

**A Narrative Biographical Summary of
Jack Jennings**

**States' Impact on Federal Education Policy
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As told to Anita Hecht, Life History Services, July 2013

John F. Jennings, nicknamed Jack, was born on December 29 in 1942, in Chicago, Illinois. Both his paternal and maternal families were of Irish-Catholic background and both placed a great value on education. Jack's mother, as well as her four siblings, graduated from college, a relatively unusual occurrence for women in her day. Jack's father, one of six children, also attended college.

Jack's parents met and married in Chicago and had five children. Jack was their eldest son. As Jack states, the traditional expectation was that Irish-Catholic sons would become one of the three "P's": a policemen, a priest, or a politician. Since Jack's father was a policeman, his mother forbade her children from following in his footsteps. That left the priesthood or politics.

Jack's education began in parochial schools—first at a neighborhood Catholic grammar school, followed by Quigley Preparatory, which prepared young men for the priesthood. Its five-year program resembled a French lycée; but at the end of those five years, Jack decided against pursuing the priesthood.

After Jack graduated from Quigley in 1961, he had a year and a half of college credits because that academic program had been so intense. He wanted to go to St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland to study the classics, but the college would not accept his credits, and he did not have the funds to start college over again. So, he decided to attend Loyola University in Chicago which accepted his credits. At Loyola, he completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in History in 1964. He then went on to earn his J.D. from Northwestern University in 1967.

Though never in publicly elected positions, Jack has indeed spent time involved in politics even before his professional career. This presence in the political arena began while attending Quigley Preparatory, continued through college and law school, and then was dominant in his professional career where he was at the heart of federal education policy.

To be specific, while at Quigley, he volunteered to work at John Kennedy's Chicago presidential campaign headquarters. This was followed by Jack becoming president of Loyola University's College Young Democrats club. Subsequently, Jack became State Chairman and then a national committeeman of that organization. In these roles, Jack came to know Roman Pucinski (D-IL), who served six terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, representing the 11th district on the northwest side of Chicago—Jack's home area. Pucinski was also a Democratic committeeman in Chicago, a role which Jack states was more important at that time than being a congressman. Pucinski asked Jack to become a Precinct Captain for his neighborhood, which Jack did during his three years of law school. In this position, Jack was effective in gradually changing this mostly Republican precinct to a predominantly Democratic one. He says that his secret was simply hard work—each year he visited three times every one of the hundreds of houses in the precinct to get to know the voters and their views. Obviously, that tactic worked when the precinct went Democratic. While involved in politics in his neighborhood, he also was elected by his law school classmates to the board of student governors at Northwestern; and not neglecting his studies, Jack graduated in the top tier of students at his law school.

Jack's political success led Pucinski to offer him a job in 1967 as staff director and lawyer for the Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor in the House of Representatives, a committee that Pucinski chaired. The full committee had written legislation such the ESEA, the Higher Education

Act, Head Start, and many of Johnson's Big Society programs. Pucinski chaired the subcommittee dealing with education below the college level.

At the age of twenty-four, Jack moved to Washington DC and became one of the youngest staff directors ever on Capitol Hill. It was in this manner that Jack entered the world of federal education policy, eventually becoming what he calls, "an expert by accident."

Jack arrived in Washington DC only two years after most of the Great Society laws under Johnson were enacted in 1965, including the ESEA, which focused on providing aid for education to states with poor children. Before this time, Jack states that only a few states had separate programs for poor children, and there had been fights for decades about whether the federal government would create major aid programs for the public schools. With the tenor of the times focused on poverty and civil rights, Johnson had managed to pass these equity-based, major grant programs.

Hugh Carey, Bobby Kennedy, Al Quie, John Brademas, Edith Green, Carl Perkins, Jake Javitz, and a host of other congresspersons who were involved in creating ESEA programs were all on Capitol Hill when Jack arrived. Thus, Jack had the opportunity to discuss with the authors of the Great Society legislation their intents and their struggles to achieve enactment of those laws. That "in-sider's" knowledge of what happened and why was Jack's hallmark for his entire congressional career from 1967 through 1994.

During his 27 year career on the Hill, Jack saw that much of the disputes along the way had to do with the requirements and control that were bound to federal funds. At the first Senate-House conference committee he attended on the second day of his new work in 1967, the Congressmen and Senators representing the two houses of Congress were arguing about whether to eliminate some of Johnson's new education programs and give the funds to the states as "block grants." The next day, another conference

committee he attended in his new position was to resolve a Senate-House dispute about limiting federal control over the new poverty program and instead vesting authority in the local mayors and state governors. At the time, these conferences were behind closed doors, and at both meetings there were involved such luminaries of the time as Senator Robert Kennedy, Senator Ted Kennedy, Senator Javitz, and many other powerful and well known members of Congress.

That introduction to legislating fascinated Jack because it was a combination of policy and politics. He did not want to spend all his time in politics running campaigns and raising funds, and neither did he want to be in an academic position studying policy without having much impact on the content of that policy. By working on a congressional committee in a high position, Jack understood that he could influence policy and then use his political skills to achieve enactment of the legislative bills containing those policies. Thus, he could operate in both worlds.

Pucinski was the subcommittee Chairman until 1972, when he ran for the Senate against Charles Percy and lost. Congressman Perkins (D-KY), who was Chairman of the full committee and had been subcommittee chair before Pucinski, decided to take back his old subcommittee. Perkins asked Jack to stay on as staff director, which he did until 1984 when Perkins died. Gus Hawkins (D-CA) then became the Chairman in 1984 of the Education and Labor Committee and asked Jack to stay on heading the subcommittee, as well as to become counsel to the full committee. In January 1991, when Hawkins retired, Bill Ford (D-MI) became Chairman of the full committee, and asked Jack to become general counsel for education for that committee.

Jack's service was rooted in his belief that government should serve and protect those who are disadvantaged in our system. He believes that the United States is deeply capitalistic in its economy and very individualistic in its society, and so government must

try to help those at risk in such an environment. In other words, the government should smooth the rough edges of a capitalistic and individualistic country.

In the field of education, he felt that the federal government's role should be in advocating for greater equity. During his nearly three decade congressional career, he was involved in advocating for special education, equality of opportunity for women and minorities, and greater access for students lacking the financial resources to attend institutions of higher education.

Jack remained on the Hill through the Clinton administration, after helping to enact all the major legislation of that administration. He retired from Congress at the end of 1994, and in January 1995 he founded the Center on Education Policy. CEP's signature was its work for ten years following the development and implementation of NCLB. In fact, the Center issued more reports on the impact of NCLB than any other group in the country. Jack states that while heading the Center, he tried to remain balanced and neutral in his analysis and presentation of policy issues. Since retirement from CEP in 2012, however, Jack has been become more openly critical of where policy has led us.

Mr. Jennings is currently a member of the National Academy of Education. Over the years, he has received awards from dozens of organizations, and most recently was the recipient of awards for distinguished public service from the American Education Research Association and from Phi Delta Kappa. Other recent awards are the Education Visionary Award from the Learning First Alliance (a coalition of the country's major national public education organizations), the Outstanding Friend of Public Education Award from the Horace Mann League, and the Meritorious Service Award from the National Association of Federal Education Program Administrators.

Jack is also a member of the U.S. Supreme Court Bar and the Bar of the District of

Columbia. He currently serves as the chair of the board of directors of the Phi Delta Kappa Foundation. He writes a blog for the *Huffington Post* and gives occasional speeches and lectures.