you put the teacher?" "Before you do that, you ought to hire more than one," I said. "I'd like to think that you would hire a good teacher. I would like to hope that all black teachers are perfect, but they're just like anybody else. You have a certain percentage of them who probably couldn't make it. If you hire one and that person fails, then you've set back the whole cause. So hire two or three, and then you're not having everything on one roll of the dice."

"Where do you place the teacher?" I said, "It's very important. You have a wide socio-economic range here. One place you don't put the teacher is in your low socio-economic, lower middle-class, poor white area. In the first place, lower-middle class whites usually are already negative toward the system. That is, you put a black teacher there, and that is just one other evidence. Better put the teachers in your highest socio-economic schools."

Sharp: How did that go over?

Riles: I told them, look, if they are engineers, doctors, professors, professional people, whose children go there, even if there were some resentment, it is impolite in that type of situation for people to express bigotry. [laughter] In other words, educated people are not supposed to do that. It also says to the low socio-economic people, you're not just forcing it on them.

Riles: One other question: "They have housing problems here, how do we locate a place for the teacher to live?" My question would be always, when that question came, "Do you find homes for the rest of your teachers? No?" "Well, then, don't get into that. Minorities are more sophisticated about that than you would ever be, so just let them handle it. If you find homes for others, then you have an obligation to find homes for them. They may not even want to live in your community, but you leave that up to them. That's not the school's problem."

They moved on that, and it was successful.

I said, "Look, here's what will happen. There may be, rarely, some questioning, eyebrow raising, for two or three weeks. If it's a good teacher, parents are interested in their children learning. Give that two or three weeks, and all that stuff will be forgotten."

And I said, "I'll tell you another thing." (I was talking from experiences that I had seen and questioned and surveyed.) I said, "What is most likely to happen, the parents will not know that it's a black teacher teaching the class until you have parents' night, because kids do not relate to that. That's not of a concern to them. If you're black or brown or blonde, they just assume that that's the way you are."

That's the way it works.

To make a long story short, over that period of years, when I was working at improving Certificated Employment Practices, we moved the system along to the point where, when the Fair Employment Practices Commission was established, there was very little for them to do, in so far as discrimination in teacher employment [was concerned].

Sharp: You mentioned that the first time we met, and I find that hard to believe.

Riles: It's true. The problems were in other areas, not in teacher employment. Of course, you have to consider that you didn't have a lot of black teachers, and it came down to that. Not many Asians had gone into this. Not many chicanos were trained, because if people look up and don't see any jobs out there, they're not going--

Sharp: Not going to spend a lot of time getting educated.

Riles: That's right. There were very few blacks, after this program had run a couple of years, that couldn't get a job. That's the way it was. There were a few people who began recruiting blacks from other places.

Riles: California was going through a period of growth, and teachers were needed. That helped, because if one district could do it, then another district could do it. If Stockton could do it, there's no reason why Fresno couldn't do it, and so on.

Some move very slowly. When I came up here, you could count the number of black teachers on your hand in Sacramento. But that moved forward. At some point, I forget the year now, I felt that there was a need to go further than just employment. [I felt we needed to get into] the whole area of intergroup relations, of how to develop strategies for people to relate to others, for children to relate to each other constructively and without conflict, into the whole area of cultural awareness and appreciation of each other and so on.

[The interviewer later asked Dr. Riles to fill in any additional thoughts on the effort in teacher employment.]

Riles: Without attempting to put self-praise on myself (and I don't want to do that; I'm trying to be objective with this), the fact of the matter is, we used an approach to get teachers employed by persuasion. Persuasion was just as logical and simple. We asked the question, "Who are you really hurting if you don't hire the best qualified teacher that's out there?" "Not really the teacher. You're hurting the kids. They deserve the best that you have to offer."

All right, everyone would accept that. The second is the question, "How do you go about doing this?" "Where do you find such teachers," and so on. Answering the question of how the public is likely to react. Well, we gathered together enough information and data on practices that this thing began to move. It began to be the acceptable thing to do. Since there were no, or very few, cases of problems in it, it just moved quietly.

I guess what I'm saying is, because we did not have a fair employment law with teeth in it, with cease and desist orders, investigations, and pressure, we had to move in the way we moved. Through gentle persuasion. But I want to say to you that, in most instances, it is the most effective way to move. I'm not opposed to having a law. As a matter of fact, I support having a law that you can go in and demand that injustices be corrected. But these ought to be the special cases, where everything else had failed.

Now, because we had moved so far along in education, the Fair Employment Practices Act had an indirect effect, I guess, because if there were a problem, we had a service there to deal with it, so far as the school districts were concerned. I would guess that it was a stimulant to school districts to move after you got the Fair Employment Practices Act.

Riles: But the fact of the matter is, there were relatively few cases that the Fair Employment Practices Commission got into, because it was not necessary. Furthermore, they had their hands full with other areas that had not moved quite so far.

[transcript resumes]

Establishment of the Bureau of Intergroup Relations

Riles: I got permission from Dr. Simpson and the rest of the staff [in the department] to introduce a bill to create a Bureau of Intergroup Relations, which was broader than just teacher discrimination and employment. Al Rodda, who was a new senator, we got him to carry the bill [in 1963].

Sharp: Was this a difficult bill to pass?

Riles: Yes, it was difficult, and, by the way, this gave me my first experience with the legislature.

Sharp: I thought so.

Riles: I learned I had to follow the bill myself. I had to meet with people on it. At that time they had the Senate Governmental Efficiency Committee. Whenever a bill went to that committee, you knew it was dead. The assembly used to pass a lot of bills. Every bill had to go to the committee in the senate which decided where to send bills, but when they sent it to the Governmental Efficiency Committee, you know that that was the place where they were going to bury the bill.

I met a fellow by the name of Bob Mendelsohn, who worked for Senator McAteer, the late Senator [J. Eugene] McAteer was from San Francisco.

By the way, that was the second time I had met Marion Joseph.* She was doing some legislative reporting for the California Democratic Council. So I saw her and I said, "Why don't you support this bill?" I just happened to meet her in the hall. She said, "Well, I'll find out whether I can do that." Evidently she got in touch with her people, and they endorsed the bill. She knew Bob Mendelsohn, and introduced me to Bob.

Bob said, "Well, I'll introduce you to Senator McAteer." I met with Senator McAteer, and he liked me for some reason. He was a tough, hard guy. He didn't know anything about any group relations.

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*The first time Riles met Joseph was in 1962 when she was the Sacramento area manager for Ralph Richardson's campaign against Max Rafferty for Superintendent of Public Instruction. Riles worked on this campaign. Marion Joseph provided this information about the early period of her association with Riles.

Riles: or all that stuff. But he liked me. He said, "Now listen, Wilson. If you want a bill passed, come to somebody who can pass it." You know, that type of thing. He said, "These new guys, they don't know what's going on."

Sharp: Meaning Rodda?

Riles: Yes. [Mervyn M.] Dymally, I think, was supporting the bill over in the assembly, and he didn't have much good to say about Dymally. But McAteer said, "Okay, I'll see what I can do. I'm not going to promise that I can get it out, but I will try." And he got the bill out. Some minor amendments; it passed.

Sharp: Did it have a lot of money?

Riles: No, it had very little money. At that time, once they pass the bill, then you can put in your budget to carry out what the legislators' wishes were, and that's what we did.

I started out with one person, Ted [Theodore] Neff, whom I hired, who was a principal down in southern California, happened to be a white guy. He worked in the bureau until he retired. That's how that got started, and it gradually grew over the years.

Organization of the Division of Compensatory Education: Implementation of the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title I

Sharp: I wanted to ask you about your compensatory education work.

Riles: The state, in 1963 or 1964, passed the Compensatory Education Act--

Sharp: McAteer's act?

Riles: Yes. Three or four?

Sharp: Well, I think it's later, Dr. Riles, because the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act was passed in 1965.

Riles: This was one year before. There were two [McAteer] acts.

Sharp: The McActeer act, I thought, allowed California to implement the federal act?

Riles: There was one before that. At any rate, the state appropriated $1 million, less than $1 million. This was a state program prior to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act being passed.

Riles: I was asked to apply for that, but I didn't. Leo Lopez, who is now in the department and has been in ever since, was the first staff person. They only had one person to operate the program.

Then, when it became apparent that the [federal] Elementary and Secondary Education Act would pass, the state felt it needed the structure to do that. What it did was to lock the other program into that, and pass the structure to administer the federal program. By this time, Max Rafferty was Superintendent [of Public Instruction] and his deputy was Everett [T.] Calvert. Rafferty and Calvert were not enamored with the McAteer act, because if you didn't have that act, then the department could have operated the federal program however they wished, but this set up a commission, and so on.

I was asked by Bill [William A.] Norris, who at that time was either president or a member of the State Board of Education,* to take that job. By '65 that act had passed, I think, in the spring. It hadn't been signed yet, or the appropriation hadn't been made, but it was passed. It brought $70 million into the state for programs to meet the needs of children from lower income families, to establish programs for it, which, in a sense, was compensatory education.

I never had problems with Max as such. The problems were always with his deputy.

Sharp: Mr. Calvert?

Riles: Yes. That's another story.

I knew the board supported this. The board took it and worked with Max to make sure that I got it. What they got Max to do was to give them three names, and they selected me. I believe the other two names were Eugene Gonzales and Ed Klotz.

Sharp: Because you had a good record?

Riles: Yes. I had worked in the [Bureau of Inter]group Relations, and I'd report to them over the years, and they had confidence in me.

To go back just a little bit, I was in Oakland the other day. One of the things that I did in Oakland [involved] the NAACP. [They were] going to have a strike and pull all the kids out of school. As a part of the Intergroup Relations, I was asked to go and try to resolve that thing. I resolved it by getting Max and the state board

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*Thomas W. Braden was president in 1965.

Riles: to invite the Oakland board over to a state board meeting, and then got them to agree that if that board would formally invite me to assist them and advise them, the strike wouldn't go on. It was a long, very delicate kind of operation. Of course, I was invited; I worked all summer over there. I came up with an integration plan for them that they could live with. The board adopted it, and that was that. Everybody's face was saved; everybody was happy about it.

[The interviewer later asked Dr. Riles to fill in the story of this confrontation between Max Rafferty, the State Board of Education, and the Oakland Board of Education.]

Riles: I'm not sure how long you want to spend on this story. Let me just say that this is a very interesting occasion to me, because it's an example of what you can do, even though you have the superintendent, in this case Max Rafferty, and the board poles apart. But I found that there were ways.... Well, here you had a situation in Oakland where the NAACP, the head of the NAACP, felt that kids were segregated and discriminated against. According to their feeling, they had been patient, and they were going to do something about it. And what they were going to do was strike, take all the kids out of school, teach them in store fronts, and all of that kind of thing.

Well, the state board does not, nor does the superintendent, have power over a local board. That's what the reality is. Well, what do you do if you're sitting in my [place]? Again, if all you have is the power of persuasion, you have to try to use it. We were not in a very strong position, because our state board and state superintendent couldn't get their act together. So how in the world are they going to help?

So what I did was call the regional director of the NAACP, not the local one, and said, "Look, you have a volatile situation. Schools have enough trouble trying to control teenagers when they come in the classroom. Do you really think that your people are going to be able to have an educational program with these teenagers running all over the street and this emotional atmosphere, boycotting the schools? Who are you going to hurt? The kids."

So she agreed with me. But she said, "I have a problem on my hands. I have a president of one of our chapters over there, and this guy is determined to solve a problem, and it is indeed a problem."

So I said, "Well, let's play for time. If I can get the State Board of Education to invite the local board of education, could you get your people to delay their strike?" [laughs]

She says, "I'll do my best. I think I can make it."

Riles: So we kept in close contact. I called a member of the Oakland board, who by the way is still on the Oakland board, even after all these years, and he was scared to death. He happened to be black. But he was scared to death of what would happen if all these kids were pulled out of school.

I told him, "Now, here's what I'm going to try to do. I'm going to try to get the State Board of Education--they can't demand anything--to invite your local board, and let's see if we can work out an alternative."

He said, "If they'll invite the board, if you can get them to invite the board, I will get my board to accept. I will personally talk to them individually to get them to accept."

My role then became to broker this thing between Max and Braden, who was president of the State Board of Education. So I'd go to Max and say, "Look, we have a difficult situation over there in Oakland. I recommend that you invite, or the state board invite." And I go to Braden and I say, "We have a difficult problem..."

By the way, the board did invite them. Now I have another problem: how are Max and Braden going to react when they start negotiating with the board? [laughs] I want to tell you--let's make it brief--and I again don't want to praise myself, but one of the few times they were together, Braden and Max, is when they were negotiating in an open meeting in San Francisco with the Oakland Board of Education. The compromise was to let Wilson Riles come in and take a look at that situation as an outsider and make recommendations on how to deal with their integration problem.

The other problem was how do you deal with an NAACP that had geared up to strike? And to get them to have enough confidence in me to allow me to come in and deal with the problem?

We got them all to agree, and there was no strike. [laughs]

Sharp: It must have been a pretty big room.

Riles: It was!

Okay, so much for that.

[transcript resumes]

Riles: Back to compensatory education. I was appointed. [President] Lyndon Johnson signed the bill. I became the director of Title I, and all of that was thrown into it. I had to build that office from the bottom up. I think I can say it became the real model on compensatory education programs for the nation.

Sharp: I saw some reports by critics of compensatory ed programs in the late '60s. Some of them felt that the compensatory ed programs actually added to segregation of schools. I wondered how--

Riles: It depends upon how it was managed. We didn't do it that way here. You see, the language of the bill said those funds should go to concentrations of low-income children. Obviously, if your low-income children are all black or primarily black, that was where you had to concentrate the money.

What I did was work out with the [U.S.] Office of Education a program, a means by which you could reach kids wherever they were. I don't agree with those who said that it added to discrimination. It was not a program designed to integrate kids. It was a program designed to reach kids. Wherever they were, you were to reach them and raise their achievement level.

Some people weren't happy because they didn't feel that that was the way to do it, that the way to raise their achievement level was to bus them off and mix them up. I didn't agree with that either. We did figure ways to have the programs follow the children. My position all along was, our job was to educate the kids wherever they were. If they could be integrated, fine.

I had always encouraged integration. I never encouraged just the wild, mindless busing of kids all over the district, because I didn't see that that in itself solved the problem.

In some cases, the whole issue became not education, but how many kids you were going to bus. We went through a very sad period on that. You see, discrimination is one thing, setting up barriers is one thing, but the whole question on the integration issue comes down to the point, what is the role of the school in all this? You have a socio-economic consideration. You've got a jobs consideration. In the long run, if you can educate people, have them get jobs and earn money and move into the society according to their desires and capabilities and do away with housing segregation, people move where they want to move.

In California, except in your concentrated areas like San Francisco, Los Angeles, etc., all your black population is 6 or 7 percent at the most statewide.

At any rate, I disagreed with that contention, and I worked very hard, at least in California, to see that compensatory education did not become a barrier to integration, if I can put it that way.

Sharp: Were the [Los Angeles] Watts disturbances [11-16 August 1965] a real setback?

Riles: No. As a matter of fact, one of the unwritten stories about the Watts riots--and this was a compliment to the LA [Los Angeles] school system and a compliment more than that to the eagerness of black parents and the black community itself to have education for their children--is that the fact of the matter is, out of all the burning and disturbances, not one single school was damaged in the Watts riots, not one. There were a few churches that were singed, but no schools. Ten years later, I'm not sure that you could say that. [pause]

Sharp: What was the contact that you had as the Director of Compensatory Education programs in California with the federal government?

[Dr. Riles answered this question in the follow-up interview.]

Riles: Let me say this, Jack Hughes was director of the Title I program in Washington. In other words, he was my counterpart.

To be very frank with you, Lyndon Johnson signed this bill in September, and suddenly $70 million became available. Well, there were no guidelines, no structure, you just had the law. No regulations.

You either sat down and twiddled your thumbs and waited and planned for a year, or you got busy and began to get the job done. In California we got busy and put on a crash program to get the program under way by the second semester, which meant three or four months.

Jack Hughes and I naturally became friends.

Now, how did I do this? We had our own ideas, and we helped develop a program. The same Ruth Love that is superintendent of schools of Chicago was one of the five people I hired to sit down with me and help put the program together. She was a consultant in the department. I brought her in and four or five other people, and we sat down and planned the program together. We knew where we wanted to go in California. We believed in the law. We believed that the job was to raise the achievement level of children from low-income parents. By definition that was Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. We had some ideas on how you go about doing it.

What we did then, Jack Hughes believed in the law, and we set up a relationship that, without stating it, said, if you can deal with the federal bureaucracy, we can deal with our bureaucracy back in California, and let's get the job done. So I did not ignore him, as many people try to ignore Washington and do everything [on their own], or Washington comes and tries to investigate and all that kind of stuff.

Riles: For example, we felt that there should be parent involvement, and that every district should have a group of parents of disadvantaged kids to form a committee to sit down and discuss what kind of programs we were going to put for their children. We felt that made sense.

There was no law that required this. There was no regulation that required it. I just got on the phone and said, "Look, Jack, we plan to do this. We would like to do this for this reason. Can we do it?"

He would say, "Let me check it out with our lawyers." He would find a way for us to do it. You see, this was the kind of dynamics and relationships that were working there, because you had people who were committed to get a job done, and not let the bureaucracy get in the way.

As long as he was there, and as long as I was in comp ed, we worked together. There were no conflicts. When they got down to making regulations, they invited us back to have input.

Now, every state didn't do that. There were states--look, this money was not to be spent solely on equipment. I want to tell you something. We took it literally that this was to develop programs, and we tried to play down as much hardware and all of that stuff--

Sharp: And buildings.

Riles: And buildings. I want to tell you, the first year, Missouri didn't do that. St. Louis took their Title I money and built six elementary schools, which was clearly not the intent of the law.

I must say now, as things drifted over the years, programs became formalized, people running around with audits, and kids got lost in the shuffle. But that's the way it was then, and it's a beautiful--it shows what can be done.

Okay, so much for that.

[transcript resumes]##

Riles: In other words, we had open, complete, direct, constant communication.

Sharp: And they were really helping?

Riles: And they were really helpful in doing it. He was dedicated to make the program work. I was dedicated to make it work. I had hired people--you really have a chance when you have the opportunity to go out and hire new people, because you hire people who will care and who are dedicated.

Riles: To give you a little feeling about some of your intergroup relations techniques, your way of working with people as people comes out. I remember the whole attitude about federal programs in the department here was a new thing. Superintendents just want money. I had a big fight with the [State] Board [of Education] after I had been appointed [Director of Compensatory Education], because the fellow that was in the department who was over the fiscal unit wanted all the money to flow there and he would send it out to districts, just like an appropriation. But I'd been around the department long enough to know how superintendents act. They would come up, bring their finance guy to find out how to get the money. They would go over there to find out how to get the money and go home.

But they were supposed to have a program of what they were going to do to raise the achievement level of kids. The board didn't understand that, even though they were friendly and supported me. One night at the board I said, "If you set it up the way it's being proposed by the department, I end up by being window dressing. Superintendents will come up and bring their fiscal person, find out how to get the money, and go home. They won't talk about plans. The situation has to be set up so that they have to come through my office first, so we'll know what kind of program they're going to have. If they come and bring their fiscal person, I'm going to say, 'You bring up your curriculum person, also.'"

I ended up by telling that board committee, "If you don't set it up that way, I don't want the job."

Sharp: How did that go over?

Riles: Dan [Daniel A.] Collins, who was a member of the board and a former dentist who lives in Marin county, was a black. He really understood it. I hadn't talked to him about it. He said, "Look, if you don't set it up the way Wilson wants it, I'm going to resign from the board." That was enough.

I got sidetracked and lost my point. Oh, I was going to tell you about techniques. We had a staff over here. We had to rent a place over on J Street, kind of unattractive, but we didn't care, we were working like the dickens to get it under way.

I came by one day and I heard them arguing with some superintendents there about the program. My staff was just anxious to make sure that it was right. The superintendents were dragging their feet and didn't want to do this. I heard all this noise. So, after the meeting was over, I called my staff in and I said, "You're approaching it the wrong way. You don't have to get into confrontations. You know what the law is. You know what the direction is. You have the guideline. Discuss it with them."

Riles: I said, "Furthermore, you are making the decisions about the money. When you are making the decision about $70 million that somebody else wants, you don't have to yell. You can speak in a whisper and be heard." [laughter] That's true, as long as you know what you're doing and you are committed, and you are working in the interest of the children. So it was a revolutionary kind of approach.

Everything didn't run smoothly in the beginning, because a lot of attitudes had to be changed.

Next time we get together, I want to share with you some of the residuals, some of the things that do not come directly to mind, because Title I opened up a new vista for poor people and for minority people. One of the myths is that only minorities benefited from it. More money, more resources, and more programs were developed for poor whites. You have a greater percentage of blacks who fall into the category of poor of that group, but when you look at the population as a whole, you have in numbers much greater lower socio-economic people who are white. Those kids benefited from it too, and we administered program without discrimination based on race.

I'd like to mention to you that we were the beginning of establishing an advisory committee that we required every district to have. These advisory committees must be composed of parents and community people. I tried to structure them so that they were not adversary groups. It was kind of hard to do, because the Office of Economic Opportunity would deliberately have people confront each other. Our approach was that this advisory committee would be constructive and work with the [school] district.

We found that that was not enough. We needed parents to relate at the school site. So we then asked Washington, "Could we suggest that there be advisory committees at each school?" They said, "Yes." Later the law was amended that required some of the things that we were already doing in California. I understood why they did it, because they wanted to have it throughout the nation. But the moment you write something into law, it becomes inflexible. So I have mixed emotions about that.

Also, you will understand as we continue to talk, as we developed other programs, like Early Childhood Education [ECE] and School Improvement Programs [SIP], that some of the things that I learned as Director of Compensatory Education, I could modify or improve upon, and they became parts of other programs. That's it.

Riles: Prior to Title I of Elementary and Secondary Education Act, there were two other major federal programs. One was the Vocational Education Act, which has been around since 1970. I don't know--you can check this out--but I guess it was getting $30 million from the federal government in the state for vocational education. The next program was passed, I think, in '58. It was NDEA, the National Defense Education Act. That program had $5 million to be distributed. The next one was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which in that one title alone had $70 million.

Sharp: And that's just for California.

Riles: That's for California.

Sharp: That's a huge push--

Riles: For raising the achievement level of disadvantaged children. You can see that that shook up the bureaucracy and really made a difference.

Sharp: It's an incredible commitment on the part of the federal government.

Riles: That is right. That is absolutely right.

Well, our hour is more than up.

Sharp: I know. I'll let you go now.

##

IV THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, 1970-1982

[Interview 4: December 21, 1981]##

Election as Superintendent in 1970

Sharp: The first thing I wanted to talk to you about was your election in 1970 as Superintendent of Public Instruction. There are a lot of details already published about the campaign,* so I wanted to get beyond them and ask you right away, why you think you won in '70.

Riles: Really, it was a combination of things that happened to come together at that point in time. Number one was Rafferty himself. He was elected first in 1962, I think, and took office in 1963. He was re-elected in 1966 and was up again in '70.

He was a very controversial person, thrived on controversy. Very right wing, and so on and so forth. But that was not the main issue. One thing that happened was that he had aspirations for the Senate.

Sharp: The U.S. Senate?

Riles: The U.S. Senate. In '68 he ran against [Thomas] Kuchel in the Republican primary, [Alan Cranston] defeated Rafferty in that November election. Kuchel was a moderate Republican. I think you could describe him as that. He had enough seniority so that he was the minority whip. Max defeated him in the primary in June and then lost to Cranston in November. So not only did he defeat a moderate Republican, the effect of his effort was to give up a Republican seat. This infuriated the moderates, the moderate Republicans who had serious questions about Max that never were expressed.

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*See especially, "Riles' Grassroots Campaign Unseats Rafferty," California Journal, November 1970, p. 307.

Riles: When I ran--and of course I took the position that I have always taken, that I was going to conduct my office in a nonpartisan way and run as a nonpartisan candidate--I got significant support from moderate Republicans.

Sharp: You did. Kuchel then supported you.

Riles: Kuchel supported me. I got support of people like Leonard Firestone and other moderate Republicans across the state. A fellow out here who owns the Nut Tree [near Sacramento]. What was his name? Oh, it will come to me in a moment. [Robert Power] And many others around the state. That was a factor.

Then, of course, people were tired of Max Rafferty's rhetoric. His relationships with the legislature became a disaster. That was just general unhappiness with Max Rafferty. When you added those things together, at that time and place, he was vulnerable, and I conducted a good campaign and people responded.

Sharp: But you are black, too.

Riles: Yes. I have an analysis for that. No black has ever been successful in getting elected to a statewide office in California. Blacks cannot elect anyone in the state. The percentage at that time was no more than 7 percent of the voters. Maybe 8 or 9, but no more than that. So obviously you couldn't run on a black ticket, and I did not do that. My whole campaign was to reflect what I really felt, and that is that I run as a professional, a capable superintendent who happened to be black. I never said one time, "Vote for me because I'm black," but, "I'm a qualified person. These are my programs, and if you believe in those, vote for me for that reason."

The first analysis with regard to this--and of course I wasn't naive about it, and there is no way to prove it, but I think there is a gem of truth in it--is that, when I was making up my mind whether I would run or not, my question to the people that I talked to with respect to this was, "Do you think it is possible for me to win given Max's posture, his glibness, his mastery at rhetoric? Could he be beaten?" Secondly, "Obviously, I'm black. Can I win? Would it be possible?" I didn't mean whether it would be easy or not easy, but could it be done?

I never would have run in the first place had not the people I respected said, "Yes, it is possible, but extremely difficult. Tough but possible."

Riles: One of the people I talked to was a physician friend of mine that had served on the commission [on Discrimination in Teacher Employment] who happened to be black and who happened to live in Los Angeles. I talked to him about it. "Do you think I can win?"

Two years before [in 1968], Tom Bradley had run against [Samuel] Yorty. I reminded him of that. Although there was no question in any objective person's mind that Tom Bradley would have been a better mayor than Yorty, the fact of the matter is that Yorty conducted a very racist campaign. Although Bradley came out first ahead of Yorty in the primary, the run off election, it ended up by Bradley getting defeated and so on.

So I reminded my friend of this. I had no doubts that if Max felt he was going to lose, he would drag race into it.

My friend told me something that was very interesting. He said, "Yes, it happened as you said, but there is another aspect of it."

He recalled that he was born in Mississippi and that he knew people from what he called the Bible belt. He knew that the lower middle-class whites tended to be prejudiced. But he said that what many people never realized was that there was something that ran through their culture that was counter to that, which said that you be fair with a person. And fairness, even though they may not prefer to associate with you or give other evidences of prejudice, requires that when you get right down to it, you give a man his due.

He said that he'd noted since the Bradley defeat a sense that people realized that they voted against Bradley for the wrong reasons. How could you say that a person is soft on crime, or that there would be crime in the street when Tom Bradley was a policeman for twenty years and ended up a police lieutenant, and so on and so forth?

Then he said something I will never forget. He said, "There is a chance that the lower middle class whites, who were really the ones that defeated Bradley, need redemption, need to prove to themselves that they could vote for a person who was qualified," and that I ought to give them a chance to redeem themselves. [laughter]

How much truth was in that I don't know, but I tend to believe, as it turned out, that there is a lot of truth in it.

Sharp: Have you ever tried that theory out on Tom Bradley?

Riles: Not directly. We've discussed it, but we didn't raise it in that context. We both agreed, or at least I believe that the fact that he lost and his being a very genuinely good candidate enhanced my victory two years later.

Sharp: That's interesting.

Riles: I also believe that when he ran again two years later, my victory enhanced his.

I was trying to think about little incidents where the mainstream white Californians really at that time and place came to the conclusion that it was really okay. It's a hard thing to explain, but the results point it out. I got 54 percent of the votes, and I could not have won just depending on minority votes alone.

Transition with Department Staff

Sharp: I'd like to move along to some of the issues that you had to address when you first came in on two different levels: administrative changes immediately in the department, and then the substantive issues of education.

Riles: All right. Let's deal with administration, which was an issue.

Sharp: I know that you appointed a transition team. Greg [Gregory O.] Lipscomb and Francis Doyle were on that. What were they supposed to do?

Riles: In the first place, Francis Doyle had been around. I think he had left the department by then. But I brought in a few people to take a look, to advise me on staffing, and so on. I also brought in some professionals. Andy Strain was one of them who is still here, and Jesse Heinzman, both of whom later worked for me.

Before I did that, there were some Max Rafferty characters around here that I knew that I couldn't operate the department with.

Sharp: Was that Ed [Edwin J.] Klotz?

Riles: Ed Klotz. And the chief deputy that Max had. What was his name? Do you have his name there? [Everett Calvert] His name will come to me in a moment. I didn't think I would ever forget it. A very difficult, paranoid person. You see, your chief deputy is an exempt employee, but he had managed, after Max lost, to get the

Riles: [State] Board [of Education] to appoint him to another position in the department, associate superintendent. That was a contract. Most of our top level people are contract.

To be specific, we have a chief deputy who serves at the pleasure of the appointing power, me. Then you have four other top level people who serve on contract upon the recommendation of the superintendent. They don't have to appoint your recommendation, but they can't unless you come up with a recommendation they will accept, then they are given four-year contracts. So he was put to that. Calvert was his name, Everett Calvert.

So Calvert was switched to a contract position, which indicated that he didn't intend to move. He was one of the most obnoxious individuals that I've ever had the unfortunate experience to come across and who largely motivated me to finally run for superintendent.

Then there were others like Klotz, who was some kind of administrative assistant, and so on, real bad apples.

What I did was call in the top people and said to them, "You're not in my plans, I would prefer that you move. The election is over and we want to get on with the job." Klotz, to his credit, said, "Yes, if you don't want me, I'll leave."

Calvert had moved to another position. Prior to me taking office, I talked to the personnel manager to find out what power the superintendent had. He told me that, yes, I had all these contracts and all these things, but also that the law provided that as superintendent I had the power to set the compensation and assign the duties for all personnel in the Department of Education. I told him that if I could assign the duties and set the compensation, that was all I needed.

I assigned Calvert to pick up his credit card, telephone, travel car, which we had at that time, and to review old documents and report to me. Since he wouldn't be traveling, I assigned him to an office down on the first floor, and that was it.

Sharp: How wicked. [laughter]

Riles: I found out later from his brother, who worked in the department and who was a completely different kind of person and indeed didn't go along with the attitude that Calvert, his brother, had, that if I had done anything else he wouldn't have quit, but I did the one thing that moved Calvert to leave.

Riles: When I moved these people out, we set up a kind of team approach to management as an interim thing for the people that I had brought in temporarily. We just had a kind of team management thing to move things forward.

Then I got the Department of Finance to give me a couple of people to look at the whole arrangement.

Sharp: You mean in terms of administration or in terms of--?

Riles: Organization. They came up with recommendations, structural recommendations which we began to try out. One was a matrix management system.

Sharp: What did that do?

Riles: The matrix management system was introduced, I think, by NASA* and some of the earlier governmental and electronic industries, and so on. [The system] had your usual organizations, your bureaus and your units in the department who had specific assignments. It also provided that you could take someone out of the matrix, out of their assignments, and put them on a task force to do a specific thing.

Since I wanted to be in a mode of innovation and planning and giving some leadership in education, that appealed to me rather than the bureaucracy with its rigidities and turf type of thing where it's hard to move someone if they've been doing something for twenty years. It's hard to get them to relate and work with each other, partly because of Max Rafferty's lack of leadership and management and Calvert's paranoia. What happens in a bureaucracy under those kinds of conditions, when there's danger, everyone backs up into their shells and don't come out of their shells, don't talk to anyone across each line.

I wanted the department to be a department that is committed to education and use the talents of the individuals wherever and whenever we wanted to do it.

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*National Aeronautics and Space Administration

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Mrs. Alvia Barfield
United Teachers, Los Angeles; President-Elect, Association of Classroom Teachers, National Education Association

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[1]The titles and locations given for persons acknowledged here are those that were in effect when this report was written.

Relating with the Legislature: Enabling Early Childhood Education

Sharp: Let me just stop you right there, and ask you what you thought the main issues were for grades K [kindergarten] through 12 that had to get going?

Riles: Now let's get into programs. Oh, by the way, as a footnote, as I look back, the matrix system gave me an opportunity to shake up the department. We modified considerably, when we really settled down, how the department could operate. Part of this has to do with how people behave. I found, for example, that although it made good sense on paper to be able to move people around in task forces, many people became insecure. They like to know who their boss is, who they are working for, and so on. Some people are able to work in a task force mood, but I believe most people find that insecure. So we sorted that out.

Now we come to the point of, "Okay, what are you going to do?" I had some ideas that I had well thought out. What are the goals? I had made some campaign commitments which I had thought through very carefully and which I believed in, and so on. One was to get rid of the adversary kind of relationships that we had here. Two, to develop a working relationship with the [State] Board [of Education] rather than an adversary relationship.

Then, on the idea of curriculum, to reform the system which had languished and which had serious problems. To upgrade the learning, to make sure that the needs of special populations were met.

Now the question comes, if you're going to reform the system, where do you begin? Well, you begin early, with the very young child.

I used the task force approach to develop the structures and the programs. One of the first task forces I developed or pulled together was an Early Childhood Education task force.*

Sharp: You appointed them in March, and they reported in November 1971. Milton Babitz and Jeanada Nolan were the heads in turn.

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*This was the Task Force on Early Childhood Education. The task force's 1972 report and proposal is submitted as a supporting document with this interview. See following page for members.

Riles: They were assigned to head the task force. Once their report was in and I took it in hand and took the concepts and put them into structures, then I went to the legislature and had legislation introduced, which we got through. I went to the governor, who was Reagan at the time, and through negotiation I got $25 million from him, and we started the Early Childhood Education on a phase-in basis [SB 90, 1972]. Because I came to the conclusion that, if you are going to make changes, you can't change a whole system as big as California, but you begin on a solid basis and phase it in.

Another one that followed soon after that was the Master Plan for Special Education [AB 4040, 1974]. Again, we brought together a task force [to develop that].

[In a follow-up session, the interviewer asked Dr. Riles to expand on the Master Plan for Special Education.]

Riles: When I first came in, as I have mentioned before, I had some priorities that I wanted to present. One of these had to do with trying to organize special education, which encompases a wide range of disabilities among children. It had been a long, long struggle to get the schools over the years to really give services to these youngsters. The services were expensive, class sizes had to be small, and so on. It was a sad state of affairs.

Now, you had people who fought to recognize this, and indeed considerable gains have been made, but the way they were made was not to provide adequate money, applied to any disability. In order to get the money, you had to name the problem, and then it would go to the legislature, and the legislature would appropriate money for that particular problem.

To give an example, take the words "mentally retarded." We had to break that down into different categories of the mentally retarded. So you had money for the trainable mentally retarded, and it went on ad infinitum. You had words that cropped up--a youngster had dyslexia, which is another type of ailment, and so on and so forth.

So you would meet these various categories coming and going, and unless a youngster fit into one of those categories, there were no services. They just fell through the cracks because there were no monies for them.

It was because of that, I asked and put together a task force, which was my technique for really bringing together the people that knew about the subject and others, to not make a big study, but to tell us what to do about it. "We're going to address this problem for kids. What needs to be done and how do you go about it?" Then I would take that politically.

Riles: So we put together a task force, and they came up with a plan to address the broad needs of handicapped youngsters. Now, it so happened that just as we were doing this, [HR] 94142 was being considered by Congress, so at the national level people were beginning to try to deal with the problem. Now, we knew a lot of funds, or at least some funds, came from Washington, and we knew that Washington would set up regulations that may go counter to anything that we might do. So what we did is had our people on our task force (but mainly our directors) go back and work with those people in Washington to help devise [HR] 94142 so that California's program as we saw it emerging would not be in violation with their laws and regulations.

The result was that our people did influence [HR] 94142. Not totally. I mean, we didn't accomplish everything that we wanted to accomplish. [In] my view, [HR] 94142 ended up still too rigid. We could not change the terminology. But we were able to get it flexible to a greater extent than it would have been had we not been involved.

Now, the Master Plan for Special Education is one of the things that I'm most proud of. Because it really gave the parents of youngsters who were handicapped, brought them into the system in a way where they could be influential and help as a team, to the extent that they had not been before.

[transcript resumes]##

Sharp: I want to back you up and ask you about the task force and the legislation that Reagan signed, the SB 1302 that Mervyn Dymally authored. First of all, this is a list of the senate and assembly Education Committee members for years 1970 through 1974. I know that you hired some lobbyists in March of 1971--to assist you with your legislation, in those committees, I presume.

How, when you first came in, did you set up your relationship with those committees? Some of the people who were on there were friendly to you already: Rodda, for one, Dymally another, and some other people.

Riles: Let's look at some of these people on the assembly committee. Leroy Greene, who was chairman and is still chairman, whom I knew well. Peter Chacon is another. [Dixon] Arnett, who happened to be a Republican but also a friend. Jim [James W.] Dent, former superintendent. [John F.] Dunlap, March Fong [Eu], [Bill] Green, [John] Vasconcellos, [Newton R.] Russell, Jerry Lewis. Most of those people were people that I knew. They knew where I stood, and were even openly sympathetic to what I was trying to do, and were quite relieved that I was elected.

Riles: [In the senate] Rodda is another. Dymally, Gregorio, Grunsky, George Moscone, who later became a mayor [of San Francisco], [John A.] Nejedly, [Nicholas C.] Petris, [Walter W.] Stiern, who came on in 1972. These were people that I found that I could work with.

A very interesting thing, though, about this bill. We developed a bill, and since [Kenneth] Cory, in the assembly, was a power in the assembly (he had been a protégé of [Jesse] Unruh), we felt that he was the person to carry the bill. So we developed one bill, offered it to Cory, who accepted.

Merv Dymally, prior to the time we gave it to Cory, came and asked me to give him some legislation to pass. He wanted to help. We didn't want to give him that bill, because usually bills of that magnitude began in the assembly anyhow for a number of reasons. So we gave him a part of the bill, not the main thing. He was very unhappy about it and very annoyed. So we had the bill, SB 1302, had him introduce it in the senate, and had the assembly version, which was the same, introduced in the assembly.

Now, what happened? Sometimes the best laid plans go astray. In the first place, Cory took little interest in the bill and did not move it.

Sharp: Because he thought it was too big?

Riles: No, he just wasn't interested or didn't believe in it, or whatnot, but he didn't work the bill, didn't move it. So we had to then move the bill in the senate. Dymally was one of these individuals that would almost take any bill that you gave him. Some would get through and some wouldn't.

You still have people like that in the legislature. Some people will take very few bills and get most of them passed. Some of them will take almost any bill and if it goes, fine, if it doesn't, you know about that.

So we worked, we pushed. Dymally did work and moved it. But then, when it really got down to the last push, the last spring, Dymally was going to Florida to work on a degree and so on, so he asked Moscone to support, to carry the bill and appear before the committees.

Moscone was a tiger. If he took on something, if he was a friend, he was a great friend. If he was an opponent, he was a formidable opponent. He believed in that bill. He was the one that took it before the committees for Dymally. Bless his soul, a

Riles: large amount of credit for getting it through the senate and, after it was through the senate, to follow it through the assembly, because it was then a senate bill, goes to him.

Sharp: What were some of the major obstacles to getting the Early Childhood Education bill passed?

Riles: Money was always a factor--certainly Reagan has never been a free spender. He wasn't then and is even less so now. In addition to that we had included in the bill that we begin with the four-year-olds. I felt that the four-year-olds ought to be part of the system. All the studies, [Jean] Piaget and others, indicate that youngsters are far more ready to learn than we generally give them credit for. We felt that the basic issue is, if we get them off to a good start, then the problems we face later on you could identify and deal with. The four-year-old thing was too much for Reagan to buy. As a matter of fact, we began to get letters from conservatives who were saying, "God, you're taking these kids this young," and, "What are you going to do, make communists out of them?" You know, the whole idea that young children four years old ought to be at home with their mamas; that was too soon.

We used this as leverage, though, because when Alex Sherriffs came over to negotiate for the governor, he was the governor's education secretary, he said, "The governor feels that four years old is too young."

I said, "Well, is it?" Finally I asked, if we took that out would we get the rest of the package? And at the proper time, I was willing to make that compromise. That's how we got it kindergarten through third grade.

One fundamental change that we implemented in that bill that has now become, in California, routine was the idea of having a school site council composed of parents and teachers who would assess the needs of the youngsters at the school site, agree on an instructional strategy together. I'm not talking about an advisory committee, but people with the power to study the situation. This was something that was brand new. So you had boards of educations who worried about, "God, you're going to give all the power, you know, down there." The teacher unions, at least the CTA [California Teachers Association], was concerned about whether there were going to have more parents on that, and were parents going to take control, and where would the teachers be. So we had to negotiate a parity arrangement.

I had to keep saying over and over again. "This is not set up as a power arrangement. It's set up so that teachers and parents, the people who are most concerned with what happens in the school,

Riles: can sit down and do some thinking and planning about the needs of their youngsters and get a commitment." That was a very difficult thing to negotiate.

Thirdly, any time you come up with a program to implement change, no matter how logical it is, people fear change, and so you have that inertia. You had other programs. People wondered whether they were going to be abandoned, and so on. The Miller-Unruh teacher things, which was designed to put on Miller-Unruh teachers, was an issue, because they were insecure about it. So we had to write the bill to let everybody know that we weren't interested in getting rid of Unruh teachers, but they ought to be part of the planning program.

Sharp: But, in point of fact, the Miller-Unruh teachers were jeopardized. As I understood it, in the first phase of the funding for the Early Childhood Education, money was taken away from the Miller-Unruh Reading Program.*

Riles: Here's the way we approached it. Keep in mind that Miller-Unruh was imposed from Sacramento. This was your change. Everything was imposed from Sacramento. What we were saying was, "Look, we will help you. But you should determine what you consider the needs of your youngsters, whatever they are, you have to go through a process. Once you determine what your instructional strategy was, you would have put that in place.

"Thirdly, you would have put into place a way you would evaluate what the goals you have for your children's learning are. We want you to feel free that you are not locked into some kind of experimental program. If something isn't working that you've planned, we want you to be free to modify it.

"Then finally, we are going to give you $90 or $120 per kid, and that money is going to go to the school site council. You could determine whatever you wanted to do with that money. We were not going to dictate to you from the state level or the county. We're not going to let anyone interfere with you as long as you were spending your money to carry out your plan.

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*This is a reference to the pre-existing Miller-Unruh Reading Program which was implemented before the Riles Early Childhood Education program was legislated in 1972. See "Department of Education Moves to Implement Early Education Plan Recommended by Riles Task Force," by Ruth Pritchard, in California Journal, December 1971, p. 342.

Riles: "Now, if a part of your plan was to have a Miller-Unruh teacher, you could spend that money for them."

You see, the difference is, your Miller-Unruh teachers were locked into a kind of situation where you either took them or you didn't take them. What we were saying is, "If that's what you consider your main problem, if you think a Miller-Unruh teacher is what you want, you can use Early Childhood Education money for that."

Sharp: With Reagan's focus on budget cutting, then, why did he sign it? He was giving you, over a period of a couple of years, an enormous increase in funding for education in the lower grades in California.

Riles: Two reasons, I believe. I'm trying to think.

Sharp: I mean, there are strategic reasons.

Riles: Let me tell you something about Reagan in my experience. In the first place, I started off with him up and above board and honest. I let him know what I was trying to do. That friendship has lasted. When I had to disagree with him on at least one occasion and take an open public position in opposition to one of his programs, before I did it I went and sat down with him and told him why I was going to do that and why I had to do it.

So, the first thing that I want to say is that there was a personal relationship of trust.

The second thing is that he was concerned about good education and, I think, still is. When I laid the plan before him, it was something that he was willing to support.

Thirdly, and I don't think we should leave this out, Alex Sherriffs, who was his education liaison person, we got along well. He is now vice chancellor at the state university.* He had a blind spot with regard to the University of California. [laughter]

Sharp: I'm aware of that. [laughter]

Riles: But with the other segments, he was very rational. So we did a very good job in putting that plan together. With Reagan, we were able to sell him on the value of the approach.

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*Dr. Sherriffs's full title is Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs for the California State University and College System.

Working with the State Board of Education

Sharp: I want to ask you to change your tack and tell me about the State Board of Education. Did they have input for you on the Early Childhood Education bill?

Riles: Before I answer that, let me say this. Keep in mind that when Max [Rafferty] first ran [1962], you had a Pat [Edmund G., Sr.] Brown-appointed board. Pat Brown and that board were sympathetic to Ralph Richardson. But when Ralph lost to Max and Max became superintendent, you had a virtual shootout between them during the Max years.

Every meeting was a media event, television cameras and everything. It became a [Thomas W.] Braden-Max [Rafferty] show.* That did no good for education. Education was in the paper a lot, but it was a contest, an adversary relationship between Max and the board.

One of the commitments that I made was that I wasn't going to have that kind of situation. I was going to do my best to work with the boards. If there were differences, we would work until we hammered them out. When we went to the legislature, we were together. It was a department-superintendent-board recommendation rather than what had happened under Max. I had found myself over at the legislature proposing legislation that the board was proposing, and Max had another position, which put the staff in the oddest kind of relationship. It would be as if you had to go to the legislature representing the [U.C.] regents and Dave Saxon had someone there taking the opposite view. [laughter]

So when I came in you had a more or less conservative board. In 1971, out of ten of them, every one had endorsed Max Rafferty except one, and that was Donn Moomaw, who happens to be [Ronald] Reagan's pastor. [laughter] He's a Presbyterian minister.

I had won. I could afford to not lord it over them. I could have gone there and said, "I've won now and the hell with you." I could have taken that attitude, but I went with them as I went with others.

Sharp: So there was a courting.

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*Braden was president of the State Board of Education.

Riles: Yes. It was rough at the beginning. You take Eugene Ragle, who was a very conservative guy. The most conservative of this group was Newton Steward. I went to them and said to them, "Look, the election is over. We have to work together in the interest of education. Whenever there is a grievance, I'm going to let you know. Whenever there is something that I am fundamentally against, you will know that and you will know the reason. And vice versa. Our job is to come together on every issue that we can come to agreement on, and that will be most, if we work as men and women who are concerned about education."

So I kept setting that tone with the board. Little by little, they began to come around. Of course, we got their commitment, or at least no opposition, to the Early Childhood Education program.

Then another thing began to happen, and you can see it reflected here. As a matter of fact, it began to happen before this 1969-70 board.

Sharp: It was quite different?

Riles: Some of them were on here [refers to list], but there were some new ones. I sensed that Reagan, and it's not a sense because he actually did it, began appointing people that I could work with.

Sharp: Why?

Riles: Because he didn't want any conflict with me. He didn't want the conflict situation to exist. As a matter of fact, I remember the board would meet with Alex Sherriffs sometimes, and the question would come up, "What do you want us to do? What does the governor want us to do?" (Meaning the board.)

Sherriffs would say, "We appointed you for you to use your judgment for the best thing for education, and we want you to work with the superintendent"--which is something Jerry Brown is not likely to say.

[Mrs.] Marian [W.] Drinker is one of those who was appointed, I feel, a kind of independent-minded Republican, but someone I can work with. Newton Steward was a person we could work with. Mark [T.] Gates [Jr.] was one of the appointees, and in a sense we became very good friends, and so on down the line. Jim [James W.] Dent, who was appointed in 1973.

So little by little, we began to work together. I can't remember a proposal, when I became superintendent, that we didn't work out before we went to the legislature. That, in turn, led to the success of the program that we implemented during that time.

Sharp: Did they bring issues to you also that they wanted legislation on?

Riles: No, because really a board is a policy-making board. I kept it at a policy-making level. As a matter of fact, I was on the offense, in a sense, not in a negative sense, but it was I who was talking in terms of reform, and so the initiative was on my part. It's very difficult for a board, any board, to come up with legislative proposals as a board.

What they will do if they are a policy board is express their concern about a situation. Then it is up to your staff to come up with proposals to deal with their concern. Sometimes it may be through legislation, sometimes not.

It's only when you really want to change something that you cannot otherwise do legally that you need to come up with legislation.

The Superintendent as Regent

Sharp: Let's shift to another group, to the [U.C.] regents. I'd like to ask you what you thought your role was supposed to be as superintendent in the role as an ex officio regent?

Riles: Number one, the regents are a policy-making body for the University of California. No matter what hat you wear, I took it that I should be interested in the students, in the viability of the university, and the type of policy decisions that would enhance the job that the university was to do with students.

Secondly, though, I felt that, as chief executive officer of elementary and secondary, I was the only person on the regents that had a firm understanding of what happens at elementary and what also happens at the University of California, and therefore could relate to the regents, communicate to the regents at a policy level as to what their impact would be on elementary and secondary, and vice versa.

However, my style is, whenever I go on a board of any kind, whether it's the Wells Fargo board, the PG and E board, the regents, the trustees, or National Council on Aging, whatever it is, to not go in there and the first day try to take over and sound off, and so on, as I notice many people do. I go and sit and listen to find out what is going on, to learn a little bit about the traditions, to indeed learn a little bit about the people that make the decisions, to think through the issues very carefully.

Riles: Then when you speak out on an issue, it's thought out and it's constructive, and so on, and people listen. That's the role I've played with the regents.

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Sharp: Did you find it intimidating to be a regent, in the beginning?

Riles: Not intimidating. There is a certain sense of, you know, from the outside, [that] the regents look like a formidable group of men and women. I would say there is a stature. At that time all the appointees were successful community leaders, businessmen. Look, appointment to the regents was something that was the epitome of public service in the state of California, largely because of the history of the university, and these [positions] were reserved for, I presume, top leaders of the state. You don't get appointed to the regents because you're looking for a job. [laughter]

I might say that I learned over the years that the regents are not likely to talk to anyone short of God. They look upwards, not down. So it was a part of that, but as you work with them, as you get to know them, you find out that they are good people. That's what I found; sincere people. Their goals are the same.

One of the things that ought to be written someday by someone is that, and I watched it, no matter what ideas you come with in the beginning, something happens to you as a regent. Part of it is the long terms on the regents. I have seen people, although they may disagree on the approach, their commitment to the university and what's good for the university, is without question.

Sharp: But you came on at a really tough time. They passed this, for example, in March, before you came on, of course.* Reagan's first administration was a very tough one because of the issue of campus unrest, because of tuition and all of that, and you came on in a--

Riles: I came on right, well, at the tail end of that unrest. Reagan was elected on his first term, you see, to a great extent because of his commitment to straighten out the university, which he viewed that the people had allowed to fall apart and go along with relevancy and all the rest of it. There were riots.

I remember, before I became superintendent, during that period I was over at Berkeley to a meeting, and the National Guard was shooting canisters of tear gas, and so on and so forth. I don't know whether you were around in those days or not.

Sharp: Not here, no.

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*See p. 77a.

Riles: That was that part. By the time that I came on, Charlie [Charles J.] Hitch was president [of the university]. He viewed himself as holding the line to keep Reagan from dismantling the university. Those issues were really not, the student thing was not, as great as it had been [before I was elected]. There were some demonstrations and so on, but they were rather minor.

Let me tell you an anecdote. Reagan, who attended most of the regents' meetings and, of course, still was suspicious of the university, appointed William French Smith, his lawyer, who is now attorney general. I was there when William French Smith first became a regent. One night at a party, or at a dinner of the regents, I think it was at the president's house, several years later, I went up to Smith and I told him, "You know, I remember when you were first appointed to the regents, and you seemed to take your cue from Reagan and voted consistently the way Reagan voted. After a couple of years, I noticed something else. I saw you one day sitting next to Reagan, and you voted opposite the way he voted."

One of the things about the regents that I have learned is that after a certain period of time most of the regents become committed to what they feel is good for the university. [I remember] when Vasconcellos and all those people were talking about doing away with the sixteen-year terms and cutting it down to four or six or eight years, I sit on the trustees, which have eight-year terms, I work with my own Board of Education, which has four-year terms. I feel that the tenure has something to do with the stability of the institution.

He was not upset at all. I could see a smile. He was pleased to hear me say that he exerted his independence, which he did.

Of course, the ex officio members are in a different posture; they're there by virtue of their office.

But from then on, I have looked at the times when I have disagreed with an approach, I've indicated it.

Sharp: Can you give me an example of an issue that could illustrate it?

Riles: I've always been opposed to raising the fees. I think by now everyone is clear on that. The reason is, I don't think you should take it out of the hides of the kids.

The most celebrated and publicized issue, of course, was the raising of the [admissions] standards in 1977. I don't know whether you have come across anything on that.

Resolutions on Campus Emergencies Adopted By the Regents; Effective Immediately

At their March 20 meeting the Regents approved two resolutions covering periods when a campus emergency is declared.

First Resolution

1) RESOLVED THAT during periods of campus emergency, to be determined by the Chancellor of the individual campus in consultation with the President, the Chancellor shall, after such consultation, place into immediate effect any emergency regulations, procedures, or other measures deemed necessary or appropriate to meet the emergency, safeguard persons and property, and maintain educational activities.

A campus emergency is a time when disruptive activity on a campus or other facility of the University—or within one mile thereof if the disruption there is closely associated with the well being of the campus—is of a serious nature which requires immediate, extraordinary measures to safeguard persons or property or to maintain educational activities. Disruptive activity shall include:

a) obstructing or restraining the passage of persons in an exit, entrance, or hallway of any campus building without the authorization of the administration of the campus or facility;

b) seizing control of any campus building or portion of a building for the purpose of interfering with any administrative, educational, research, or other authorized University activity;

c) preventing or attempting to prevent by force or violence or the threat of force or violence any lawful assembly authorized by the University administration;

d) disrupting by force or violence or the threat of force or violence a lawful assembly in progress;

e) obstructing or restraining the passage of any person at an exit or entrance to said campus or facility or preventing or attempting to prevent by force or violence or by threats thereof the ingress or egress of any person to or from said campus or facility without the authorization of the administration of the campus or facility; or

f) participating in mass disorder, disturbance of the peace, unlawful assembly, the infliction of physical violence upon any person, or the destruction of or damage to property on campus or within one mile thereof.

Second Resolution

2) RESOLVED THAT the President be directed to instruct the Chancellors that:

a) when a state of emergency is declared to exist by the State or the Chancellor of the campus concerned, interim suspension shall be imposed on any student, faculty member, or employee in each case where there is reasonable cause to believe he has violated any University or campus regulation by disruptive acts during a disturbance occurring on or within one mile of any campus or other facility of the University.

Those placed on interim suspension shall be given prompt notice of charges and the opportunity of a prompt hearing.

b) anyone so suspended shall not, during the period of interim suspension, without the prior written permission of the Chancellor or his designee, enter any campus or other facility of the University other than to attend the hearing. Proceedings for *dismissal* shall forthwith be instituted against any person violating any condition of interim suspension.

c) anyone found to have committed violations of University or campus regulations during a campus emergency by disruptive acts occurring on campus or other facility of the University or within one mile thereof shall be subject to University discipline ranging from a minimum of suspension for one quarter through expulsion.

The two resolutions are effective immediately, and supersede the policies relating to campus emergencies set forth in the third paragraph of Section I, Part A 2, of *University of California Policies Relating to Students and Student Organizations, Use of University Facilities and Nondiscrimination*, dated March 17, 1969.

The Regents also approved changing the word "may" to "shall" in the following policy on administration of student discipline, which had been issued by the President to the Chancellors under date of March 17, 1969:

> Chancellors, in accordance with campus regulations on disciplinary procedures, *shall* impose discipline for violation of University-wide policies or campus regulations whether or not such violations are also violations of law, and whether or not proceedings are or have been pending in the courts involving the same acts.*

* The policy statement in its original form appears in "University of California Policies Relating to Students and Student Organizations Use of University Facilities, and Nondiscrimination," March 17, 1969, in the section on student discipline.

Sharp: I focused on the earlier period [1966-1974].

[Dr. Riles addressed the importance of the issue of admission standards in a later interview.]

Riles: So far as I'm concerned, the standards issue was one of the major problems that came up during that time, and during the time of the [Edmund G.] Brown [Jr.] administration in this case. The university was doing some study on entrance requirements. Their plans were to require tests, require them for the first time, for students who made less than a 3.3, I believe. That was to be the Scholastic Aptitude Test or the American College Testing program. Students who made above 3.3 would not have to take the test. Students between a band of 2.8 and 3.3 would be required to take the test, and it would be equated with their grade point average.

The head of the academic senate came and discussed it with me, prior to the time they brought it before the regents. I suggested some modifications in it, some alternatives, which they agreed upon. In any case, I was prepared to vote for it.

Well, when I got to the regents' meeting, I met with the education committee (I was a member of the education committee).

The NAACP and representatives from the Mexican American group opposed it. I, of course, voted for it. [laughs]

I made it known that the last thing I would ever do was to try to put up barriers on a racial basis. But having said that, please don't put me in a position of equating excellence on a racial basis.

There were certain standards to be met. Our job at the high school level was to see that all students met those standards and that they be complied with. And not to say that tests discriminate [against] blacks, and so on and so forth. I even pointed out that, as it was, at that time, you had to have a 3.0 grade point average to get into the university. This moved it down to the 2.8, which would give some people a chance who had not made a 3.0.

Well, at any rate, it came before the full board, and there was debate. Prior to that time my good friend, the regional director of the NAACP, Virna Canson, had known of my position and called many of my friends, political and otherwise, to put pressure on me. I got more calls that night before the board meeting--the phone just kept ringing, people asking me to vote against the proposal.

Riles: Well, I'm a kind of person, when I've thought through an issue and feel that it is morally sound and it's the right thing for kids, that kind of pressure doesn't move me; it makes me more rigid.

At any rate, when the vote was taken, it turned out to be very close. But the proposal won. Virna Canson spent her presentation directing it toward me, showing every way I was a traitor of some kind. [laughs] But it didn't change my vote. The vote was thirteen to twelve.

And, of course, you know what the press did. The next day they were saying, "Wilson Riles cast the deciding vote." Which is not accurate. It was a roll-call vote, and I just voted in sequence with my name, as everyone else. But there was a lot of hullabaloo about it. You had William French Smith. You had [Dean A.] Watkins. You had a number of people who voted after I did. I didn't break the tie.

I think I told you I had to go off to China a couple of weeks later with a study tour. I thought it very interesting that I got over there, and we were discussing education, and I found that there was not a single freshman in any university that fall. When I asked why, they said, "Well, the Communist party is reconsidering entrance requirements." Their method of doing it meant not having any freshmen until they worked out the problem. [laughter]

Sharp: That's one way of doing it.

Riles: So I said, "I can't believe it. I came all the way from California to get away from the controversy on entrance requirements, and I come half way around the world, and here you are considering them." But that's just a side note.

By the time I got back, though, I began to look at my mail, and some of the most moving of the mail was some people who agreed with me. They said, "Look, Mr. Riles, we don't want our kids to come in as an exception. We don't want them to come in at the back door. We just want them taught like every other kid, so that they will be able to meet whatever standards there are."

Sharp: So that they're striving for the same as everybody else?

Riles: That is right. And no one, frankly, to be personal for a moment, has been more disadvantaged and out of the mainstream as when I came along, but that's the type of thing that you, through sensitivity, through hard work, through proper direction, that's the way you help kids. You don't help them by making them feel that they have to come in on a different level--so if the

Riles: requirements are fair and equitable, then let's work, then, to have all youngsters meet those standards. At any rate, that was a traumatic issue for me.

I think I've told you, with regard to the regents, or any board or commission that I go on, when I go on the board, I try to learn what the issues are and the institutions and so on. I'm not one to go on and on the first day start telling people what to do. I've watched people who do that. I want to learn what it is all about. I ask questions. I feel that I have a basis on which to deal with it, then I act. That's the way I performed on the regents. I must say, until the day I left, I had the respect of most of the regents.

Sharp: The regents really stand out in terms of a body with a significant amount of power. Having the superintendent on the board, you sort of automatically wonder what the relationship is between that superintendent and the board, because of what the superintendent is in charge of--essentially elementary and high school education throughout the state.

Riles: Frankly, I felt that the people who drew up the [California] constitution had very good insight arranging it so that members of the regents would have the state superintendent on, because at least it provides a person there that deals with another segment, that is feeding into the university, and there can be appropriate interface.

[transcript resumes]

Riles: But that's the way I played. If it's a major issue, it comes to the fore. They sometimes get into arguments that I don't think make any difference one way or the other. I'll vote if I'm there; I've never abstained. If it is a major issue, I'm willing to take a stand.

There is another part of the things that I've begun doing as a regent. The president, Hitch, did this. If it is a major issue, he will call and get your feeling on it. [David] Saxon will do that. We're talking about raising standards now.

Sharp: You mean admissions standards?

Riles: Admissions standards. Already, before this has come anywhere near the meetings, the president of the academic senate has come to sit down and get some ideas about this. I've given him ideas about it, raised the kind of questions that need to be raised. They have gone back then and done further research. It's that kind of work that I find that I can be more effective at and more constructive with, than waiting until everything blows up and there's a big confrontation, and then sounding off and voting.

Riles: I like to get the ducks in order before, and get moving in the right direction.

I think we'd better go.

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Efforts at Equalizing Public School Finance, 1971-1972: Funding for Early Childhood Education and Other Programs

[Interview 5: February 1982]##

Sharp: Today I thought we'd talk about two important issues that have a lot of subtopics in them. The first one is Serrano v. Priest* and the resulting SB 90 bill that was passed in December of 1972.

The second issue is the passage of the [Peter Chacon] bilingual education bill, 2284, that also passed in December of 1972.

[interruption]##

Sharp: I thought I'd give you what I see as a brief summary of the background, some of the main events between January, 1971, and December, 1972, with regard to school financing and the big crunch that came.

[interruption]##

Sharp: In early 1971 Reagan's task force, called the Commission on Educational Reform, gave the governor its recommendations on school financing. One of the main things that it advocated was a statewide property tax system. In August of '71 Serrano v. Priest was rendered by the California Supreme Court, declaring the current financing of California public education unconstitutional. Later in '71 you testified before the Select Committee on School Finance, which Mr. Rodda chaired.** In mid '72 discussion began on plans for bills to address Serrano, SB 90 coming out of this, a lot of compromising, a lot of people's work. Then in December of '72 SB 90 was passed.

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*Mr. John Serrano of East Los Angeles initiated the suit on behalf of his son, John Anthony Serrano, against state Treasurer Ivy Baker Priest. The decision directed the California legislature to equalize spending in schools within specified limits.

**Other members included Randolph Collier, Stephen Teale, George Moscone, Walter Stiern, Donald Grunsky, Dennis Carpenter, John Harmer, and George Deukmejian.

Sharp: I have a lot of specific questions that are meant to get your perspective on this whole time period, basically early '71 through December of '72, when SB 90 finally was passed.

I know that there was a task force sponsored by the State Board of Education and your office on the issue of school financing that came up with its conclusion sometime in February or March, 1971. I wonder if you recall anything about it and what its purpose really was?

[brief interruption]

Riles: Let me tell you about SB 90. You're going back to a period that is a little vague. I wish I had known what you were going to ask about. I could have looked at some notes or something and been able to recall a lot of it. So many bills and so on have intervened in between that there is some vagueness.

Sharp: I sent you a letter ahead of time.

Riles: Did you? I didn't read the letter, or someone didn't bring it to my attention. But let's see what we can do with it. Keeping in mind that I took office in '71. I was elected in '70, but I took office in January of '71. So what transpired that first year and early '72 was really a treadmill for me, because we were putting a lot of things together, getting the department organized, and so on and so forth.

What I recall about Serrano is that sometime during that period the decision finally came down.

Sharp: You were one of the main defendants in the case.

Riles: That is right. What the case was about is that school districts' income was primarily based on property tax. The tax wealth, the value of property, varied widely among districts. People taxed themselves to pay for their schools. Obviously, then, if you had a lot of valuable property in the district, you could tax yourself at a low rate for school purposes. Money would just come pouring out.

If you were in an area where there was not much taxable wealth, then you had to have a high tax rate. In some cases it would be so high that, no matter what you did, you could not raise the money to have a good education system. Therefore you had unequal opportunity within the state.

The courts ruled that education is a state function, and that you must have equity. I agreed with that concept. Instead of defending in the case, I felt that if I agreed with it, then why

Riles: should I be trying to defend it? So I took the heretofore unheard of position that, although I represent the state I agree with the plaintiff. Normally under these circumstances the attorney general represents you. I asked the attorney general not to appeal it, because the court had already ruled. I think it had already ruled in '71, hadn't it?

Sharp: It ruled in August of '71. You worked with Evelle [J.] Younger, who was attorney general at the time, and you decided that you wouldn't appeal it.

Riles: That is right.

Sharp: And you got a lot of heat for it.

Riles: That is right. I also asked [Houston] Flournoy, who at that time was [state] controller, to join with me. He and I joined in and decided not to appeal. I remember that very distinctly.

Sharp: I had seen one note that the rationale you gave for not appealing it was that it would just take so long that it would just slow the whole--

Riles: That would have been true. I believed that and expressed it. But frankly, I also believed that there were inequities.

Sharp: What were your ideas for remedies in school financing besides categorical aid programs?

Riles: We put together a task force, or at least a committee that had been meeting prior to that. It was a fellow by the name of Edwin [H.] Harper that was the head of our administrative unit who worked with that.* He had been meeting with a number of people that were pulled together to address the problem. It came out of that group, after a long debate and discussion within the group, a position that I articulated and felt was the answer.

It went something like this. You could equalize if you dealt with effort. The courts ruled on effort. For example, suppose X district, a so-called high wealth district, could raise $1000 by raising its property taxes $1. That is, $1000 per pupil. Another district with $1 could not raise but $100. The $1 is the

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*Harper was chief of the Division of School Administration and Finance in 1970. He later became Deputy Superintendent for Administration. See p. 124.

Riles: same effort. My idea was that, if a district wanted $1000 to run its school and could raise $1000 by raising the tax $1, then every other district who was willing to put forth $1 should get the same amount back.

Obviously what would happen in that situation is that a district that took $1 to raise its revenue should not get all that money. That money should go into a fund so that other districts with lesser wealth with that $1 could get the money that was available in that district and enough in the General Fund to make the amount equitable.

I don't know whether I am explaining that well. The state would serve as a kind of broker to put the excess money in the General Fund. That would make it possible for everyone with equal effort to raise the money. That was the concept.

We ran into something else as the courts began to have hearings on how to carry out Serrano. Did you come across that? We're going into something that I don't think was addressed in the original court case. Indeed, as I look back, I don't think it has ever been addressed. That is, variable costs that districts experience. Differential costs. Because of their location, size of the district, climate, terrain, and so on.

One example. In the Sierras, say, in Truckee. Because this is located in the mountains, because it is cold much of the year, you have heating costs that one would not have in San Diego or Santa Monica. In Truckee many youngsters have to be transported long distances because it's a rural area. I understand that it's not uncommon for a student to be transported forty or fifty miles each way per day. In Santa Monica, for example, you would not have transportation costs of that magnitude, nor would you need to heat the building to that magnitude. Therefore you can begin to see that if you equalize by having the same dollar amount for each district with accounting for variable costs, that is not equity. As a matter of fact, it would be very unequal.

The legislature began addressing that concept, but, in my experience, even to this day, I don't think it has been appropriately worked out, even though some formulas have been put in to make up for the differences. For example, there is a transportation fund now that addresses that issue. But there are other variable costs that I think are worthy examining as we work through this problem. Even now the problem is not solved.

By the way, I'm in court again. You know that, don't you?

Sharp: That's right. What is the case this time?

Riles: This time the plaintiffs came in and said that in spite of all the programs we have, the latest one [being] AB 65 (prior to passage of [Proposition] 13), which [in 1977] really finally addressed that [equalization] issue to a great extent, because there are still some [areas] out there that still are not equalized, then the state ought to go ahead and complete the job.

I feel that the spirit of Serrano was met in AB 65. I feel that to get any closer any faster would hurt certain districts and would not help the others. Furthermore, Proposition 13 changed the whole method by which you equalize.* Now the state puts in about 70 percent of what it takes to operate schools. So the whole ball game is changed.

I still agree with the whole concept of equalization, but I feel that that court case is no longer relevant to solving the problem. Therefore, I decided to defend this time, which has upset a lot of people on the other side.

Sharp: Let me back you up a little bit. Was there one particular point that you reached where you began to really actively assert your ideas to address Serrano?

Riles: Yes. It was after those hearings that the court came out.

Sharp: This was in the form of an actual bill?

Riles: Yes. When was SB 90 passed?

Sharp: December of '72. SB 90 is considered the Reagan-Moretti compromise bill which some people think only gave a polite nod in the direction of equalization and actually was more a tax relief.

Riles: That was my feeling. Now it comes back.

Sharp: You have a lot of company.

Riles: That did not address Serrano.

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*In June 1978 California voters approved Proposition 13, an initiative ballot measure sponsored by Howard Jarvis and Paul Gann that sharply lowered the amount of property tax that could be levied by city and county government.

Sharp: Yet SB 90 had a very important ingredient for you, which was the Early Childhood Education.*

Riles: That is absolutely right. It comes back now, and I have a little anecdote I can tell you about that. SB 90 did something that I think I have lived to regret, on the one hand. I was mixing it up with Reagan's Proposition 1, which was a different thing.

Sharp: Yes, that's later. That's '73.

Let me show you this. That's sort of a capsule version of SB 90. It's out of California Journal.**

Riles: Okay, it's clear to me now. SB 90, as it indicates here, got more school support, as well as tax relief. But it did something else--it gave us tax relief by setting revenue limits. In other words, no matter how much you could raise, there was a certain amount you could spend. I didn't object to that at the time as long as it was adequate.

Also, there were developing a lot of complaints about property taxes during this period.

Reagan called me over to explain the bill to me. We had developed a rapport, as I have told you previously. This was the bill, and I gave him my support. Also, you had Early Childhood Education in there, and that was a very significant part of it, which he was supporting.

[Robert] Moretti got it through the assembly. It went to the senate and it ran into some trouble. I had to go to a UNESCO*** meeting in Tokyo. I never will forget it, because Ronald Reagan

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*Other important elements in SB 90 were a greater property tax exemption for homeowners, a renters' tax credit, increased business inventory tax relief, reimbursements of counties and cities for open space allotments, over $400 million in new school funds, as well as additional assistance of $82 million for urban schools.

**See "Legislators, Governor Hail 11th Hour Victory for Property Tax Relief--School Finance Bill," in California Journal, December 1972, pp. 368-369.

***United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

Riles: called me from Sacramento. It must have been around ten o'clock here, but it was 2 a.m. in Tokyo. The phone rang. I got up and answered. It was Ronald Reagan asking me to call Al Rodda, who was opposing the bill that was on the senate floor. I called Al Rodda and told him that I would like to have his support on that bill and why, and so on. He was not against the Early Childhood Education portion. He was against the revenue limit, as I recall. I did not convince him to vote for the bill, but the bill passed anyhow.*

Now why do I have some concerns? It wasn't concern with the bill itself, as it affected schools. The concern was that cities and counties in that measure were also to have a revenue limit, if you get what I mean, but they were able to lobby to keep the revenue limit off of cities, counties, and special districts. As it ended up, only the schools had a revenue limit.

Let me tell you what happened. I remember being over in Marin County talking to some people. They were furious at how their tax increases had gone up in 1972 and 1973. I said, "Oh no, your taxes have been rolled back." Indeed they had, for education. But when people see their tax bill, they won't bother going down there and seeing what items are what. They look at the total bill. So we had a situation after SB 90 where, indeed, the schools' taxes were rolled back in many cases, but the city and county taxes skyrocketed. So the people were furious about property taxes, but they didn't know that the schools were not creating it.

You went through all those years, up until Proposition 13 passed, with the schools not benefiting from the inflation in taxes, but cities and counties and special districts were.

What I will say at this point, if the SB 90 had covered cities and counties and special districts as it covered education, we would not have had Proposition 13.

Sharp: Would Serrano have been addressed better?

Riles: No. We indeed did not address Serrano, in my opinion, in SB 90. We may have kept the gap from getting wider and probably did, because when you put the revenue limit on the district you indeed prohibited the high wealth district from escalating.

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*Readers might be interested to see Albert Rodda's interview on this matter, "Sacramento Senator: State Leadership in Education and Finance," in, The Assembly, the State Senate, and the Governor's Office, 1958-1974, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1982.

Sharp: What led up to Early Childhood Education getting into SB 90?

Riles: It was a money bill. It did run separately with no money [SB 1302], but we needed $25 million to carry it out, and that $25 million was put in the budget bill.

Sharp: Would you have supported SB 90 if it didn't have the Early Childhood Education in it?

Riles: Yes, I would have supported it. I thought it was a good bill. I don't think I would have supported it if I had known they were going to take out the cities, counties, and special districts. At least, I don't think I would have. In any case, as I look back on it, I didn't see that it was going to hurt school districts, and so therefore hindsight is better than foresight.

Secondly, I was certainly determined to get that $25 million for ECE. It was our first real thrust toward reform.

Sharp: How did you work with Alex Sherriffs at all on this process of getting SB 1302 passed?

Riles: Alex Sherriffs, as you know, was the governor's liaison person for education. From the beginning I got along well with Alex Sherriffs, because I could talk to him as an educator. He would open the doors to the Reagan administration. He was very close to Ronald Reagan.

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Riles: I discussed it with him when we were putting it together. He walked the other side of the road. I think, although I have never gone into detail to discuss it with him, that he used his voice over there in support of it. I remember him calling me one day and saying that he'd like to talk to me about it. He came over and he expressed a concern--this was before we discussed the bill at all, but he knew we were putting it together--because the bill had in it beginning with the four-year-olds in the regular public schools. My idea was, looking at the literature, the data, and all of that, that youngsters were far more able to learn earlier than we give them credit for. We ought to get the kids through school so they can get a job. If you're going to cut out something, cut out the twelfth grade, but not wait around for six-year-olds or even five-year-olds.

There was a lot of reaction to that, particularly from conservative circles, who seemed to feel that you are taking the babies away from their mothers and might indoctrinate them or something, which was ridiculous.

Riles: At any rate, the governor was concerned, too. So Alex came over to discuss this, that the governor was concerned about that. We discussed it a long time and debated it. Then I said, "Suppose we take this out. Do we then have the governor's support for the rest of it?"

He said, "Well, yes, I think we can support the rest of it."

I didn't immediately take this out. I held it in a while until I saw that it was going to move. Then we agreed on a compromise to take the four-year-old out, or at least postpone it. The way the bill was written, that part of it wasn't funded and that was postponed.

I think it suffices to say that my relationship with Alex Sherriffs was good. He provided a good liaison with the administration, which I perceive was unlike what he had with the University of California, which was not very amicable. And there were reasons, I understand, why that was so. But our relationship was good.

Sharp: If you put it all together, who do you think benefited the most from SB 90 as it was passed? With all the compromises, with all the changes that finally ended up in its final version?

Riles: In the short run, the schools. I say in the short run with regard to the overall finance, because it was basically a finance bill, as you know. I'm talking about the general finance, because it did bring in more money to the schools at the same time it set a revenue limit, that is, for most schools.

The money that went for ECE was a long-term benefit, because it set in motion a reform movement. It was the legislation, SB 1302, that really did it; but SB 90 simply funded it. That was a beginning for that, because our whole strategy was to start with 12½ percent of the kids, which $25 million made it possible for us to reach, and phase in over the next few years, getting more money into it.

Without that beginning, it would have delayed us implementing Early Childhood Education. That was the beginning.

I think the cities and counties got away with highway robbery on SB 90.

Sharp: Why?

Riles: Because they did not have a revenue limit, and they could just go on using the tax windfalls that came in. I think this finally got out of hand and resulted in Proposition 13. If there had been some controls established, as Reagan originally proposed, the situation wouldn't have gotten out of hand, certainly not as quickly as it did.

Sharp: There is a question. The question is begged, I guess. In the times that we've met in the past, we've talked a lot about financial aid for special programs like Early Childhood Education, and I'm going to ask you about the bilingual ed. There are these special categories of needs--blind children, bilingual children, etc., and there is this question about these varieties of programs going into the schools. What about the average child? Or is there no average child? That is a question that I'm sure you have dealt with a lot of times before.

Riles: Yes. I will answer that. I think it's a very good question. I would say two things about this. And maybe to tell you a story if I have not already told you. We're talking about special ed, special programs.

Let me raise the question in this way. My commitment is to serve the needs of all children, no matter what their handicaps, no matter what their assets, whether they are gifted or not gifted, mentally retarded, or whatever. Poor, rich, regardless of color. Whatever their needs are. But the first thing we have to recognize is that children's needs differ, depending upon their circumstances. The schools traditionally never recognized those differences. When I say differences, I mean what do you do, what kind of programs do you have, what kind of resources do you need, to assure that every youngster can develop and grow and learn to the extent of that individual's ability?

I raised the question when I first became superintendent, why do we have a special education department in the Department of Education and special funding? I called a friend of mine, Helen Heffernan. She must be in her nineties now. She had been in the department for years [Bureau of Elementary Education]. She was a grand old lady of California education. She had retired by that time. She thought about it and said, "Wilson, you know we tried to meet those needs of those youngsters years and years ago, but it cost more money to educate a child who had a handicap, physical or blind or mentally retarded." We never could get the extra money that would be required.

Then we approached it on the basis of various categories. Within special education there were some twenty categories, all kinds of titles. Every time you looked up there was a different title. The only reason why you had all those titles was that you

Riles: couldn't get the legislature to respond to give you all the money to meet all the needs, so you identify a handicap and then you can zero in on that handicap. It happened on the other end of the scale. Why do you have special money for gifted children?

Why not just have enough money for all and then use the money to meet the needs of all, realizing that it doesn't take as much money in one case as it does in the other? The political system did not allow you to spend it.

More than that, many of these kids were not educated at all. In a real sense, they were kept in closets.

Nothing really significant was done for them until the parents organized themselves, learned the political process, lobbied their legislators. Money was made available, but earmarked to take care of the need that was identified.

In the case of the disadvantaged, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, our own compensatory education program [assisted those children]. We all know that a youngster coming from a disadvantaged background needs extra help until that youngster can cope. Those categories were one thing.

In the case of ECE we tried to bridge that gap. ECE was for all children from five to eight years old, the first three grades. We viewed this as a way to plan. In the first place, to set up a school site council, where parents could be involved with the teachers. Then provide some money for them to do what they want to do. But in that planning, they had to plan for all the kids. What we were really doing was setting a structure to reform the system, rather than just another category.

So ECE and School Improvement [Program] is different from categories set up on special needs. It was a strategy to plan to meet the needs of all youngsters, in a meaningful way to tie those things together.

There is no such thing as an average child. So what we have to try to do is to see that we have adequate resources to meet the needs of all children.

Sharp: There was some criticism by '74 that maybe Early Childhood Education as a program was not that effective, that there was no measurable--

Riles: There is always criticism. Here is a program that was implemented in '73, and someone who doesn't want to spend any money wants to measure it after one or two years of its being implemented. Of course you could not show tremendous results in that short length

Riles: of time. There were some gains that were shown, but you couldn't base it on that. Human beings are not that way. I heard someone illustrate what some people try to do with a program. It's like planting a tree and then a month later pulling it up to see whether the roots are growing or not. You've got to give it time to allow the effects of a program [to become visible]. You've got to give people time to learn to watch their plans, to see what the cause and effect is.

We not only had that criticism and battles to fight, but also the battles of people who didn't believe in the education of young kids in the first place. Some kind of religious oriented groups. Some felt that kids shouldn't go to school until they were eight years old. But mostly people who just politically didn't want to spend the money or wanted to go off on some other tangent.

But we prevailed, as you well know. I'm glad we did, because we have been vindicated.

Sharp: Let me ask you to change tacks a little bit. I want to get your perspective on the passage of AB 2284, which was Peter Chacon's bill, passed in December of '72, which gave essentially $5 million for a bilingual education program. I know that there was a bicultural and bilingual task force that was set up within the Department of Education sometime in 1971. I wondered if this had been sponsored by you or by the administration?

Riles: It was sponsored by me because it was a part of my intent, and still is, to meet the needs of all youngsters. I felt that we've got to look at ways of addressing that. We did make a study. We came up with recommendations on it. We didn't try to advocate putting them in law because you had a lot of guessing and a lot of experimentation going on. They were not in place, and the data was not researched well enough to confidently come up with a lot of regulations and directions.

Before I became superintendent, Mrs. Afton Nance had $50,000, she worked for Helen Heffernan, and they had little programs that they were experimenting with in just a couple of schools, called English as a Second Language. This began to grow as one technique. Then there were other techniques that began to develop. What we did was take a look at all of them. Our posture coming out of that task force was to allow more experimentation and give more support, and so on, to approach it at that level.

In any case, some of our data was pulled together by [Peter] Chacon. But he primarily went out on his own and got someone separate from the department to write up a bill. The bill was very poorly drawn, overprescriptive. As a matter of fact, it could not be administered the way it was drawn up.

Riles: John Mockler, I believe, was our legislative liaison person at the time. We tried to point out the discrepancies. Here we have a commitment to bilingual education, but we are trying to approach it in an educational way. The rest of the educational establishment that later came along complaining--the school boards assocation, the school administrators association, the teacher associations, the various large districts--raised no complaints at that time. We were out there alone trying to straighten out the bill. Indeed, we got over a hundred amendments to the bill. And then it passed. It was still very difficult to administer. It bumped along until it was very clear that, because it had become a political issue, and these people didn't raise their voices. They felt that if they raised their voices it would sound like they were anti-chicano or anti-this or that.

So, in my opinion, it came through as a political document rather than an educational document. A lot of it was written in by bilingual teachers. We knew you didn't have bilingual teachers available. Those that were bilingual, most of them, were not chicano. So what did you have to do? You had to put in waivers. So you're just waiving all of this stuff.

That's what I remember of the times. It was a difficult task to know my commitment to doing the best for the children and then having someone up here with some philosophical beliefs about how you educate the children or how you deal with social problems. In any case, it got through.

Sharp: Are you saying that the bill came too soon?

Riles: No. I think the bill was written too prescriptively.

Sharp: If you or Mr. Mockler had written it including your ideas, how would it have been different?

Riles: Number one, we needed special monies to educate the youngsters. No question about that. That was not the issue, but the fact of the matter is that when you write in very prescriptive language in the law, you tie your hands if you are not sure that the road that you're going down is the correct road for kids. So the legislation could be written establishing the intent of what you were going to accomplish, written broadly, and then you could have allowed the State Board of Education to set up regulations under that law. Those regulations can be changed more easily than you can go back and change a statute. That's what we would have done. We would have written the bill more flexibly to give everyone a chance to do their job. I guess therein lies the difference.

Riles: By the way, as a postscript, it became very clear that the bill, after two or three years, could not be administered the way it was. Then the state board did a two-year study to revise it. When they attempted to revise it, it became a virtual shootout over at the legislature, even between Chicano legislators. Mr. Chacon at the time viewed any changes as an attack on his bill. Certain members of the State Board of Education took that attitude, and splits were developed. Splits were developed on the board that have not completely healed yet.

However, the legislation, after several years, was finally revised. I think it now can be administered better, which is to say that you'd better have a sound law, as sound as you can make it, in the beginning. Otherwise you can create a lot of confusion. I'm pleased to say I think we are now on track with it.

A backlash began to develop against bilingual education because of the misunderstanding. That was a time when some people were pushing the philosophy that for limited English speaking kids your job was to improve their primary language as well as English. That's a noble goal. The noble goal would be for everyone to be bilingual, but the fact of the matter is that it's not a practical goal. Even if it were intensely desirable, you don't have the staff and so on to put it into effect. I can tell you now, the last bill was passed, but the regulations under that bill have not yet to this day been adopted because the board couldn't get together on it and the office over there which approves regulations hasn't yet approved it. So that's--

Sharp: A can of worms?

Riles: Yes. In the meantime, though, the limited English and non-English speaking youngsters have grown in our society. In the last ten years the Hispanic population has gone up to--I forget the figures, but I have them here. The Asian population has doubled from 3 to 6 percent. We have ninety-six primary languages in the state other than English. So you can't get off on one track on these things. This is why you have to be flexible.

For example, we had some regulations or practices which said you should begin to teach the child in his own language first, and then make a transition. Take the Mong from southeast Asia that come in, many of whom come from tribes and dialects with no written language. How are you going to teach them in their own language to read and spell and write when they don't have a written language?

Riles: That is the kind of bind you get into when you get to be over-prescriptive. My feeling is that you should have a broad piece of legislation with the intent clearly established, give the board [of education] a chance to work out regulations and provide guidelines, and then provide the resources to do the job.

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Riles: Yes, I think that regulations are something that clearly the board do. Of course, they select textbooks for the state and provide broad curriculum direction. I don't think they ought to be involved in more than that. But I think those are areas in which they can give guidance and ought to give guidance, supported by good staff work. The problem is that they tend to get off into other areas. It's not set up to deal with it.

You have to keep in mind that we do not have a situation where you have one czar or superintendent telling everybody everything to do, nor do you have a board that can sit there and direct the system. You have the legislators in the act. You have the governors in the act. You have the board. You have the superintendent. You have 1,043 local districts with boards that are elected. Their staffs. County offices. You have a multiple system of governance.

So I try to broker those, try to bring them together in one coherent form, so people are moving in the right direction, based on sound research and experience.

Sharp: Does it ever work?

Riles: Oh, yes, I think it works. I think we can point to the fact that we were able to get through a number of programs. The Master Plan for Special Education, the ECE, the School Improvement Program, revising the textbook selection laws, being able to get AB 65 passed [in 1977], which we gave the leadership to, after Proposition 13 to set up a system to survive, to get through AB 777 last year, all were formed through a coalition. The defeat of Proposition 9 [in 1980] was a coalition movement. I, as superintendent, took leadership in bringing those together.

When Proposition 9 was on the ballot I went to Dave Saxon, who took leadership for higher education. Went to the business community--they had leadership there. I called together the educational organizations, California Teachers Association, California State Federation of Teachers, school boards, and so on. Called them together and worked with them.

That takes leadership, and that takes not getting involved in an adversary situation or anyone trying to get off on their own.

[interruption]

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Integration and Busing in the Public Schools: Court Decisions, Family Reminiscence, and the Wakefield Initiative

[Interview 6: August 16, 1982]##

Riles: I notice you have done enough research that you have a better handle on the dates and so on than I have.

Sharp: Let me just start going through some of these things. The first topic I thought we'd talk about is the busing issue. Two of the more obvious court cases actually came down before your election: one in January, one in February of 1970. In January a federal district judge in Los Angeles, Manuel [L.] Real, made a decision regarding Pasadena and the desegregation of the Pasadena schools.* Then the broader decision was Alfred Gitelson's.** He was the superior court judge in Los Angeles. His decision is probably slightly more important, because it was meant to affect all Los Angeles, as opposed to just Pasadena.

Gitelson said that no school should have a minority enrollment more than 15 percent above or below the district population percentage for that minority, sort of giving a formula for desegregation. There was a lot of controversy about this, for obvious reasons.

Shortly after Gitelson's decision, the State Board of Education then dropped its approved guidelines for desegregation in reaction to the ruling.

So I wondered as you came in after your election, how you began first to deal with the issue of busing? I would imagine that it was a fairly special concern for you particularly.

Riles: Let me give you a little background leading up to this. I recall that the State Board of Education, one of the old [Edmund G., Sr.] Brown-appointed boards, and particularly a [black] attorney by the name of Nat [Nathaniel] Colley, who was on the board in the sixties, got the very first statement on board policy about integration. It did not go into the specifics, but it just generally put the state board over education on record as supporting the concept of integrating the schools, just set a kind of broad policy. I'll get back to that in a moment.

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*Real's decision was dated 20 January 1970.

**Gitelson's decision was dated 11 February 1970.

Riles: During that time I was either on Certificated Employment Practices and later (I guess '63 or somewhere in there) I became chief of the Bureau of Intergroup Relations, which meant that we assisted and advised districts, in addition to discrimination and teacher employment, on school integration.

Sharp: Right, we talked about that somewhat.

Riles: Okay. Now, my approach to this problem was to urge the districts to take actions that were reasonable and feasible. You will see that word pop up again because that was in the State Board of Education regulations or guidelines or policies (I guess they were policies), that we take steps wherever they were reasonable and feasible.

There was progress made in a number of districts, and in others nothing happened. Los Angeles was one in which very little happened. Pasadena was another case. They'd been wrestling with the problem of school segregation, or at least de facto segregation, since the fifties.

Principally, there was a school in Pasadena which had been a traditionally black area from the time that blacks were mostly the servant class in Pasadena. Just across a major street was the most wealthy area at that time in Pasadena. I think the street was Orange Grove. Once you got to Orange Grove and went across Orange Grove, you had great big [homes]. I think Wrigley's home was over there, of the Wrigley Chewing Gum Company, to give you an example of just one. That gives you an example of the type of situation it is. He no longer lives there, and it's now been turned over to some foundation or something. But historically it had been an elegant place.

You can understand when you talk about even neighborhood integration--

Sharp: You mean residential.

Riles: Residential. That is not really the fact here, because this reminds me a little bit of the South. The reason why there was great resistance to integration in the South initially was because in 1954 they weren't talking about busing kids. If you went to the nearest school, it would be integrated in most places in the South because of the long tradition of blacks being servants. When there was not a modern transportation system and people didn't have automobiles, the servants lived in the back of the houses, or on the other street over there, and so on. So neighborhood schools meant integrated schools back in those times. That has changed as people moved out.

Riles: So that first case in Pasadena was one of those kinds of situations where there had been a long history of community discussion and talk, and so on and so forth.

The other one, of course, was the Gitelson decision, which was quite a controversial one and led to a real confrontation.

I guess your question is, how did I react to all of this, being black and running for state superintendent?

Sharp: Yes.

Riles: I have taken consistently the position that wherever it's reasonable and feasible, schools ought to be integrated. But I have never taken the position that you should throw everything out of the window and bus kids around on some ratio, because I think that is nonsense. I have always felt that the school should do its part, but I have always felt that the schools cannot control where people live or their economic status or any of those things. So what the schools should do is provide access. I fought for those things in [the Bureau of] Intergroup Relations, and we made some gains. We should have a maximum of access and opportunity for people to transfer, and so forth.

But at the basis of all this was the question of having good schools, because when you really get down to it, all parents want their kids in good schools. If you have poor schools, as certainly was the case in the South, poor schools for blacks and better schools for whites, that's why the [United States] Supreme Court decision was enjoined in the first place.* Blacks did not have in mind initially, and for years, the question of mixing the races or integration. What they really were concerned about is getting equity, equality. And when I speak of that, the teachers with the same amount of training, buildings that were comparable. I think I can say that schools were indeed separate, but never equal.

The moment you begin to move north, then you were talking not about separation, certainly in California--that is, segregation by law. That was not the issue. What the issue was in the fifties was access and the skewing of boundaries, and so on. So I worked on that.

Those cases did something, at least the first case, that had not been done before in this state, and that is set up some kind of ratio, 15 percent--

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*Riles here refers to Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

Sharp: A formula of some sort.

Riles: It's interesting where that came from, and it was never intended. We drew up for guidance purposes, in the Bureau of Intergroup Relations, a measurement where a person could look at himself to look at their district. Because people would ask, when you were consulting with them, "What are we trying to do if we move toward integration?" [It was] the idea if you had a de facto segregated situation and you wanted to move toward integration, you had to have a benchmark.

I remember we had something in there, you can't or shouldn't do this precisely, but say if you had 15 percent either way, you could tell whether you were moving toward your goals, what you had to work at, how you were to do it, and this would give you some guidelines.

Sharp: You provided these for the districts?

Riles: Yes. They were provided, but not in law. These were suggested guidelines. Well, these suggested guidelines somehow got into the judge's mind, and they immediately became part of the court.

The other thing that got into the court thing was the phrase "reasonable and feasible," which even got into the rhetoric of the California Supreme Court, as well as some of these other cases. This phrase was first used by the State Board of Education, written by Nat Colley.

I think it's interesting to think about, to watch concepts and ideas, although intended for guidelines or a kind of measuring stick to be used without compulsion, sometimes end up [in law], because when the court is faced with a decision and there is foot-dragging and so on, then the court begins to flail around to find an implementation strategy and they pull those out.

But let me quickly get to what my position was. I've told you that I've never been a hardliner on integration in the sense that I have said, "You've got to have a ratio and that's it." The reason was that I have always approached problems as an educator, and what is educationally sound, and what is possible, and what is good for youngsters. There should be no excuse to have a school that is not equal to any other school as far as you could make it.

But more to the point, I have supported integration (and let it be very clear that I support integration) on the basis that in the kind of society in which we live, if we had a choice it's good that all children function, learn to live, to grow, to study, in an

Riles: integrated society, an integrated situation, because that allows that youngster, whether black or white, red or yellow, to learn to understand, to appreciate other youngsters, because these are the kind of youngsters that this country is made of, and they have to function.

I never have believed, and have frequently stated, that you put blacks in schools, integrate them, for the reason that blacks need to sit along by whites in order to learn. I have made the NAACP and other hardline integrationists a little nervous about that stand. I have even put it in a different way, and I might have said it to you. I know Reagan has quoted me many, many times. Sometimes I cringe a little when he quotes me, but he quotes me correctly. I have said that I do not believe that blacks have to sit by whites in order to learn, and I'm glad that is not true because two-thirds of the world is non-white, and that being the case, if blacks have to sit by whites to learn, we wouldn't have enough to go around.

Sharp: There are some questions about that, though. One is, because of the kind of background that you had, because you worked for desegregation in Arizona and you worked for desegregation when you were with Martin Luther King--

Riles: But that was totally different in Arizona. In Arizona we had segregation required by law.

Sharp: De jure segregation.

Riles: That is right. I felt very strongly that it was wrong, unconstitutional, to have the state require that the schools be segregated. That's a different thing. That was what the basis of the 1954 decision was. Now, after the legal underpinnings of segregation were removed, as they did in Brown v. Board of Education. By the way, I pursued that in Arizona prior to the 1954 decision and was very pleased--and I think everybody in Arizona was pleased--because when the 1954 decision came down, since Arizona had, I think, just the previous year struck down its mandatory segregation, they were not spotlighted in that case [Brown v. Board of Education].

The moment that decision passed, then segregated schools as such (and you only had a few) were immediately integrated, or kids went to the nearest school, or whatever. And that was it. That was my position.

So far as my campaigning [in 1970] is concerned, I don't think it ever became an issue. I know it didn't.

Sharp: No, it didn't seem to. But it would seem to me that once you became superintendent in 1971, you might have had quite a few forces visiting you requesting or expecting that you would automatically really push that, really push integration. Especially with these two court decisions, that you would really push it and make it sort of a major theme of your administration.

Riles: Well, in the first place, I really deep down felt that this was a tangent people were going off on, that to put all of that energy and emotion into transporting kids around and how far are you going to bus them, and all of that stuff, was a misplaced priority.

By the way, what the courts were saying, when you read those cases very carefully, was that if the district had done something to create de facto segregation, then that district was under obligation to correct it, and I agree.

But that is a different thing from saying that you live in southeast Los Angeles and that you are going to have to transport your kids to the San Fernando Valley in order to integrate them. That's one way.

The other side of the question is to expect whites to transport their kids from the San Fernando Valley to East LA. It didn't make sense either. And for lawyers to get tied up in all that kind of stuff, it seemed to me that that was something I didn't want to spend my time on, because I also know that what blacks really wanted, and what whites really wanted, and what they both still want is assurance that they have the best possible school in their neighborhood.

If a school is inferior in some place, the district has an obligation to correct that, and that's something they can do. That's where your compensatory education comes in. That's where if people are really working as they should to make sure that the progress of the kids is enhanced, that the teachers are there and are sensitive to their needs and understanding. They're there, the materials are there; that's what a school can do. There's no way for a school to control who moves into a neighborhood. Even if you did bus kids around, and even if people agreed to bus them around on some ratio, it would change every week because of the mobility of the kids.

To make a long story short, I don't want to sound like I am opposed to the integration of kids or that I believe in segregation, either de facto or otherwise. That is not so. I think there are great values in integration. But I think when you talk about achieving it, it has to be totally rational. It has to take the interests and concerns of parents--and I'm not talking about the racist--I'm talking about the ordinary parent.

Riles: I don't know, did I tell you the choice I made here when I moved to this house?

Sharp: No.

Riles: Let me just mention it. Looking at myself. We were living in Los Angeles, and I got a job in the Department of Education. By the way, I was the first black professional in the department, in 1958, believe it or not. The only. I came up in December 1958. I was hired and I came up to spend a little time getting oriented, and so on, and to look around for a place to live. The question I asked was a very interesting question. (I made a choice to leave the family in Los Angeles because it was the middle of the year and they were in school and getting along fine, and to make the move to see if I could get a house located, and move up the summer after school was out. So I would commute every other week or so to LA.)

What did I ask before I started looking for a house? I had four kids: two in high school, one in junior high school, one in the sixth grade. Obviously, two would be in junior high school and two in the secondary school. I asked people I got to know, other consultants, "What is the best junior high school in Sacramento?" And, "What is the best high school?" I didn't ask about elementary school, because I wouldn't have any kids in elementary school. They told me, and they didn't give me any statistics or any educational jargon. At that time, they simply said, "California Junior High School is the best junior high school in Sacramento, and McClatchy High School is the best high school." Okay?

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Riles: They didn't tell me how many blacks went to McClatchy, or chicanos or Caucasians, nor did I ask. [laughs] But I know the system, and I know the school district system is that they have attendance areas around the schools. They had at that time, they still have. I don't know what I would have done if the junior high school and senior high school had been in different attendance areas, but they happened to be in the same attendance area.

So I obviously began looking for a house that met my needs in those attendance areas. The sole reason to look for a house. Now, I had to face the problem of housing discrimination. That's one thing that I thought the school integrationists ought to be focusing on--is there housing discrimination? If there is, then you have to remove those barriers. And there had been some [discrimination] in Sacramento, but I came at a time when it was changing.

As a matter of fact, I came to know, was referred to, a woman who was the wife of a doctor, a black couple, the Johnsons, who owned a lot of property. I called her and told her what I wanted, what I was looking for. I didn't know whether there was discrimination

Riles: or not. She said, "Look, I have a real estate firm that has been trying to buy some property that I have, some land, and I've told them that I wasn't going to sell it to them because they had a policy of discrimination, and they swore to me that they didn't have a policy of discrimination. I'm not sure that they're lying or not, but you go to them and tell them what you want and tell them that I sent you." [laughter]

Sharp: And see what happens?

Riles: Yes. So this real estate broker really knocked herself out. You see, I needed a four-bedroom home because I had a daughter and three sons. I didn't have a hell of a lot of money. So she tried to find something that met my needs. I looked at a number of places that didn't meet my needs. For example, a house just next to this one, which is for sale now, interestingly enough. It had a nice swimming pool, but only three bedrooms.

Finally she told me something. We were standing right out in this street, and she said, "Now, I'm going to tell you something that's unprofessional. I've done the best I could. But that house down the street," meaning this one, "used to be listed, and it didn't sell. Now it's no longer listed. The owner is trying to sell it. Why don't you just go and talk to him."

I went. I talked to them. They were willing to sell. I thought it cost more than I wanted to pay for it, but I paid it. I bought this house right here and moved in in 1959.

Now, I often think, "Why did I buy this house? Why did I go to all that trouble?" Because someone had told me that there was a junior high school and a senior high school that were good ones. I often wonder now what would have happened had some school person come along, or some court, and said, "Now, Mr. Riles, you need to integrate your kids. Therefore, you are going to have to bus your kids over someplace else." I would have been very upset about it.

Now, what is the difference with me? I had a choice. There are many people who don't have choices. I submit to you, people should not be forced to make a choice on looking around for the best high school. Maybe I'm idealistic, but they ought to be good schools. Then you can deal with the integration question. You can deal with that and then you would find people who had other agendas, racial agendas, and so on. You could deal with those. But when you have to tell a person, "Look, we're going to send your kid to a school that's more inferior than this," it just doesn't work.

Sharp: When you came into office in '71, you obviously didn't come into the department; you had been there quite a while. Were there a lot of other people in the department who thought like you? Or were people lining up all over the place either pro-busing or anti-busing in a stricter way?

Riles: Really, my major, oh I won't put it that way, but the one contribution I had made in '68, '69 [was with respect to] Max Rafferty. I can say he was quite, not only controversial, but he could be a demagogue whenever he wished. I spent a lot of time trying to get him to take a rational position. Believe it or not, he came out with a position that schools ought to be open to every kid, any school in whatever city it was, and that people ought to have a right to go to the schools, and they should not be shut off from anybody.

Now, that's a strong position for a super conservative, and he even went one beyond that, that transportation ought to be provided to take kids to whatever school their parents chose to send them to.

He did not go so far as to advocate that you force parents to send their kids to a school. Now, obviously the NAACP position--that was not enough for them. There were some people in the department, I guess, who said it ought to be a strong ratio position. I don't know who they were at the moment.

Sharp: But those forces were there?

Riles: Yes, and the force that was really there was that our Commission on Intergroup Relations took a very strong position and indeed tried to force Max into taking a strong position. As a matter of fact, I arranged a meeting with the NAACP, with members of that commission, to sit down to see what could be worked out.

Now, back to districts, we were always (and still are) in a position in the department not of mandating anything. We don't have that power. But to assist and advise if they called on us.

My style when I was over the unit would be to assist, to help, to counsel, to say, "Here are some things that you can do to resolve this problem."

Itmight surprise you that most districts, for whatever reason, never asked for help.

Sharp: [laughs] No, that doesn't surprise me. I mean, it sounds like one big headache.

Riles: For example, in the LA district, they went four or five years of confrontation after confrontation on this issue. Board members lost the elections. Just unbelievable trauma.

I, at every step of the way, said, "Look, we are available to help. We are available to make some suggestions."

Finally, it got so bad (maybe it was beyond hope at that time) that I began to take initiative and began to speak out and say, "For goodness sakes, let the NAACP and the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] get out of this. Let the board step out of it. Invite the Department [of Education] in to come up with some recommendations on the solution of the problem."

That didn't happen. No one agreed to it.

Sharp: They didn't want to trust you?

Riles: No, I think egos had gotten so wrapped up in this that the NAACP and certainly the ACLU didn't want to back away. The board people were rigid, and the superintendent, I thought, perhaps felt that here the state is trying to interfere. That was when along came this initiative.

Sharp: The Wakefield?*

Riles: Yes.

[In a follow-up session the interviewer asked Dr. Riles to reflect more fully on the roles of the NAACP and the ACLU with respect to school desegregation.]

Riles: The ACLU, as well as the NAACP, took a very strong position with regard to school integration. Of course, my position has always been to favor integrated schools, to the extent that they could be accomplished. Certainly I have always opposed any vestiges of putting up barriers to youngsters going to the school of their choice.

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*Assemblyman Floyd Wakefield sponsored Proposition 21 on the November 1972 ballot. Passing by a large margin, Proposition 21 forbade the assignment of a child to a certain school because of his/her race, creed, or color. This proposition was meant to repeal the Bagley Act, passed and signed in 1971, which gave suggestions to school districts and the State Board of Education for the elimination of racial imbalances in California public schools. These guidelines did not include busing as an option. Interested readers may see California Journal, October 1972, p. 312, for additional details about Proposition 21.

Riles: The NAACP'S position was that not only were you to integrate schools, but you were to integrate them on a certain ratio, or percentage. I just found that in most cases (and it varied all over the map) that you just couldn't accomplish that. If you did accomplish it, it was going to shift, it was going to change. People moved, you know, people are not stationary. And it would create a lot of confusion. So instead of being rigid, I always fought for openness, open access, and so on.

But most important, I thought that whatever you did, you must make sure that there were good programs in those schools, excellent programs in those schools. Furthermore, it has always been my belief if you have a good educational program, and people know it's a good educational program, it tends to build stability in the schools. It's simply, parents react, whether they're black, white, or whatever their ethnic background, the color. They want their kids to be in a good school, and if they have a feeling that the school is a lousy school, they want their kids out of it. So you're not going to force parents to keep their kids in an inadequate school, if they have a choice or can do anything about it.

Sometimes I found myself not in an open warfare, but certainly disagreeing with the ACLU and some of its tactics. Now, in the LA situation, that was a very, very traumatic experience. Once you throw this into a legal category, see, you really have difficulty in implementing integration. The law, in my view, is to say that there shall not be segregation and there is to be access, and all of those things. Then you must get educators to work this out in good faith and get the maximum amount of integration, depending upon what the situation is.

In that case, in LA, they got tied up in the legal thing. The repercussions were very unfortunate. Here you had a fine judge in the case of [Alfred] Gitelson, wringing his hands and doing the best he could, literally begging for someone to come in and work out what would be legal and amicable, and so on. You had the NAACP and the ACLU taking a rigid position. The fallout was, the judge was kicked out of office. You got some rigid conservatives on the board, and generally it was a setback.

I hope, from what I said, it would not indicate that I'm some kind of moderate on the issue, but I feel I'm an educator first. Kids need to be educated. I think integration has been painted as some kind of thing just for minorities, and we don't think that's so. I think the idea of youngsters having an opportunity where it is available to attend school with people who may come from a different background, it's good for all kids, because this is the kind of world in which we live, where we have to relate to people of all backgrounds.

Riles: But we have to keep in mind that in the first place, in the South, where they had the rigid legal separation, what the people were fighting for there, blacks, is to have schools that approached some kind of equity. For years they accepted separate schools, but separate schools were supposed to be equal. But they were never equal, and it was only until they could not make them equal that they said everyone should go to the same school, or the school nearest their home. Of course, that was a great movement forward. It broke down those barriers. But then when you skip from that to saying that every schools has to have the same ratio of every ethnic minority, it just simply is not possible to do or not wise to do that. And that's my position.

[To give another example], at the present time, there are very few blacks in Humboldt County, in the whole county. What are you going to do? If you have ten blacks living in the neighborhood, are you going to send them around to ten different schools? [laughs]

You see, this is what you come down to when you start dealing in quotas. You can on the margins do a whole lot. If you have two schools in an area, and in commuting distance, and one is impacted with one ethnic group or another, you can certainly change your assignment patterns, and so on, to accommodate that.

But I can tell you frankly that, speaking from the point of view of a minority parent, I want to make sure that my kids have access to the best that the district has to offer. And if you don't have one of those good schools, let's get it that way. Then give me some choices.

The other part of it is, the one thing that I have always been sensitive to, that always gets into this mix,[is] that somehow blacks learn better when they're sitting by white folks. [laughs] Well, I can't accept that. I mean, socio-economic status gets involved in this whole picture. I have found over the years, and I think it's unfortunate, that achievement correlates very closely to socio-economic status. This is true among blacks as well as anyone else. Poor children tend to do less well, children from poor families, than children from affluent families. You're not going to make any gains in achievement by integrating poor blacks with poor whites. [laughs]

[transcript resumes]

Sharp: I want to ask you about the Wakefield initiative, but before that, in the letter that I sent you I asked you about those two [William] Bagley bills, AB 724 and AB 725, that were signed in December of '71.

Riles: I know Bill Bagley, a good friend. He happened to be a liberal Republican. When I got to the job--what year was that?

Sharp: They were signed December, '71. They were signed together.

Riles: I had just come on the staff, had just been in office about a year. The [Bureau of] Intergroup Relations had worked with Bagley on this whole thing.

Sharp: That would have been Ples Griffin?

Riles: That was Ples Griffin. I had great reservations, just between you and me, about the bills.

Sharp: They were too weak?

Riles: No, I think that we didn't need them, because they were really copies of state board regulations primarily. There were state board regulations already there. Regulations have the force of the law. They could be changed through a process of the governor, but they were there. They weren't creating any controversy. They could be used as leverage. So why codify these and highlight them in legislation?

Well, what do I say? Do I come in and say, "Look, I'm opposed to this legislation"? If I said that, then I would have to be opposed to the regulations. But I thought it was totally unnecessary and unwise at that time to codify the regulations, because then it highlighted the thing and brought it to everybody's attention.

Well, the legislature adopted it, and I believe it was signed by the governor.

Sharp: Yes. But the impact of those two laws, what they did was to allow a mechanism to implement a whole lot of money that was coming from the Emergency School Aid and Quality Integration Act, which was a federal act and gave to the state $500 million in '71 and $1 billion in '72. From what I understood, the reason for getting those laws passed was so you could get the money.

Riles: I feel that there could have been other mechanisms to achieve that. What they really did was highlight this issue--

Sharp: In a nice political way.

Riles: And make it possible for [Floyd] Wakefield, without expending hardly any money whatsoever, to get an initiative on the ballot or a constitutional amendment, I forget which, that nullified not only the legislation, but then made the regulations moot.

Sharp: And mobilized a lot of ill feeling.

Riles: That is true. And in this area of race relations, if you really want to move forward (now this is my advice), if you really want to improve race relations, create more justice and opportunity, those people who pursue those goals (and I'm certainly one of them) and certainly every responsible person, in my opinion, should consider the strategy that you use in order to make things better for people, and not go off on some self-righteous tangent.

[brief interruption]

Riles: Where were we?

Sharp: We were pretty much finishing up our discussion of the implementation of 724 and 725, and the Wakefield initiative that came as a response.

Riles: I do not want to blame anybody, certainly not to be critical of people who pursue civil rights or any of the areas in which we are trying to achieve fairness and justice in our society. It has been a lifelong pursuit for me. But I have found myself at times resenting people who seem to forget the strategic requirements, and the fact that one must use every ounce of their intelligence and integrity, and so on, to achieve those goals and not move backwards.

You mentioned Martin Luther King. Part of the changes that he wrought were not just people going out emotionally on a binge, although sometimes the emotions got out of hand. But there was a profound strategy in the background, and although most people didn't know what that strategy was, great progress was made in a situation that had not moved for years.

I don't want to philosophize too much on that.

Sharp: That's okay. We hadn't really ever talked about busing, and it was important for us to do that. I'm glad that we did.

Riles: You see, I think that we only at certain times and certain places have applied the various fields, like historical considerations, psychological considerations, sociological considerations, economic considerations, to social change. It seems to me that if you are going to have social change, then you have to look at what experience, knowledge and science say about it. How people relate to people.

I guess I somewhere along the line became sensitive to this, because my background, growing up in the South in a segregated situation, and then suddenly finding myself, as I told you, in an all-white college, and I the only black, and the traumas of having to deal with that.

Riles: I came to the realization through experience that people are people, with good, bad, weak, strong, wise, foolish, among all of us. Then frustrations that all people have. Egos. Some with a tendency to want to be better than someone else. How do you orchestrate those things? Then how does a community get together? We could make much more progress if someone at some place at some time looked at strategies for improving relationships of people with people and all of the things that our country purports to stand for. It's only here and there that you see a really thoughtful approach to it.

More often people tend to approach it through the courts or through law--and I'm supportive of that, but it has to be more than that. They complement each other, rather than having one way to achieve noble goals. And I think we are talking about noble goals.

I've done a little travel around the world, and I'm amazed to visit Israel, walk on the Golan Heights, go to a motel in Jerusalem where people would have guns around in fear of terrorists, and all of the rest, and then to conclude that five thousand years these antagonisms have been going on.

Or to go to England, talk to a British teacher and say, "Tell me about the Irish," and then hear a long diatribe on what Irish are like, not through hate and so on, but just, you know, that kind of factual thing.

Then I come back to the United States and see all of these races, ethnic groups, religions. Maybe the one thing, if we were to make a contribution, it would be to demonstrate that people can live together, function together in some semblance of understanding.

No more speeches. [laughs]

[The interviewer later asked Dr. Riles to more fully explain his experience in England.]

Riles: I recall being in England and going over there to look at teacher centers, which was the thing back a few years ago. Or a group of teachers, invited me to their apartment for dinner. Three or four. I went out and had a fine dinner, and we were sitting and talking. You know, I wanted to say something that related to the situation, being a black American visiting London. They were very nice. So I said, "You know, the most popular Englishman in the United States, I guess, is [Richard] Burton, the actor." Of course, their response was, "Oh, he's not English, he's Welsh." Well, I'm ignorant about that. [laughs] I just don't know one from the other. So I said, "Yes, well...." [laughter]

Riles: I tried again. I said, "We have a lot of Irishmen in the United States, and they are very politically strong. Tell me about the Irish here."

Well, to hear a little, young, twenty-five year old teacher say, "I'll tell you about the Irish. They're dumb. They're thick-headed, lazy, and have bad manners." She wasn't saying this through hate. She was just saying this advising an American the truth about the Irish. That's what I meant, that for her it was a factual thing.

Sharp: Just the way things were.

Riles: Yes. To me, it was shocking. It was as if I were sitting in the antebellum South hearing someone describe a black. That's what I meant. That's the context in which I was saying that.

For fifteen hundred years the Irish and the British lived on these little islands together, and still have that kind of stereotype. [It] doesn't give me much hope for hoping that mankind--. I mean, at least the British can come together and deal with realities. It was in that context that I said, when you look at that situation and look at America, that has absorbed so many ethnic racial groups, through pain, through conflict, but for goodness sakes, we made more gains than they have made.

It's that kind of perspective that I was speaking about there.

[transcript resumes]

Department Administration and Organization: The Long View, 1970-1974

Sharp: I want to move us on a little bit and talk about the Department [of Education] as a department during that first term. When we met before we talked about some of the changes in personnel that you made when you first came in in '71, but we didn't talk about some of these other elements within the department. I sent you copies that I had gotten of the personnel.

Riles: Yes, I received those.

Sharp: There were, not so much in the 1971-1972 version, but in the 1973-1974 one there are these commissions. I thought we'd talk just a little bit about them and see how they sort of fit in to your idea of what the department ought to be doing, because it seemed as though you really began to change things around.

Riles: Two things. Let me talk about department structure. What I wanted to do, and I think I could have accomplished that very early, but I got some counsel. I don't know whether I totally agree, but I think I ended up agreeing. Departmental organization. How do you organize a department in a bureaucracy? And obviously, it needed reorganization.

I talked to some legislators and began to pursue the idea that we needed--here I am going through an election and elected by the people, and then I walk in and find that there are only two exempt positions in the department that I could make an appointment without going through the board or something else. I think we discussed all of that, and how I found a way to deal with it.

Sharp: Right.

Riles: I felt that there should be more opportunity for an elected official to bring in people into the administration to carry out the things that you had promised the people that you were going to do.

One of the persons on the State Personnel Board sat and talked to me, gave me some historical perspective and said, "Wilson, you will have time to make some changes, maybe a little slower than you thought, but it's better to have it that way than to have fifteen, twenty appointments. Because the first thing that's going to happen if you have all those appointments, everyone who supported you that wants a job will want one of those jobs." [laughter]

So, at any rate, we didn't pursue the other. We found other ways to do it. But then, the question you are raising now is, "What was your mission?" Now, my mission was to make certain reforms. In order to make reforms, my style had been a task force approach, and that's what you see reflected there. [referring to California Roster lists] I put a task force together on Early Childhood Education, for example. If they still have some of the old documents, they would be quite revealing. Because what I did is call together a cross section of people, like the dean of the School of Education at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles].

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Riles: The school administrators, businessmen, labor leaders, and say to them, "We want you to take the early years, take a look at them, look at the literature, look at your experience, and if you wanted a youngster by the age of eight to be able to read, write and compute, what would you do, given what we know from the literature and experience? I want a report within six months. I will guarantee you that if you come up with a good report, I will politically take that and implement it."

Riles: Of course, this was and still is a rare approach. You have a lot of studies and so on that go on in a task force, but most of them break down in the implementation.

Sharp: You were able to get through SB 1302.

Riles: Yes, because I did not allow them to try to deal with the implementation of it. I felt that was a political move that I had to deal with.

Of course, we could have gotten in the back room or assigned staff and they could have come up with a similar report. But part of the implementation strategy is to get individuals who are out there and who are concerned and have some prestige by their names, so that when you begin to move you have their support as well as strategies that you need yourself.

After all, going through an election, to get elected in California, I ought to know something about the political structure. Most of what it takes to implement is political, and not partisan political. Not only legislative, but political in the broad sense of the word. How do you get superintendents and teachers and parents and all of that. I don't want to belabor that, but that was one way of initiating reform and change.

You will see that we looked at vocational education. We looked at programs for special education. A number of task forces that we put together, once we got their reports, then we were able to (and I think in all cases they required legislation) move them through.

That doesn't mean that there weren't some modifications along the line, like here, I think you'll see that [Early Childhood Education] proposal recommended we start out with five-year-olds and so on; I couldn't sell that to Reagan.

Sharp: I remember. [laughter]

Is that the purpose of all of these commissions?

Riles: Yes. Oh, now on the commissions, let me go back. That's a different thing. Task force is one thing, because that included people from outside the department.

Sharp: So did these commissions.

Riles: All right. Yes. We had over thirty, when I got to the department, commissions, committees, of all sorts, sizes and descriptions, on everything that you could name. Some reporting to the department;

Riles: some reporting to the board; some reporting to this and some reporting to--. It was just a total mess. I've learned a little bit over the years. I've learned some things since then.

But all of these committees--. I think part of it came out of the fact that they didn't trust Max, or whatever. That was only one issue. So you appoint a committee. And they were all totally unrelated to anything.

So I said, "For Christ's sake, what is all of this?" So I came in with a legislative proposal to reduce those to about five or six, and I picked the major areas in the department that either required some kind of commission or an area of concern, and we introduced legislation, brought the board into the act, and came up with those commissions. Six of them, I think it was.

Now what may surprise you is that here I am trying to get rid of thirty-odd committees, commissions, groups and things sailing around. You would be surprised at the resistance to this by self-interest groups. I didn't realize at the time how anxious people are to be on committees, state commissions. It means a lot to people. People were suspicious of me on trying to get rid of some of these. But we made it. It was not an easy bill to get through.

That is how you got those. We had legislation to do it. We tried to organize it where it made sense. It was one of the things that we accomplished that I am proud of.

I said thirty; I think, to be exact, that there were twenty-eight that we reduced to six.

Sharp: Did each of these commissions have legislative suggestions occasionally? Was that part of their function?

Riles: Oh, yes. I structured them, as I recall, so that I would recommend membership to the board, and the board would appoint a number, but the legislature got into the act, and you will find that the legislature--the [assembly] speaker maybe would appoint one, and someone in the senate would appoint another, so you had a mix along that line. It was a very interesting mix. I'm not so sure that that was a wise thing, but I felt in getting it through, I think it became clear getting it through, you had to bring in the legislature. If I had to do it again, I wouldn't do that.

Sharp: For example, this Educational Management and Evaluation Commission, what was its job?

Riles: To really look at school management, district management, departmental management (not so much departmental, but some) and to make recommendations to the board on how could you improve management, manage the system better. And we got some good people on that.

Sharp: But their suggestions were only that, only suggestions?

Riles: Let me tell you how that management thing works. We have a unit in the department that works under that commission that are really consultants. These are staff. I haven't checked on them recently. We have not tried to publicize their work very much. But let's say a San Francisco or a Fresno or some district need some consultative service. They would call, and we would send the staff in, and they would make a study and make recommendations to the local board of education. I remember a few years back looking at some data, and I want to tell you, millions of dollars have been saved by these people uncovering sources of money or ways of doing things that would lead to more efficiency, and so on and so forth.

So that was the whole idea around that. A commission to highlight the issue, and then staff who would make themselves available, not to go in and say, "You must do this and must do that," but to say, "We're here, and if you would like to invite us in, we will come in, and we will give the best information that we can give you."

And it works. Now, if you're not asked, you don't have a chance to go in. But the word gets around, you see, if a good job is done. People will go after whatever source they can find to help them carry out their goals. So, that was the strategy.

Sharp: What about the Curriculum Development and Supplemental Materials Commission?

Riles: That replaced a God-awful commission that selects textbooks. We restructured that. The one thing that the board is charged by law to do, as far as I'm concerned the primary thing, is to select textbooks for the elementary and secondary schools. That commission was restructured. They had an old [state curriculum] commission before. This was streamlined. They are involved in making curriculum framework in various areas and recommending to the board. The board adopts the framework. Once the framework is adopted, then the textbooks and materials to carry out that framework. They screen the textbooks, a whole system of screening, and then the commission then recommends those textbooks to the State Board of Education.

Sharp: But some of the commissions didn't work so well?

Riles: In the first place, the former superintendent, Max Rafferty, used to--I'll say this not as a criticism, but this was his priority--go to the commission meetings. I think he was chairman of the committee, to try to get them to adopt the McGuffey reader or something like that. He made a great issue of getting involved in textbooks. I never did. I very seldom attended the meetings. I set those commissions up with me serving as staff, and of course I sent my representative, and that was the difference in the structure.

Sharp: How did you make your ideas known, though? How did that work, for example, with the Educational Management and Evaluation Commission that we talked about?

Riles: Through staff. I want to tell you, to be very honest with you, where you have staff that are sensitive to working with the commission or boards, things move smoothly. Where you have staff who do not understand the dynamics of a commission or board, they don't work smoothly. But it's through that.

And also, I go in occasionally, sit down and talk to them, or call commission members. I haven't done that in recent years as much as I should have because my time has been taken up trying to get enough to operate the schools [laughs] in the light of Proposition 13 [1978].

But it is a good vehicle. I don't try to dominate it, but try to lay problems before them that they can get their teeth into and come out with rational recommendations.

Sharp: Did you worry about them going off the deep end somewhere, not coming up with the kind of suggestions that you would like?

Riles: Yes, that happened, but I tell you what tended to prevent it from happening, and that is making recommendations of the membership of those commissions that are people who tend not to go off on tangents, as far as you can anticipate, but are concerned with the issue at hand. If you recommend to the board someone that is way out in left field or way out in right field and you get a bunch of commissioners like that, then you just have a problem on your hands. But if you really do your homework and think of people who can make an input and it's rational and it's concerned about the issue at hand, then you have a minimum of that kind of thing.

Sharp: That sort of brings us to the next thing, talking about the people that you brought into the department to work with you. I wonder, just for example, how Marion Joseph came into the department?

Riles: I met Marion years before I became superintendent, when she was working on Ralph Richardson's campaign against Max Rafferty in 1962. Then we met again over the [Bureau of] Intergroup Relations legislation when she was working for the CDC. I said, "Look, you've got bills there you're supporting. Why don't you support this one?" She said she'd have to check and find out what their position was on that.

To make a long story short, she worked at it. She agreed to help and was a valuable help in getting it through. It was through that contact that, from time to time, I--.

Oh, by the way, then there was a commission. I forget what you call it--a compensatory education commission--when I was chief of the Office of Compensatory Education in the department.* I asked that she be appointed to it. She did accept appointment. Of course, then I would see her occasionally in connection with that.

But then I found out that she was very politically sophisticated and was really committed to anything that she believed in, and so, when I came to the point of thinking about running--didn't I go through that with you, how I decided to run?

Sharp: Yes.

Riles: She was one of the people that I discussed it with. She also introduced me to a fellow by the name of Bob Mendelsohn and people like that, who then introduced me to Sandy Wiener, and so on. When we finally made a decision to run, then she helped in the campaign. When I won, then I went after her to join the staff.

I set up a legislative office, and she, although she was not director of that office, she became a member of that staff and worked primarily, in those first years, on legislation. That's how she came in.

Then later I put her on my executive staff as an administrative assistant.

Sharp: I want to move us on to this last topic, but I wondered overall, especially in this first term, if you could just step back and say what the goal was of all these new people coming in and all these elements of the reorganization of the department? What were you trying to do?

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*Marion Joseph provided this information regarding her first appointment in the state Department of Education.

Riles: To answer that question, I came in with a determination to initiate the kind of reforms that would get California education back on the track, to end the confrontations that had been part of the Max Rafferty administration, and put the Department of Education in a constructive leadership role.

In order to do that, I knew that we must do a number of things. One, to study situations; thus task forces. Come up with recommendations, and to implement those that would improve the system of education in California. The goal, then, was out there, how can you enhance and move things forward?

You see, you can take two positions, and I can tell you that often in the past, bureaucracies or departments try to keep everything afloat, maintain the status quo, keep everybody happy, make no waves. That's the easiest way to do. It takes some dancing around, but that's one way that you can do it. I was not interested in maintaining the status quo, because I felt the status quo was unacceptable. The question is, then, how can you move things forward? How can you get changes? How can you make reforms that will begin to improve the system? That was the goal.

Once you got onto that goal, then the question becomes, how do you staff your department in order to have the people to move toward those goals. Therein was why we brought different people in, in trying to generate a different kind of mission, in commitment and in activities, and so on.

I want to tell you, as I might have told you, that most of the legislation that we have introduced over the years, I would say three-fourths of it, maybe greater than that, legislation that we've introduced or promoted, and some were major, [we got passed]. You couldn't do that without getting people who had a real commitment to what your goals are and were willing to work at it and not just punch the clock. I looked for people over the years who had a vision and that want to win, don't like to lose. Once they decide that here is the way to go, then they want to get there. You have to have some of those people around. Now you can't have all that type, because everything would collapse [laughs], but we had a nice mix of those people over the years.

It has been twelve tough years. You can have twelve easy years if you don't do anything. But if you try to move an establishment like 1,043 school districts with 1,043 local boards of education, and 190,000 teachers, a legislature, a governor, it's no easy task.

Sharp: It strikes me that at least some of those groups might not want a mission.

Riles: Don't want change! Look, I want to tell you something. In spite of all the rhetoric, most people fear change. I don't know whether I told you the lesson we learned on using a matrix management system.

Sharp: No, I was going to ask you about that.

Riles: The only thing I would say about a matrix management system, if you want to shake things up (and by the way, this came out of industry) you use it, but you'd better quickly settle down to some other organizational pattern. I think this came out of the space age, NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration], and all of that kind of stuff. Even they have discarded it. [laughter]

Why? Because, you see, the concept is a very mixed concept, that if you are task oriented, here's a job to be done, and you look into the problem. [There are a few] people who are willing to move into an area and work at it, and then go back to where they were, and so on. You begin to find that you only have a few people who have the security, the personal security, that will work in that kind of mode. Most people want to know exactly who their boss is, and they don't want two bosses. They want a tighter structure than matrix management offers. We looked around after we had gone through our matrix management thing, and our morale in the department had sunk to a new low. It was because people weren't sure where they were, had uncertainties about who they were working for, and so on.

Sharp: So you abandoned that?

Riles: We modified that very drastically. I don't mean that we did it suddenly. And, by the way, the government, the finance and all that, their structures are not set up for that.

What it did for us, though, as I look back in retrospect, it did give us an opportunity to kind of shake things up.

Sharp: I'm sure. [laughter]

Riles: And then we settled back down again.

Sharp: Let's shift gears a little.

##

Sharp: I wonder if you think that your role really changed during this first administration at all?

Riles: You mean the first four years?

Sharp: The first four years.

Riles: I really don't think so. I'm trying to think how it would have changed. I think if you would look at the programmatic directions that we struck, we pursued them and had a great deal of success with them. Let's see, that would be from '70 to '74. We developed a good working relationship with Reagan and the governor's administration, although I am from a different political party. We came in to carry out a non-partisan mission and not do what Max had done, make it a highly partisan thing. We began working effectively with an antagonistic [State] Board [of Education] who had, nine out of ten, endorsed Max. I had to demonstrate to them, let's forget about that. Now let's see what we can do for children. It was a little tough to bring them around, but they came around and we got along. You didn't have the shoot-outs, so to speak, at every board meeting that once existed. As a matter of fact, the board meetings became rather dull. [laughter]

We carried that out. I think the change came in 1975. Jerry [Edmund G., Jr.] Brown was elected governor in 1974, and he had a completely different style. Then our relationships with the governor's office changed. That's when things changed first. Whereas we had gotten through the Early Childhood Education program, we had put a task force together called the RISE report, Reform of Elementary and Secondary Education. We followed the same procedure that we had followed, worked it through the legislature, got it funded. You couldn't get near him [Brown] in those early days. You couldn't talk to him. Reagan I could call up, make an appointment, sit down, work with. Or he had an education specialist [Alex Sherriffs] that you could work with. Brown didn't have one, wouldn't appoint one. You had no contact with him. He was just sailing on.

But he vetoed the RISE bill in 1975. The same governor now that has suddenly in the last year talked about the three C's: communications, computers and calculation, and that kind of stuff. Never before, never taken any interest at all in education. So that meant that our style had to change.

Then, of course, although you're not dealing with that period, the impact of [Proposition] 13 in 1978 just created a new ball game. I don't know whether we have dealt with Serrano [v. Priest] or not.

Sharp: We did.

Riles: Okay.

Sharp: Do you have some further thoughts on that?

Riles: I think I went through the whole discussion about having supported that very strongly the first go-round and then indeed work with the legislature to change it.

Sharp: You mean change SB 90?

Riles: To implement SB 90 to move toward meeting the requirements of Serrano.

Then we had districts come in last year, the year before last, subsequent to [Proposition] 13, saying that we had not complied, and so on. Whereas great progress had been made, but they wanted to open up the same issue again. My position has been, look, we're moving toward it. We're not already there, but 90 percent of the children are within districts now [in 1982] that are within $100 either way from the average. So instead of supporting your suit, I'm going to oppose it. So we're in court right now opposing it.

Sharp: How do you think that's going to come out?

Riles: I don't know. It depends upon how the plaintiff and their lawyers are able to manipulate it. It's very obvious to me that the basis on which Serrano was brought no longer exists. The basis the plaintiffs brought Serrano on was that the property values in the districts varied so much that a low wealth, meaning a low property value, district could not tax itself. No matter how much they taxed themselves, they could not raise the revenues that, let's say, Beverly Hills could raise with a low tax base.

Since [Proposition] 13, 75 percent of the money it takes to operate schools comes from the state General Fund, so the issue of equity may be involved, but the basis on this, property values, is moot.

Sharp: I wonder if, in this first term, you found yourself dealing differently with the legislature in the end than you did at the beginning? Did you learn things along the way?

Riles: Yes, I learned.

When you're first elected, you have a kind of mandate from the people that the legislature respects. Since I had conducted a non-partisan race, this was very clear in people's minds. Since I had met early with Reagan and had no opposition from that score, you had quite a honeymoon going for you. You know, this doesn't keep going on forever, because the legislature begins to change.

You had actors there, leadership, where I used to go in, talk to the Democratic caucus, and then go over and talk to the Republican caucus, and kind of pull those things together and get consensus. More easily.

Riles: The longer you work at that, the personalities, the players, begin to change, and it's amazing how those players change. And when players change, you lose a sense--not I, but individuals, lose a sense of history.

If I could point to one of the greatest problems that we face in many facets of our society, it is that new people come on the scene, whether it's in the legislature or governor's office, school district, whatever. Or board. They just have no sense of what is going on.

Of course, fortunately I, over the years in previous jobs, certainly in the Department of Education, learned that lesson. Because you go in new and you have an idea and you say, "Why don't you do it this way?" and it looks so logical. I was fortunate enough in many cases where someone would sit down and say, "This has been tried on this occasion and that occasion, and so on. This is why we do it this way."

That first four years, though, I cannot recall a serious problem with the legislature. I learned a lot, naturally, coming on new. For example, when I put together the task force on Early Childhood Education, I didn't even ask how it would be funded. I just said I want some people to help me with this proposal, to take a look at it and to come up with recommendations. I called, and people came at their own expense. It was only after the fact that I figured out, at least we ought to pay these people. We're not going to pay them any money, but we ought to take care of their expenses. As you are around a while you find out that you don't do that. [laughs] You at least see that they are funded.

Do you have a specific on this, because I am trying to think, were there any fundamental attitudinal changes or strategic changes that, say, I moved on in '74 that I didn't move on in '71?

Sharp: No, it strikes me that you were particularly successful in dealing with the legislature.

Riles: I think if I can think of one difference, one big problem I had when I first came on was dealing with the staffing situation. That was a tough one. By the time we had gotten down to '73 and '74, we had the people on the board that we didn't have to go through that trouble.

A Final Note on Campaigning for Superintendent, 1970 and 1982

Sharp: The last question that I have is perhaps the most contemporary one for you especially, and that's the issue of the elected Superintendent of Public Instruction. It strikes me that at this particular time--

Riles: [laughs] To look at it, hm?

Sharp: Yes.

Riles: My experience has been comfortable with, knowledgeable about, local boards of education in which, almost always, you have an elected board which appoints your chief administrative officer at the local level. I was really ambivalent about how it should be before I ran. I had a couple of incidents that happened that led me to the conclusion that after considering everything (and certainly I don't claim that electing a superintendent means that you are going to get perfection), the people would be well advised to elect their superintendent.

Now let me tell you why. I told you of the fairly good relationship I had with Reagan. I had a couple of clashes with him, not personal, but on issues. He initiated an initiative--I believe it was Proposition 1.

Sharp: In '73?

Riles: Yes.

Sharp: In November.

Riles: He, by the way, called me over--it was late in the game--and we spent a half hour talking about it. And I didn't make a commitment. I said, "I'd like to have my staff check to see what the impact of that proposition would be on education." [I said,] if it were no impact, little impact, or if it helped, I would certainly support it. If it didn't hurt, I would certainly not oppose. Maybe help. But I wanted to take a look at it.

He said fine. I had Edwin Harper, whose name you see there [referring to department list], take his staff and analyze it. He analyzed it and came back in a couple of weeks and said, "It will have a very negative effect on education."

I said [to Harper], "Look, I'm not promoting Reagan or anything like that, but this is very important to him. He's put his career on the line for it and it means a lot to him. We can't make any mistakes. So you go back and check your figures again."

Riles: So Harper and his staff went back, took another week and reanalyzed it and came back and said, "Look, Wilson, this is the effect that it will have."

I don't think Reagan intended it. I know he didn't intend it, for it to have a negative effect on education. I don't think that was anywhere in his concept. He'd brought in [Milton] Friedman and a lot of people. You see, the Department of Finance, his own department, were not involved in that. He went outside apparently and got people who really didn't know the nitty gritty. In any case, the result was the same, and it was already in concrete, so to speak, and there could be no changes.

One of the most difficult things I had to do while he was governor was to go to him--and what I did before I said one word about it, called up and made an appointment with him. He invited me out to his house. Ed Meese was there. The same Ed Meese. [laughs]

Sharp: Who's still there.

Riles: Yes. I said, "We analyzed this initiative, and this is what our figures show that it will do. I'm going to have to oppose it, and oppose it vigorously and openly."

I could see the disappointment on his face. I said, "Now, we may be wrong. If we are wrong, I'd be the happiest person in the world. I will give you a few days to have your people analyze it, and I'll not say anything. But if they are not wrong, then I'm going to just have to oppose it. I may lose, but I can't go against education, go against what I think is in the interest of the kids."

So I left. He was living out, I think, on 43rd Street or 41st, and it took me about twenty minutes to drive back to the office. When I got back to the office, Ed Meese had called the president of the board, which was a Reagan appointee [Newton Steward], and told him to get the board, at the next meeting, to support the initiative. At the next meeting the board voted nine to one to support the initiative.

One good friend of mine, whose name I would not want to call--I knew them all, but this was a particularly supportive, as well as concerned individual. After the board took the vote, there was a recess, and I turned and said, "How could you do this? The data we have, I laid it out to you. You know the negative impact. You are charged to do the best you can for the public schools of California. How could you vote to support that initiative?"

Riles: He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Wilson, if I were in your shoes I'd do exactly what you are doing. But it's the first thing the governor has asked me to do, and I owe him this one."

From that day to this, I came to the conclusion that if you really want someone to stand up for education against the governor or the legislature or anyone else, then you'd better elect that person. Because, you see, if I had been appointed by the governor or appointed by a board appointed by the governor, I would have either had to be quiet, kept my mouth shut, or support the initiative, regardless of what its impact would have been on the schools, or resigned.

I didn't lose friendship over this with Reagan, but you can see where I'm coming from. Sometimes the people will elect a dud or a screwball, but then they can correct that. It will take time to correct it. But if you want a person to be free and be accountable to the people, then you had better elect him.

Sharp: You've been in office a long time.* I don't know if you thought you'd be in office this long, but the question, I think, is begged, especially because of the different sorts of programs that you've initiated, the kinds of changes that you've made in the department, and the kinds of people that you brought into the department.

Do you know where one leaves off and the other begins? Do you know where the politicking leaves off and the substantive issues of reform in education begin?

Riles: I think, first, anyone in the superintendent's position must have a vision of where they want to see the system go and have that commitment. And I think it must go beyond that. I think a person must do his homework. Keep in mind that you want to see things as best as you can for all the little kids. I think that's where it begins.

Next, you need to get people who have their commitment and who are willing wo work to accomplish these goals. Now we all have egos and all of that kind of thing, but what I'm saying is

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*At this time of this interview, Riles was running for re-election to his fourth term as superintendent. He was defeated by William Honig in November 1982.

Riles: different from, "Well, I want to make this job a stepping stone to something else. I just want the acclaim and ego satisfaction of having the State Superintendent of Public Instruction behind my name," and all of that.

I think, to get to the other part of your question, once the commitment is there, and once you have people who have that commitment and sense of direction, another part of that is understanding that if you are going to accomplish things at the state level, you have to be aware of the political forces that are either positive or negative in the picture.

This includes one element that I don't think you've raised, but it becomes a very important one. It's not only and, I want to say, not primarily your superintendent that can move a political situation like a legislature. That's part of it. Also a part of it is coalescing a broad spectrum of people. For example, legislators or governors do not move in a vacuum. They are political creatures, too, and they have ears to the ground and wet fingers up in the air. If they see a consensus out there of people who want them to move in a certain direction on an issue, they are going to go that way.

So part of the role of the superintendent is not only to interface with the legislature oneself--and that is important--but the other is to coalesce people. And who are the people? Parents, and I've done a lot of work to interface with parents, as well as community people. Parents and community people as well as the establishment, teachers and school administrators and school boards.

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Sharp: Well, that is all I have.

Riles: Well, you don't need this for your study, but since we're there, the question would be, why did I run again this time?

Sharp: This is a hard one.

Riles: Yes, it is. I, over a year ago, realized that I needed to reassess where I was. After all, twelve years is a long time. I thought of what my options were. There were a number. I could retire. I could have been invited to take other jobs. Alvin Eurich--I don't know whether you know Alvin Uurich. Do you know him?

Sharp: I know the name.

Riles: He offered me a job paying twice as much as I am earning here before I ran in '78.

Riles: I thought about, should I run for something else? The moment I asked that question I thought, what would it be? The only thing that I saw that might be attractive would be maybe the U.S. Senate. Certainly not the governor's race. That's just more headaches. I thought about all of those things.

Then finally I faced myself with the question, why would I want to run for the Senate? I can only say that at this stage in my career, it would be an ego trip. So I dismissed that.

I think the thing that really moved me to run again were two things. One, we were still struggling trying to get through the impact of Proposition 13. It seems to me that you don't need an amateur. You need someone with my experience to try to bring this system through, to say nothing of the programs that we have implemented. Some are still fragile and need to be bolstered and put on an even keel. The system needs to be adequately supported on a long-range basis.

That was one thing. But the other, I recall that in 1962 when Roy Simpson, the fellow who hired me, after seventeen years decided that he was going to retire, everybody and his cousin got into the race, and we ended up with eight years of Max Rafferty. I felt that I didn't want that to happen again, because it is just throwing up some balls and letting them come down. So I made the decision to run again.

Just for your information, I had a number of people, including Honig, who came and said, before I made a decision, "I'd like to run for this office if you don't." Gary Hart, and so on.

So I said, "I haven't made up my mind." As a matter of fact, I had Gary Hart and Honig both come over, and I talked to both of them together. I said, "You're two people I know, and I am not going to choose between you. I tell you what I will do. Within a couple of weeks or three weeks I am going to make up my mind, and then I'll call you." They said, "Oh, if you're going to run, I won't run." Both of them.

When I decided to run, I called Gary. He was a little disappointed because he really wanted to run. He said, "I'm not going to run against you because I don't want to do that."

I called Honig. He said, "Well, I've been thinking about that. I'm not sure."

Riles: In any case, eight people entered the race. Three of them, at least, very serious. The [school] board member in LA, a man by the name of Mr. Ferraro who is extremely to the right. No matter what you think about his philosophies or whatnot, he continues to get elected by a certain segment of the people in Los Angeles to the school board.

The second serious candidate was Gene Pratt, who has been Dr. Hayakawa's administrative assistant. He decided he wanted to run for this office. He conducted a campaign.

The third was Bill Honig, who has not much of a track record but a lot of money, and indeed spent $1,400,000 in the race. Eight hundred thousand [dollars] of family money.

Honig spent that much. And with Pratt spending $200,000 and Ferraro $100,000, you see, you begin to approach not only three, to say nothing of the other five. You begin to see where more money was spent in this campaign than in any other. Mr. Honig came out with 25 percent of the vote. I got 40 percent. The rest were scattered between the other candidates.

But now [after the primary] we're on a one-on-one basis, and whereas if you've got eight people running against you, you can't talk about their record. You have to sit up there and be reactive. But on a one-on-one situation, part of it is to also put his [Honig's] record on the line.

Now, I don't think I will be able to outspend him, but we have gotten some professionals in the campaign, and we're going to conduct a good campaign.

Sharp: How do you think it will turn out?

Riles: We expect to win. He has to get 25 percent of the vote in order to approach that 50 percent. I have to go 10.

Sharp: And keep what you have.

Riles: Then keep what I have. We're not going to take anything for granted. As I say, the big problem is trying to overcome some of his money.

Sharp: Yes, it's considerable.

Riles: Sorry that I was so late.

Sharp: That's all right.

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