

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FEBRUARY 6, 2014

CHRIS NICASTRO INTERVIEWED BY BLANCHE TOUHILL

Blanche Touhill: Why don't you introduce yourself.

Chris Nicastro: I'm Chris Nicastro. I'm currently the Commissioner of Education for the State of Missouri.

Blanche Touhill: Very nice to have you here.

Chris Nicastro: Thank you.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk a little bit about your early life: your parents or your siblings or you grandparents or teachers in the elementary or secondary school that might have said something to you, like, "You really have ability and you ought to go on to college" or something like that. So, talk about your early life and what your expectations were when you were young.

Chris Nicastro: Sure. I grew up actually in Manchester, Missouri before it was West County, I always say, because at that point, Manchester was a two-lane road and it was safe for a child of five and six to cross the road on foot to get to elementary school. My mother worked at first at the grocery store next door to our apartment...we lived upstairs...and she worked at the grocery store. My father was a fireman. Later, my mother went to work in the Bookkeeping Department and ultimately ran the Payroll Department for the Parkway School District. So, from an early age, I was exposed to school districts. I was the oldest of three. I had two younger brothers. My one brother, John, was two years younger than I, and then Jim was nine years younger than I. So there was a good gap there. My brother, John and I were very close. He was one of those kids that was always picked on by all the neighboring children so at a very young age, I became a protector for him and always made sure that people weren't bullying him or bothering him too much. I can remember that probably the most...the first very influential person in my life was a first grade

teacher named Carolyn Woods. She was an amazing teacher. She was constantly telling me that I was bothering my neighbors and so she would have rewards for me, as a student, because I would finish my work and quite often I would finish it very quickly. So she would give me a coloring book or a special book to read or something to keep me busy so that I wouldn't bother my neighbors when they were still trying to complete their assignment. She was a teacher who I think really encouraged me first and foremost, that let me know that I was very smart and that she thought I could do great things. So I remember her clearly. I think probably the next teacher who really influenced me in that way was Mrs. Adams and she was a teacher who was extraordinarily demanding. I can remember feeling that I was never going to be able to satisfy her and part of that, I think, was just her desire to continually push all of us to do better and to be better. Probably the most influential teacher I ever had was a gentleman named Roland Kline. Roland Kline was a teacher at that time at Parkway Central and then later, at Parkway West, where I graduated and Roland taught History and it was really Roland who, I think, convinced me of several things: one, that I needed to know the world beyond Manchester and beyond Missouri. Roland was exceptional at exposing his students to the world outside of what we knew. So he encouraged us to explore and to be open to new ideas and interested in things that were going on around the world. He also was probably the best teacher I've ever known or seen. He was one of those people who could just engage a class and keep everybody on the edge of their seat and also, who really pushed us to be our best. I can remember we used to tease him that we were always getting B+'s and these were all supposedly very bright kids and we were all high fliers and used to getting straight A's and in Roland's class, you got a lot of B+'s and so trying to push to get that A- or that A was just a huge task that we were all constantly striving for. I think I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. I can remember as a small child, conducting class in my neighborhood out in the back yard and having all my neighbor children sit down in rows and follow my direction. I was always trying to tell someone...now, my brothers would say it's because I was bossy and that probably is still true today. I think my husband might even agree with that today. But nevertheless, I always felt like that was a natural thing for me, was to work with people and try to teach something. I went away to Indiana University to college.

Blanche Touhill: Well, go back to high school.

Chris Nicastro: Oh, I'm sorry.

Blanche Touhill: How was high school? Oh, that's Mr. Kline.

Chris Nicastro: Mr. Kline, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Okay. So where did you go to college?

Chris Nicastro: I went to Indiana University for my undergraduate and that was interesting because my high school counselor was always encouraging me to apply at Ivy League schools and schools on the East Coast. I knew that finance was going to be a real issue for me. I was, in fact, the first one in my family to graduate from college and my parents were people of very modest means. So I knew they weren't going to be able to pay for it and that it was going to be up to me, either through scholarships or loans or some combination of that, to do that. So when I started looking at colleges, I guess, I wanted to go somewhere else. I wanted to explore the world a bit, if you would, and Indiana was far enough at that time. It seemed like it was not where all my friends were going and it was far enough away. My mother and I visited the campus and I really fell in love with it. It's a beautiful place and still comfortable in that it's a Midwestern feel to the university but also a school that had a great reputation in History which is what I majored in as well as Education, which I knew at that time I wanted to get my teaching certificate.

Blanche Touhill: Did you graduate from Indiana?

Chris Nicastro: I did, I got my Bachelor's Degree in History, picked up a teaching certificate along the way; later, came back to Missouri and, of course, at that time, in 1973, there weren't very many jobs for Social Studies teachers, particularly not women who couldn't coach football. So I kind of was really searching for a job for some time. I ended up getting married and had my first child and during that time, while I was still seeking a job and having a baby and so forth, I did a lot of substitute teaching. So I had an opportunity to see a number of school districts, both in this area as well as in Jefferson County and kind of explore some of the ideas and things that were going on in those districts. Ultimately, I did get a job, first teaching job at Northwest High School in House Springs. I taught World History, American History and Government and probably my

favorite course was the Government course because I just felt so strongly that that was such an important piece of what all people need to know and a knowledge base that everybody really needs in life. I also found it a good way to really make History or make Social Studies, if you will, very relevant for kids. So we talked a lot about our community; we talked about our greater community; we talked about our state, to try to build those connections between “what is my life here in Northwest High School and how does that relate to the bigger world?” I really enjoyed doing that.

Blanche Touhill: Now, Northwest is not a large school, is it?

Chris Nicastro: At the time, it was...I don't recall...maybe 12...1,400 students. The district, of course, has grown significantly since those days just as urban and suburban sprawl, that part of Jefferson County has grown a lot. They now have two high schools, I believe. But I spent my first four years teaching at that high school and really enjoyed every minute of it.

Blanche Touhill: Then what happened?

Chris Nicastro: Well, I can recall my teacher/friend, Roland Kline, who I mentioned earlier, contacting me about my fourth year of teaching and he said, “We’re getting ready to have a North Central visit at Parkway West and I think you should be on the team.” He said it would be “a good growth experience for you.” And so I said, “Sure, I would love to.” So I was on the North Central visiting team as a classroom teacher and went through that process. About six or eight months after that, the superintendent of Northwest and the principal came to me and they said, “We’re getting ready to pursue North Central accreditation for the first time and we think you’re the only one who’s ever been through a review so we want you to chair the process.” So I became, my fifth year, a part-time administration, part-time teacher. I taught two classes a day, did cafeteria duty and then I started working with department chairs and others to put together a report for our initial North Central visit and that was a huge opportunity for me. I think it gave me an opportunity work with lots of colleagues in other departments, to get a really broad understanding of the high school and how it was put together and, of course, it really was my first major leadership opportunity in a school setting. In looking back, I’m amazed that a high school principal and an assistant superintendent, at that time, would have so much confidence in

a young teacher who really hadn't been tested. But that was the beginning, I think.

Blanche Touhill: So you successfully got North Central approval?

Chris Nicastro: We did, we did that and the following year, Northwest, at that time at least, was a very volatile place politically and the school board, at a meeting the week after school was out my fifth year, the school board fired everyone in the Central Office except the one assistant superintendent who had picked me out earlier. So, everyone was gone: the superintendent; the assistant superintendent for curriculum; the federal programs director; the transportation director; maintenance director, everybody. So John Gibson...was his name...called and he said, "Do you want to come work in Central Office?" and I said, "Doing what?" He said, "Well, I'm not sure but..." ...he said, "there's a lot of open offices here and you come on up and we'll figure it out," and I said, "Well, you know, if I..." ...because he had been talking to me about going into administration, and I said, "Well, if I'm going to do that, shouldn't I be a high school principal first?" and he goes, "Oh..." ...he said, "they'll never hire a woman as the high school principal." So he said, "You just need to come up here." So that's how I got to Central Office. I did not have my Master's Degree yet. In fact, I'm not even sure I had started it, or if I did, it was just barely. So he got special permission from the state supervisor, for me to do that job and I really picked up my work here at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, to work on my Master's Degree in Administration. So, by that time, I had two children. I was working on my Master's, started my career as an administrator and that first year, I did everything from take the board minutes to deal with federal programs, to transportation. I supervised some construction; wrote curriculum; I just did a little bit of everything.

Blanche Touhill: What a wonderful learning experience.

Chris Nicastro: It was the best possible learning experience. I think by the end of that first couple of years, I literally had touched every piece of school district operation and had learned a lot. I was fortunate in that I had a mentor, John Gibson, who was one of those people who understood, really, the importance of coaching and mentoring. So he tolerated me making lots of mistakes and really helped me work through a lot of issues as I was

trying to develop what my style was; what was really important; to learn how to manage time and other things.

Blanche Touhill: Did he give you a title?

Chris Nicastro: My original title was administrative assistant. Later, I became assistant to the superintendent because at that time, you couldn't be assistant superintendent unless you had a certificate, which I did not have.

Blanche Touhill: For administration?

Chris Nicastro: Correct. So I was there three years and by that time I had pretty much narrowed my focus to Human Resources, to Personnel Management. That was an area that I had tremendous interest in and found, I guess, a real affinity for. As a teacher, classroom teacher, I had been active in the teacher organization and, in fact, had been on the (barkening?) team my third year of teaching. So I was familiar with that kind of labor management discussion and relationship. So when I got to Central Office, after my job...we hired some other people and my job started focusing on HR...I ended up doing the negotiations for the board. Of course, I was sitting opposite one of my former colleagues and friends who I'd been sitting next to only the year before. So it was a great opportunity for me. Shortly after that I did apply for and went to Ritenour School District, again, as the Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources and I spent four years doing that job.

Blanche Touhill: Did you hire teachers as well as staff?

Chris Nicastro: I did. I hired teachers, lots...at that time, my responsibility was all the recruitment, original screening, selection, dealing with compensation, everything, for all staff in the district, certified and non-certified.

Blanche Touhill: How can you tell if you're hiring a good teacher?

Chris Nicastro: You know, I think there are lots of things that go into that. I actually ended up doing my dissertation on the selection of school principals. For teachers, over the years, I think there have been a lot of models that have come out that tried to identify what those key characteristics are. I think content knowledge is critical. Whatever the teacher is going to teach, whether it's History of Math or Science or Reading, they have to have a really clear mastery of the content. They have to know how to

teach and there are certain things that are critical to the art of teaching: the ability to listen well; the ability to encourage others to speak and to engage; the ability to guide a conversation and coach learning. I see teaching as more of a coaching opportunity where you facilitate the development of knowledge in whoever it is that you're working with, whether that's children or adults. I think the role of teacher is sometimes to direct knowledge and to impart knowledge, but more often, I think it's about helping others construct their own knowledge, and as a teacher, I found that...and still do find that...very rewarding.

Blanche Touhill: Then, what do you look for when you're hiring a principal?

Chris Nicastro: Many of the same things. I think you have to be a good teacher to be a good principal. Of course, you're working with adults rather than children and there are some differences. I think that good principals...in the research I did, the research was focused on all the models of leadership development: out of the military and out of some government agencies that really pre-dated anything significant in terms of research in the education field. But there are some similarities and I think there are some leadership skills that you can identify in principals that are really important: organization skills; the ability to interact and communicate with people; the ability to express yourself, both orally and in writing. There are many of those leadership skills that I think you can have. The one thing that's always difficult to measure, whether you're talking about a teacher or principal, is that mission. Unlike many other fields and unlike many other occupations, knowing the topic, knowing the area, having the knowledge and having the skills to do the job is not sufficient. You also have to have that mission, and I believe that education, whether it's as a teacher, principal, whatever the position, is as much about that mission or that calling, if you will, than any of the other things.

Blanche Touhill: In teacher education programs, do they talk about that mission?

Chris Nicastro: I don't know that they do. I think we've really tried to...in some ways, we've tried to routinize education, where we've tried to make it a check list of, you know, you know these things and you're ready to be a teacher. The time that people find out if they're a teacher is when they do their clinical experiences: their student teaching; their opportunities in the classroom, and when you observe a student teacher or you observe someone interacting with the class for the first time, there's some magic

there that you can pick up and there's a relationship and a rapport that develops between...

Blanche Touhill: Can you pick that up in the interview?

Chris Nicastro: It's very hard; it's very hard to pick that up. Sometimes you can, if it's just an extraordinary candidate. I mean, I've interviewed some people who, within the first three minutes, I thought, oh, my gosh, this person...we've got to hire this person, and most of the time I was right. Like anybody, I made a few bad calls but I think sometimes you can pick it up immediately. I would say more often, it takes further observation. One of the things I'm really happy about now is that I see a lot more videotaping and a lot more interaction, observation, direct observation of teachers teaching prior to being selected or prior to going on because that feedback and that observation is very hard to duplicate in an interview.

Blanche Touhill: Do you think there's more dedication or more mission, fervor, today or less?

Chris Nicastro: I think it depends on where you are. My experience largely has been in urban schools or urban-like schools so I would say that most of the educators that I've surrounded myself with in my career have been people who were very intensely mission-driven. There's no question that there are some districts and some schools where it's easier to teach. The challenges are not nearly as great as in others and for those who work in districts or in schools where kids may come to school hungry, they have families that may or may not be functioning as we would like for them, they may not have heat, all those peripheral problems and all those environmental issues that kids face. When they come to school, it takes a very special person to deal with those issues in an effective way so that kids can learn and it...

Blanche Touhill: And you think most of those people are mission-driven?

Chris Nicastro: I think the good ones are and there are so many of the good ones. We hear a lot about the ones that aren't so good but I think, for the most part, they are very mission-driven. I think the key there is to make sure that, though you keep your mission, that you don't ever lower your expectations. It's very important then, and if you're really true to that mission, if you believe all kids can learn, if you believe that kids can

achieve anything that they want to, which is what I was raised to believe, then it's our responsibility to instill that in our students as well.

Blanche Touhill: So, go on. So, from House Springs...

Chris Nicastro: I went to Ritenour. I was there for four years as HR and then another great opportunity: our business manager in Ritenour decided to retire and the one area of school administration that I really didn't have a lot of experience in was the business area, the budget piece. So by that time, I had decided I pretty much wanted to be a superintendent so I went to my superintendent and I said, "I would like that job because I don't know anything about that and I think that's a piece I need to have a grasp on." As I think about that now, I think that was really strange way to ask for a position: "I don't know anything about this and therefore I'd like to do it." I had a wonderful superintendent, again, another wonderful mentor in my career and John's response was, "Well, let me think about it." He came back the next day and he said, "Well," he said, "I'll give you an opportunity." He said, "I have enough confidence in you. I know you will not let me down. You will make sure that you do what you need to do to be successful in that area but..." he said, "I don't want you out of HR." So he changed my title. I was Assistant Superintendent for Administration and I had all of that. I had HR; I had all the Professional Development; I had the business side; the budget; the transportation; construction; maintenance; custodial, the whole thing.

Blanche Touhill: How much help did you have?

Chris Nicastro: Well, I was able to hire a young, very talented accountant because I knew that that was not my strength and that if there was one piece of the budget that I...I could kind of get my head around the whole idea of finance and budgeting and figuring out a plan to support the program. What I didn't want to do, and really was not my skill set was balancing the books and making sure that we were keeping track of the dollars and cents. So I hired a young accountant to do that and that turned out to be a wonderful relationship and a wonderful team that I was able to construct. But that was a great growth opportunity for me. I did that seven years and that set me up really for my first superintendency which I did after that.

Blanche Touhill: What about your degrees at this time? You had the Master's by then?

Chris Nicastro: I had the Master's by then. I was working on my doctorate. I was, I would say, trying to do that and balance that with a work schedule that was generally 14 hours a day. My superintendent believed that an assistant superintendent should also be very engaged in the community. That's typically something superintendents do, not all assistants do but because of my superintendent's belief, I spent a lot of time in community activities. So it was pretty common for me to be gone every night during the week. So it was hard to get my courses in but I did that, ultimately ended up getting my Master's Degree here at University of Missouri-St. Louis and then later went to St. Louis University for my PhD. The program there has changed considerably since I first went there and, at the time, I was deciding, do I want an EDD or a PhD and typically in education now, most people go the EDD route. Someone along the way told me if I ever wanted to work at the university level, I needed to get the PhD. So I did that and ultimately graduated while I was still at Ritenour with my PhD.

Blanche Touhill: So you really saw that you enjoyed administration?

Chris Nicastro: I did, partially because I enjoy teachers and I still think of myself as a teacher. I have tremendous respect, I think it's a profession that is grossly underrated. It always irks me that teachers who graduate from school with a Bachelor's Degree start out at \$35,000 or whatever the starting salary is and the student next to them may go into engineering and start out at twice that amount. I think that says something about our society that I'd love to change.

Blanche Touhill: Isn't that changing?

Chris Nicastro: You know, I think we talk about it more than we ever have. I think that one of the things we're working on in the Department is changing to educator preparation programs and raising the standards for what it takes to get in and what it takes to get through a teacher education program. I think all of that is going to help. I can't help but believe that we raise the bar and make it more selective, that society is going to have to start elevating the esteem in which they hold teachers.

Blanche Touhill: Then you would have more teaching assistants or you would just have more teachers and it would be more expensive?

Chris Nicastro: I don't know that that would necessarily dictate structure. I think that you could still have the same number of teachers but I do think that, in our

country or in our society, we tend to recognize the professions that we hold in high esteem with monetary compensation and so I would hope that those two things can work together. I think that teachers certainly should be paid more. I think that the work is extremely arduous if you're doing a good job and ultimately I'd like to see teachers regain the respect that they used to have 100 years ago.

Blanche Touhill: I assume the teaching profession never received much compensation because it was filled with maiden ladies.

Chris Nicastro: I think that's true.

Blanche Touhill: And who were considered to be dedicating themselves to the children.

Chris Nicastro: Oh, that's absolutely true.

Blanche Touhill: And not allowed to marry.

Chris Nicastro: That's exactly right.

Blanche Touhill: And so they're working their way out of that atmosphere.

Chris Nicastro: Right, yeah, and what's happening today, there are, in my lifetime certainly, there have become so many more opportunities for women, that that has really depleted the ranks of...you know, for a very talented, very bright young woman, even 50, 60, 70 years ago, teaching was one of the few paths that you could choose. That's not true today and I think that, as a result of that, we've kind of allowed that reputation of teaching to be diminished and it's something we need to work on.

Blanche Touhill: How do you work on that?

Chris Nicastro: Well, I think a number of ways: I think people like me, who are coming to the end of their profession, the end of their career, need to really be much more vocal about, how do we recognize the people who contribute to our society. Without teachers, we wouldn't have all the STEM activities everybody talks about today. We wouldn't have all the breakthroughs in medical science and other things, the digital age that we're so wrapped up in. So I think it's up to us, some of us, to really talk about that a lot more.

Blanche Touhill: Why are teachers getting such a bad rap these days?

Chris Nicastro: You know, I think people are trying very hard...I mean, I think it's important, as part of that whole accountability movement, to try to make sure that we're measuring results in schools, which I absolutely agree with. I think it's important that we get results and it's important that we have high expectations but I don't think you can always quantify that, certainly not by one number and certainly not in one setting, if you will. So the tendency for around the country that I see for states, for schools, for districts to use one set of test scores to decide whether or not a teacher is doing a good job is just, it's misguided at best, and in Missouri we're trying very hard to stress the fact that we need to use multiple measures. We need to use multiple years. We need to look at not just the test score, but also student perceptions of teacher performance; parent perceptions; peer perceptions. Most teachers I know are also very self-reflective. We all know...and I can testify to this and I think others can too...you finish a lesson and you go, wow, that didn't work well, and so the first person who knows that is probably the teacher, themselves. So I think all of those go into determining whether or not somebody is doing a good job teaching or not and it's really up to many of us to try to deliver that message and make sure that we view teaching in that context, not just based on one score.

Blanche Touhill: Go back to the negotiations when you were on the faculty side with the administration. In Missouri, you can organize but you cannot strike, is that right? Is that still true?

Chris Nicastro: That is still true. It has happened. There have been teacher strikes in Missouri and I'm not sure what could happen. I guess theoretically and legally, there could be some pretty dire consequences to taking that action. Fortunately, that's never really been put to the test and in Missouri we've had very few instances of actual strikes.

Blanche Touhill: So it's a conversation between the leadership of...

Chris Nicastro: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Is it called the union or is it called...

Chris Nicastro: It depends. Professional Organization is what most...well, we have in Missouri, three teacher organizations, two of them prefer to think of themselves as professional organizations; the third, which is AFT,

consider themselves a union. There are some similarities. There are some differences.

Blanche Touhill: Are there many AFT organizations in the schools in the State of Missouri?

Chris Nicastro: The two primary are in Kansas City and St. Louis. They tend to be focused in the urban areas.

Blanche Touhill: But most of them...or what are the other two organizations?

Chris Nicastro: NEA, which is also a national organization, and the Missouri has its own teacher organization called MSTA, Missouri State Teachers Association.

Blanche Touhill: But I never thought of NEA or MSTA to have much...they have influence more than direct power, but what about the AFT?

Chris Nicastro: Well, you know, I think every state is different. In Missouri, AFT is the smallest of the three organizations and I would say, from a statewide presence, NEA and MSTA probably have the greater presence. For many years, until just recently as a matter of fact, MSTA had the largest membership of the three and that was primarily because it was both teachers and administrators. It was not unusual for a superintendent to pass MSTA membership cards out to the teaching staff. So I think the foundation and where they came from was very different but, in recent years, NEA has now surpassed them in members.

Blanche Touhill: But if you say that the teachers of Missouri have a union, that's really AFT?

Chris Nicastro: It would be a union. Now, there would be some who would argue that NEA and MSTA, particularly NEA, have taken on more and more of the attributes of a traditional union.

Blanche Touhill: So their leadership takes on the conversation with the board?

Chris Nicastro: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: In these local school districts?

Chris Nicastro: Correct.

Blanche Touhill: Well, then go on with your career. So you become a superintendent. Where do you become a superintendent?

Chris Nicastro: I was in Riverview, Riverview Gardens School District at the time. When I went there, they were unaccredited, when I was hired, and I spent seven years there, just having a tremendous experience. I was able, during my time there, to build a really talented team of people who were knowledgeable and skillful and very dedicated to the idea of turning around an urban system. When I went there, it was about 6,000 children. When I left, it was about 8,500 and I think that says something about the importance of schools because I believe, and there was a good deal of evidence to suggest that during that period of time, as we were rebuilding the community and rebuilding the schools and rebuilding that relationship between the schools and the community, that it became an attractive place, a much more attractive place for people to live and raise their children.

Blanche Touhill: Did you get the accreditation back?

Chris Nicastro: We did, and before I left, the district was fully accredited. The test scores had gone up significantly.

Blanche Touhill: And to what do you attribute that?

Chris Nicastro: I think just unified effort of some very talented people who focused on teaching and learning and kept our objectives and our activities to a very narrow focus on what happened in classrooms. Everything we did was designed to support what happened in classrooms. So if it was a new science program, we worked a lot on, how do we equip teachers with the skills to deliver this to children? If it was a construction project, we made sure that whatever we were doing, building, improving, supported the instruction of kids. When we talked to our community, it was about, how do you get involved with the instruction of our kids? When you're dealing with a district with the kind of poverty that Riverview had then and still does, you have to deal with those extraneous issues. So you put a washer and dryer in the school and you make sure the kids get breakfast and lunch, and yes, maybe an afternoon snack and you make sure you have nurses in your buildings and you form partnerships with social service agencies and with juvenile justice groups and others so that all the things that your kids need to be successful are right there. You can't count on sending a child home with a note that says, "We recommend you take your child for counseling" or "We recommend you take your child to the doctor for screening" because that may or may not happen. The family,

the parents, the mom, in many cases, may not either have the resources to do that or the ability to do that. So you just remove those barriers and it becomes part of what you do.

Blanche Touhill: Did you have those ideas when you went to be superintendent or did any ideas pop up as you were doing the job?

Chris Nicastro: You know, I don't know that I went in with all that knowledge. I had never worked in a district quite like that before, which was, when I went there, was about 85% African American. By the time I left, it was 95% African American. So there had been a huge transition in the community. It started prior to me coming but certainly was accelerated during the time I was there and I think...I have to say that, I went into that job knowing a lot about schools and a lot about how to operate a school district, having a broad experience in a variety of areas but how do you make that all work together. I can remember my first day, sitting in my office thinking, okay, I've got this person to do HR and I know how to do that, but this person does that and I know how to do curriculum but that's so-and-so's job and I know how to handle transportation but that's what this person does, and thinking to myself, okay, so what do I do? What's my job? Well, my job was to pull all those people together and into a cohesive team with a very focused mission where we could all bring our strengths and our special skills together to work in a coordinated way to accomplish the task.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get that message to the teachers and the students and the community?

Chris Nicastro: You know, as I think back, I can remember when we were trying to pass our first bond issue and tax increase. The community at that time, the power structure of the community was all white and almost all the people in the community power structure, meaning the mayor, the alderman, those folks, many of them were sending their children to private or parochial schools. So they didn't have a personal vested interest in the district or the success of the district. So it was important for us to try to figure out a way to make it relevant to them, to make them understand that there was, in fact, an important link between how successful the district was and the community where they lived. That requires, I think, sometimes a lot of conversation but I think it also requires some really clear leadership and I was fortunate that I was able

to find in the community some very visionary leaders in that white community who could understand that linkage and who could see what was happening to their community around them and who realized that a lot of that was focused on what was going on in the school district.

Blanche Touhill: Was the school board, who appointed you, were they white or black?

Chris Nicastro: White, all white, and that remained that way, I would say until probably...at least halfway through my administration. So the district, again, had gone through tremendous change. It used to be a very, I'd say, upper middle class community, nice bedroom community for St. Louis City and the schools used to be high performing but in the 20 years or so prior to me coming, the district had changed significantly and the district hadn't responded to those changes. So part of it is just making sure that whatever you're doing in your schools, that that reflects the needs of your community, the needs of your kids, and if those needs change, then you have to change too.

Blanche Touhill: So, then, go on: where did you go from ...

Chris Nicastro: I did my term there. I was recruited to apply for the superintendency in Hazelwood which was a neighboring district.

Blanche Touhill: And a big district.

Chris Nicastro: Much larger. As I said, when I left Riverview, it was about 8,000 students, just over. Hazelwood at that time was about 19,000 and growing. There was a lot of housing development at that time going on in North County and lots of homes going in in North County. So when I went to Hazelwood, I had the advantage of understanding and knowing North St. Louis County. I had done almost all my career by that time in North County.

Blanche Touhill: Is that Ritenour?

Chris Nicastro: Ritenour and then Riverview and now Hazelwood. So some of the organizations, the Chambers of Commerce, North County Incorporated, other agencies, connections with them, so I knew the people. So those connections really helped a lot in terms of getting my arms around a bigger district, and it is a significantly different job, when you go from a district with one high school to a district with three high schools, it is

exponentially different. Thirty-three school buildings, which makes the selection of principals an even greater task because instead of having eight or nine to identify, you have to identify three times that many. I was at Hazelwood for eight years. We, during that time, were very successful in doing a lot of, not only capital improvements but program improvements, staff improvements. When I first went to the district, I was concerned about performance. I can remember in my interview, telling the board, showing them their student performance data over the previous five years and I said, "We're not going in the right direction" and I said, "I know that our review from the state is in two years and..." I said, "I'm concerned." I said, "I'm not sure the district is going to retain its full accreditation. They were pretty surprised.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, because it was known to be a good academic...

Chris Nicastro: Absolutely, and there were still...it still was in many respects but the same kind of transition that had had occurred in Riverview was starting to occur in Hazelwood by that time, particularly on the east side of the district. The demographics if the district had changed significantly. Poverty rate was increasing significantly. So, the district, when I first went there...and still today, to some degree...it was very extraordinarily diverse. I don't think there was a more diverse district anywhere in the state. We had very affluent white parents and communities, our family members; we had very affluent African American community members, and we had very poor white folks and we had very poor black folks. There were 47 different languages spoken by children in the district at one time. So, you look at diversity and you think, okay, how do you operate a district? One size is not going to fit all. You know, if you have a district that's 100% free and reduced lunch and 100% African American coming out of one or two major apartment complexes, those children's needs and the needs in that particular school building are going to be very different from the needs of the children in a district where you have two-parent families and they live in \$400,000 homes and they all have books before they come to kindergarten...very different needs. So it becomes even more important that you identify the right leadership in those contexts and that it has to be the people with the skills, the knowledge, the mission, but also the understanding. They have to be...to be a good leader, you have to be something of a chameleon. You have to be able to fit into your community and good principals know how to do that.

Blanche Touhill: So you rely on the principal to really be active in their geographical area?

Chris Nicastro: Absolutely, absolutely. I think that, of all the positions in the school district that may be the most important because they're the ones who really assemble their team to work directly with children. They're the ones who have the first line contact with parents. They're the ones who are likely to know if a community is starting to decline or starting to come back after a decline. So, good principals keep their finger on the pulse of what's going on around them and they're just absolutely critical to school improvement.

Blanche Touhill: I want to change the subject for just a little bit and then I'm going to come back to your school career. If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would you be doing today?

Chris Nicastro: I'm not sure. I think I probably would still have been a teacher. I don't think that would have changed. I don't believe that I would have had an opportunity to rise through the leadership ranks as I have but I think I would be a teacher. Now, if that had meant that I couldn't get married or that I couldn't have children, that might have changed my path because I think that, particularly being a mother, has been very important to me and seems like, the older I get, the more important it becomes. So I think that might have changed my path.

Blanche Touhill: Would you comment on your relationship with the International Women's Forum?

Chris Nicastro: You know, it's a building relationship. I've been fortunate to be a part of the group for a very short time and I have not...I've been a little frustrated because most of my work is done in Jefferson City or around the state so I'm not often here where I can take advantage of all the opportunities that it offers but it's something that I really look forward to. I think one of the things I look forward to the most about it is, first of all, all the women that I most respect are in the Forum and some of them I know very well; some I don't know at all. So I'm looking forward to having a network of women who I can really get to know and talk to and spend time with and do some important activities for our community with.

Blanche Touhill: Is there any award that you have received, or awards that you received that you really are very proud to have received?

Chris Nicastro: I think probably Superintendent of the Year in Missouri was a high point for me. I think any time you're recognized by your peers, that has a tremendous amount of meaning and that was a big one for me. I was only the second woman ever to receive that award in Missouri and actually was the first woman ever to be the President of the State Superintendents Organization. So that was very special. I think that I was recognized by the Parkway Alumni Association and it was most special to me because it gave me an opportunity to talk about how special some of my teachers had been, because they were clearly instrumental in my life. Then I've gotten a Distinguished Alumni Award here at UM-St. Louis as well as at SLU and those mean a lot because I think, with my foundation and my focus through my whole life on education, being recognized by the institutions that are responsible for who I am and what I know and what I can bring to the work, I think is particularly important.

Blanche Touhill: Now, go on to being Commissioner. Talk about...

Chris Nicastro: Yes. You know, I can tell you, I never dreamed in my wildest dreams that I was going to be Commissioner of Education in the State. I really thought I would end my career in Hazelwood and I honestly would have been very happy to do that. I was really recruited to apply for the commissioner job and it appealed to me in several ways: first, I saw it as an opportunity for me to take some of my ideas, some of my passion, some of my commitment to making a difference, particularly in urban areas, to a state level. There had never been before, and may never, ever again be a commissioner with urban experience. So I saw that as a unique skill set or a unique set of experiences that I could bring to the job that very few other applicants or other candidates might.

Blanche Touhill: Are you the first woman?

Chris Nicastro: I am also the first woman. Over the years, I think...you know, I hearken back to the '60s when we were doing the women's lib thing and we were all wearing ties because we thought that's what we had to do and we were trying to blaze the way for women and I think there's still some piece of that inside of me. I think as a woman, you still get that little point of pride. You know, you don't talk about it but you know that you're the first woman and I think that's...my daughter and others says, "You know, that's important, Mom. Those are important landmarks for us. You're blazing the way for all of us." So I think there is that but to this job, I think

bringing something to the entire state, really kick-starting, if you will, change for Missouri, productive change, is really important.

Blanche Touhill: Now, how are you trying to make the change?

Chris Nicastro: Boy, you know, it's really challenging, I think particularly from how I approach the job. Right now, things are so polarized in our society and politically and in education. We have an awful lot of our colleagues who are very entrenched in the status quo: everything's fine; we're doing fine; leave us alone; don't change anything. Then, on the other hand, we have people who say: public education doesn't work; we need to throw it out; we need to go privatize; vouchers. Well, I'm somewhere in the middle. I believe deeply in public education. I can't imagine our country existing without that as its foundation but I also believe that we have to make change and that if we're going to do a really good job of preparing our kids for success in this life and the 21st century, we've got to do some things differently and trying to bring people together to focus on what that looks like is really challenging.

Blanche Touhill: Do you bring superintendents to Jefferson City and...

Chris Nicastro: I do. I have an advisory group of superintendents I meet with regularly. I try to get around to the various education groups, to meet with the executive committees of the various organizations, from the school boards to the teachers, to the principals. Recently, I'd say this year particularly, we've formed a group called...what we call our "Education Partners," and it's representatives of...it's the leadership of the three teacher organizations, two principal organizations, school boards and superintendents. Our focus is on, what are some challenges that we face and how can we work together to craft a path forward that we can all agree on? Our first successful venture with that was on our new assessment plan for how we measure performance in Missouri. I think everybody came out of that process feeling as though we made some progress.

Blanche Touhill: You have more evaluations than just tests?

Chris Nicastro: Well, for performance in Missouri, we have many more. In most states, it's that one test. Missouri is fortunate in that we've always looked at that more broadly but in Missouri we measure attendance; we measure

graduation rates; we measure college going rates; we look at career paths...

Blanche Touhill: And you can now trace students by some number?

Chris Nicastro: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: How long has that been in effect?

Chris Nicastro: We now have...five years. My first year was the first year that we were able to do that.

Blanche Touhill: I would think that would be very helpful.

Chris Nicastro: It is tremendously helpful. It brings with it some really important responsibility for data security and for protecting student information and we don't send identifiable student information to anybody. It's become kind of an ongoing issue for us in some ways. First of all, people are very concerned about data security, but also because researchers are so anxious to get a hold of that data and I can understand because Missouri is really one of the first group of states that has that capacity to do that and we have one of the longest consistent terms of data of anybody.

Blanche Touhill: Let me just say: I'm on a statewide board that looks into poverty in Missouri and there's an awful lot of poverty in Missouri. Is it growing or is it just all of a sudden recognized that it's there? I mean, children needing food and...

Chris Nicastro: Well, I think it has grown in recent years. I think part of that is just the recession that we've gone through, so much unemployment. I think, too, we've finally, in recent years, kind of recalibrated our system so what used to be a living wage at \$7.50 or \$8.00 an hour is no longer a living wage. So I think that in terms of the number of students that we classify officially as being on free and reduced lunches has increased partially because of that. I think it's a huge issue. You think about all the things...and it kind of goes back to what I said about school improvement: the way you improve schools is to have a very intense focus on solving a problem and it seems to me that in this country, we have the skills and the knowledge and the resources to solve that problem.

Blanche Touhill: Are you able to bring these urban plans, when you bring the social worker into the school and the dentist into the school and the optometrist into the school or whatever you need in, are you able to do that throughout Missouri or are those towns too small to bring that kind of aid?

Chris Nicastro: I think you can address the issues. It's how you do that. So, there may need to be...and that's where...that may be, in fact, where things like government comes in. I know in recent years, we've done a lot more collaboration with the Department of Mental Health, with the Department of Corrections, with the Department of Social Services. So we need to start thinking of ourselves and our services as more interrelated and collaborative than operating in silos and I think as we get more of that kind of cooperation, and you pool all those resources, then there would be no reason why you couldn't address that in the most remote areas of our state. Now, you may not have a social worker in the building every day but you could have services available as necessary in our communities.

Blanche Touhill: And you work on that through partnerships with the other state agencies?

Chris Nicastro: I think so, mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: Reading: how is reading coming?

Chris Nicastro: I think we have work to do. One of the observations I've made and, as a secondary teacher, it was something I really didn't know about until...really, until I became a superintendent and it was a problem that we had to confront but I think an awful lot of our elementary teachers really were not prepared to teach reading. They had a course or two in teaching reading and one assumes that elementary teachers always know how to teach reading but we became awfully reliant on this reading program or that reading program and I'm not sure that those materials necessarily substitute for the skills that teachers need to have.

Blanche Touhill: So you're looking for life-long learning on the part of the teacher?

Chris Nicastro: Exactly, absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: If you wanted to sum up your life as a teacher and a superintendent, what do you think you've been able to really bring to education in Missouri that was new and exciting?

Chris Nicastro: I would like to think that I've brought an interest in maintaining very high expectations for all kids and finding a way to remove barriers, not using all those things, poverty and family circumstance and whatever as excuses or even as distractions, and I think quite often they can be both but rather, just admitting and conceding that those are barriers that we can and must deal with so that we can get to teaching and learning. Every child can succeed at high levels and it is our responsibility to make sure they do and I think that relentless focus on making sure every child has opportunity to succeed in school is...I hope that's what I've brought.

Blanche Touhill: Thank you very much.