

***Poweshiek History Preservation Project***

**Interview Transcript**

**Interviewer:** Judy Hunter

**Speaker:** David Stoakes

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Persons present: Judy Hunter-I  
David Stoakes-S

Hunter: transcribed stuff before and it's no fun.

Stoakes: My secretary had to do a lot of that for me. Because I dictated a lot of stuff.

Hunter: Okay. Didn't always enjoy that and I understand that but it saved me a ton of time.

Hunter: I bet. I bet. Yeah.

Stoakes: Just one of those things.

Hunter: What can you do? Okay. This is Judy Hunter and I am interviewing Dr. David Stoakes, former Superintendent of Grinnell-Newburg Schools. What years were you were you Superintendent?

Stoakes: 2003 to 2006.

Hunter: 2003?

Stoakes: 2006.

Hunter: No! Was it 2003?

Stoakes: Because I was high school principle for 10 years.

Hunter: Oh, that's what I'm getting confused. Okay. When did you come as high school principle? That's it. [laughs]

Stoakes: That's it. '93. 1993.

Hunter: '93. Okay.

Stoakes: So I did that for 10 years.

Hunter: And then 2003 to 2006 - all right. And then you went on to -

Stoakes: Cedar Falls.

Hunter: As superintendent there and you retired in—

Stoakes: 2012.

Hunter: And you've moved back to Grinnell. And -

Stoakes: Right.

Hunter: And yeah, cool. Right. Um, how did you get into education? Where did you grow up? Where did you study? What inspired you to become, you were a teacher before you were a principle, right?

Stoakes: Right. Yeah. Ah, my father was an educator and he started teaching in 1950 in Malcolm.

Hunter: Malcolm, Iowa?

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: Really?

Stoakes: Yeah. And so he was in education and his brother, older brother, of course, my uncle, was also a teacher for a few years and then went into school administration. So both my dad and my uncle were superintendents for most of their professional careers.

Hunter: Really, I didn't know that.

Stoakes: So it was just kind of, you know, the natural progression, family thing.

Hunter: Place to go, yeah.

Stoakes: Right. Yeah.

Hunter: Did your dad teach then at Malcolm? In Malcolm? Was it, was it, it wasn't BGM then, was it?

Stoakes: No, it was just Malcolm. And, my father was never one to share many stories. He would never do anything like this but; he talked a little bit about the first day of workshop which was the day before the kids come. You know, the superintendent would line up the teachers and say, "Well why don't you teach this, and you teach this?"

Hunter: Really? Was this high school?

Stoakes: Uh-huh. So he was like business and typing and industrial arts and that kind of, you know.

Hunter: It just.

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: Wow.

Stoakes: And they didn't have baseball. He started the baseball program they had. That was the first baseball program that they had. So and he – one of the other first year teachers was an elementary teacher, Barb Nesselroad - Nesselroad Chevrolet – that whole family from Brooklyn. So our families were friends for a long time even though my folks, my parents only stayed in Brooklyn, or Brooklyn? Malcolm. For two years I think.

Hunter: I was going to ask how long you were there. Where did you grow up?

Stoakes: No. They moved up by Waterloo, Orange Township, which is now Orange Elementary in the Waterloo District. And so that's where I was born. And then he took his first superintendency in 1955 in Martel, Iowa, which is a real small school east of Cedar Rapids, in '59. Then the state went through a big round of consolidation, you know, in '59. So Martel consolidated with Anamosa. At that point. So he lost his job and because he lost his job there, he wound up as elementary principle in Mason City. An elementary principle's job.

Hunter: Okay.

Stoakes: Kindergarten in Martel for myself. And then grades one through six in Mason City. All my elementary grades were in Mason City. And then he took the superintendency in Reinbeck and so then that's where I graduated from high school.

Hunter: Alright.

Stoakes: He was superintendent for, like, twenty-three years. At the end of his career he was the half time curriculum coordinator.

Hunter: Okay.

Stoakes: After he retired from the superintendency so, there in Reinbeck like twenty-eight years.

Hunter: Wow. Wow. Must have been like being a military kid, moving around all the different districts.

Stoakes: Yeah. You don't really— at the time when you're going through that. I just thought that was normal. You know, because my career of teaching in two different school districts and then being an administrator in four different districts was very similar to my father who was, taught in two districts and then was an administrator in three school districts.

Hunter: Wow.

Stoakes: So we just – he got his first administrative position when he was 27. I did the same thing; I was 27 when I got my first principle's job.

Hunter: Wow.

Stoakes: So you just kind of—and then as you look back on it you see some of the benefits but also some the cons of moving that much.

Hunter: Yeah. Yeah.

Stoakes: You really don't get a chance to put down roots, you know. We've met a lot of nice people over the years but then you're always moving to the next...

Hunter: So what districts did you teach at and where did you become an administrator?

Stoakes: Okay, I started teaching in the Boone Valley School District which is Renwick, Iowa. Which is up in North Central Iowa and it is about halfway between Clarion and Humboldt.

Hunter: [laughs]

Stoakes: [laughs] Okay, and again real small. And we were there three years and then took another position in Jessup which is down just east of Waterloo.

Hunter: Okay.

Stoakes: At that time Jessup was a 3A school. And now they have lost so many kids they're like a 1A School.

Hunter: Oh.

Stoakes: And Boone Valley where I started and I don't even know when this was – sometime in the 80's – they had lost so many kids, rather than consolidating, they disbanded the whole district.

Hunter: Oh.

Stoakes: Because some families, you know, it was a pretty wide district and families were closer to— you know, on one side of the district they were closer to Clarion and on the other side closer to Humboldt, north end of the district was closer to Kiowa and schools up that was. So they just broke it apart which really was the best thing to do.

Hunter: Okay.

Stoakes: It was hard, I'm sure, you know, because the school was gone but really for the kids it was the very best thing to do.

Hunter: This question just occurred to me, but in '59 when the state, there were all the consolidations across the state, do you think that Iowa would be better off if we either had done that again or did it again?

Stoakes: Oh, absolutely, state mandated consolidation?

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: Absolutely.

Hunter: How come?

Stoakes: I think you see a lot of local school boards now who will not want to make that really tough decision to consolidate. Part of it, they are afraid to sometimes, because of the political dynamics within the community and maybe the personal attacks that they would take from people by doing that kind of thing. We know that some board members have been forced out of business because of positions they have taken on the school board whether it's you know, big major decisions, whether it's budget cuts. If you're—

Hunter: Buildings.

Stoakes: Yeah, buildings. If you're a local business owner and take a position contrary to a lot of people in town and they decide not to do business with you that could be pretty, pretty devastating. And then I think... So you've got that. Then I think there is also a feeling that we want to keep our school open at all costs and it is a cost to the kids.

Hunter: Kids, yeah.

Stoakes: And kids loose out and sometimes it is not the quality of what is going on in those small schools that's the problem, it's the breadth of what they can offer. You know the opportunities for kids are tremendously different from small to large schools. And so I do think it would have been in the state's best interest to have some other forced—some state mandated requirements. You could put some broad parameters around school districts – total number of students – but then you'd also have to be cognizant of total miles because of sparsity of population.

Hunter: Right.

Stoakes: And so probably, even if you would have done that you would probably had to have had some kind of appeal process for people to opt out.

Hunter: Yeah. And it's not going to happen.

Stoakes: No.

Hunter: I didn't think so.

Stoakes: There's no – and you know, then the political dynamics of that kind of thing – legislators feel they like they would not be reelected and they are so focused on that kind of thing. My opinion, legislators are just doing what they need to be reelected rather than make the best kinds of decisions they can for in this case, for the kids In Iowa.

Hunter: I think you're right. Okay.

Stoakes: So, so anyway.

Hunter: Good, yeah.

Stoakes: You had asked about my path.

Hunter: Trajectory.

Stoakes: Right. So I taught for five years and the reason I wanted to make that move as a teacher was I wanted to be in a larger school.

Hunter: Ah. Okay.

Stoakes: And to teach a larger system. So. Like I said, Jessup at the time was about 1,200 kids. So it was a 3A school.

Hunter: Okay.

Stoakes: And Boone Valley was very small – 300 kids K-12, that kind of thing. So finished my Master's degree while we were at Jessup and then took my first principle's job at a small school north of Waverly – Plainfield— and that was you know, again 350 kids and—

Hunter: In the high school? Or in the district?

Stoakes: Yeah K through 12 in the whole district. And when you're an administrator in a school that small you have to wear lots of different hats. You know. So I was teaching a bit of Phys. Ed. and athletic director and 7 – 12 principle and in an emergency you had to drive the bus and all those kinds of things. So again I wanted a larger school experience. So we were in Plainfield four years. And then took an assistant principal job at Algona High school which is up north of Renwick so it was back in that same area we were familiar with. And we were there eight years. So that was '85 to '93.

Hunter: Okay.

Stoakes: And finished my Doctorate while we were there. And then in 1993 came here.

Hunter: Okay. What was your impression of Grinnell when you came? Of the school district? I mean, I'm mostly interested in, you know, in your assessment at this point.

Stoakes: I had obviously known a little bit about the district from my parents.

Hunter: Ah-ha. Okay.

Stoakes: One, my grandmother and my mother both attended Davis Elementary School for short periods of time.

Hunter: Really? What were their names? Last names?

Stoakes: Um, my mother was a Wyatt

Hunter: Wyatt?

Stoakes: when she was in school. And my grandmother's maiden name was Bruce. And related to some of the Jones family though not the Jones in the bank – a different, another Jones.

Hunter: Another Jones, okay.

Stoakes: And, another little tidbit of connection is that my mother's great-aunt and -uncle,

Hunter: 'kay.

Stoakes: Who would have been my grandmother's aunt and uncle,

Hunter: Okay.

Stoakes: Her mom's aunt and uncle owned the farm where Grinnell Middle school sits today.

Hunter: Really?

Stoakes: That property was owned by Helen and Orville Peterson which are relatives of Eric and Anne Peterson and that whole Peterson clan.

Hunter: Ah. I didn't know that! So you're kind of –

Stoakes: I'm kind of a shirt tail relation in there some way.

Hunter: Wow. Cool.

Stoakes: Yeah. So anyway we had a little bit of, you know, knowledge about that. When I was at Central College and getting ready to student teach, you don't know a lot about surrounding school districts or where you should go student teach but in the education department at the time there was kind of this, um, communication passed around students that we didn't want to go to Grinnell to student teach.

Hunter: How come?

Stoakes: Well, we didn't know specifically at the time but found out later that that is when you were doing split shifting.

Hunter: Ah.

Stoakes: Ah. So.

Hunter: Probably smart. [laughs]

Stoakes: Yeah. [laughs] Don't go to Grinnell! And get caught up in the crazy system!

Hunter: You'll be teaching until eight o'clock at night!

Stoakes: At night yeah.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: So there was a whole bunch of us – about 8 of us – who ended up teaching in Oskaloosa High School. I don't think anyone came to Grinnell for a few years from Central because of that.

Hunter: I don't blame them. What years was that?

Stoakes: That must have been '75, '76. I graduated in '76, student taught in the fall of '75. I don't remember how many years they...



Hunter: I think it was just one or two. Because we moved here in '76 and that fall was the vote to end it. The four vote margin. [laughs]

Stoakes: Is that what it was?

Hunter: It was the four vote margin. Yeah.

Stoakes: Well, and then when we moved here in '93, the previous spring I think it was, you'd had a bond issue vote for renovations and additions at Bailey, Fairview, Davis and the High school. I think it was 14 million dollars which got voted down.

Hunter: Yup. I was one of the chairs of that.

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: Yeah. [laughs]

Stoakes: So when we come back 20 years later—

Hunter: How many more millions have we spent on those?

Stoakes: Well we spent 14 million dollars just on the high school, you know, plus then did all the other ones. So it could have all been done for 14 million dollars if it would have passed in '93. So that kind of leads me into you asked about what we knew about Grinnell. In the big picture, kind of a reputation for a pretty good academic school district – not great – but good. But facilities were always a struggle and of course the whole thing with – any time you have a building that gets condemned by the Fire Marshall and shut down by a Fire Marshall, you know that the community hasn't taken care of their responsibilities for the kids. You know.

Hunter: Absolutely.

Stoakes: The facilities in this community have always been a struggle and we're kind of there again right now, trying to figure out what to do with facilities.

Hunter: Are you on that 50 person committee?

Stoakes: No.

Hunter: Okay. Okay. I know Clem is. But I'm not on it either. Um, yeah, okay, okay. So what, in your ten years as,

Stoakes: Principle.

Hunter: Principle. What were the major challenges and accomplishments would you say? I'm going to ask you the same thing about your superintendency so.

Stoakes: Sure. Yeah. Major challenges and accomplishments... Well the accomplishments— some of the

things that we did in collaboration with the college were probably as significant and fulfilling as anything that I did in 36 years.

Hunter: Wow.

Stoakes: And I've had this same conversation with Roger Henderson about the humanities project you know and...

Hunter: So you instituted a humanities course for team-taught.

Stoakes: Yeah, team-taught humanities course. Which was developed by language arts, history, visual arts and music. And all four of those – some people feel like you do an interdisciplinary course when everybody does a little piece of their area. But that's really not truly interdisciplinary and not done the right way – and this was and it was all integrated together.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: And that got started with a Federal grant that Dan Kaiser helped set up initially get which was like \$100,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities. And Dan really had the big picture vision of what that was all about you know and helped us secure that and, um, what else was I going to mention about that? Oh! After the grant period concluded, I'll never forget this, when you talk about oral histories, I wish I would have had a camera running the day that Senator Grassley came to visit and wanted to know how things had gone and we had a meeting with some teachers and he was there and the press was there and students were there. And one of the girls, and I can't even remember who it was now, just so eloquently stated how um, it impacted her education and how it was designed, the way it was designed, just helped her to really be able to learn at a higher level than she ever had before. And it was really cool and I always wished I had been able to tape that.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: Because that was pretty powerful.

Hunter: And they had the students doing oral histories?

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: Is that? If I remember correctly.

Stoakes: Basically they did, at the end of that, they did, you know, we went away from a written semester test kind of, to a Cap Stone project you know, which, if you'd go back and interview those kids that went through that, I assume that kind of experience really helped them when they got to college.

Hunter: I bet you're right. Yeah.

Stoakes: So. And then we were also able to do some interdisciplinary things in PE and Home EC. We put those two, and Health, so we put PE, Home EC and Health together. And again, did some things with you know, physical, emotional and um, nutritional health. All at the same time. We were working

on our prairie studies course in when, between Voc. Ag. and Science which we never really got going, I think I kind of transitioned out when we were working on that. And then uh, wait a second we did another, maybe that was about it. But you know the other really neat collaboration with the college during that time was the teacher sabbaticals.

Hunter: Right. That's the one I was thinking about

Stoakes: Yeah. Yeah. And that was really powerful too because we had a lot of the stuff that got implemented in the high school came from you know, those teachers that spent a semester or a year at the college and then came back. You know. It was Roger Henderson in math, Chris Molitor in science, Joyce Wagner in English

Hunter: Roger Henderson in music.

Stoakes: Roger Henderson in music. Maybe Deb Manly? Did she get one?

Hunter: I can't remember.

Stoakes: I can't remember. In art or not.

Hunter: I don't remember.

Stoakes: Maybe not.

Hunter: I know that Roger Henderson helped the music department greatly with their assessment. You know because he was really into—

Stoakes: Right. Because he was really into... He was really good with that.

Hunter: He was really—yeah. He knew about that and they didn't and it was really a help. So it was not a one way deal. The sharing and the – I'm not supposed to be the one being interviewed – sorry. But it went both ways. I think that the college benefited as well.

Stoakes: Right. And we had some colloquial with different topics, technology or whatever it was.

Hunter: Yes, Jean Ketter, Joyce and I presented that at a NCTE Conference on teaching writing. Yeah. Yeah.

Stoakes: Uh, and it was really was, and I've always really felt that we missed the boat in high school education by not teaching everything in an interdisciplinary manner. Because basically what we've done, is we take the core curriculum and we teach kids: history, language arts, you know, math, and science all in isolation, in our little cubby holes or little egg cartons, little crates. And then we tell kids as you are walking down the hall, assimilate all of that information, you know, that you got from all those and I really think that's why we've been – and again the big picture from the state and all across the country - why we've been more successful at elementary education that we have been in high school education because you look at big picture achievement across the country and we do better—kids do better – and that's always one of the criticisms of public education is how come our kids do worse the longer they're in school. Well at the elementary level we teach the way the mind works

which is everything together and so if you're studying about a particular country during a particular time, we do art projects along with that. We do science along with that. We have kids write about that, sing about that.

Hunter: Sing about that.

Stoakes: So I think that a lot of people would just say I'm crazy but I think the core curriculum – the way we teach it is one of the reasons we don't do as well as we could.

Hunter: You feel like the core curriculum encourages that kind of separateness?

Stoakes: Sure, yes. absolutely, yes, absolutely.

Hunter: I'm going to skip to my last question which is: in the current world there is this big move toward educational reform and what else would you say about the education reform movement? Anything that's part of it.

Stoakes: I think the other big picture thing about it, the reform movement, is that in the United States we have this huge, and I can understand why, push to compete with the best educational systems in the world. Okay? Finland, Singapore, you know, wherever they happen to be. But yet, we don't have the political will to use the same methods that they do in those countries. So for example Finland doesn't use standardized test to measure achievement. They use all formative assessments that are teacher-driven and they, you know, have been much more successful with that. But we have the political constructs where with elections every two years, our education ends up being kind of in that two year cycle that our politicians are in. The politicians are going to drive certain things and they want to see something happen in two years so we can, they can use that when they campaign again, you know. And you can go back to 2001 and the state of Iowa when we had the new, we had the new teacher compensation, new teacher career ladder plan that was voted in by the general assembly but there was no money.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: They never appropriated money to do it. So that went by the wayside and so now in 2012 we're right back putting that in place and this time there is money to go along with it. And it looks a little different but it has the same basic big picture broad strokes. Well, we're 12 years behind because of that, so.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: Yeah. If we want to get to where some of those countries are, we have to kind of do the same things in the same manner. Another good example of that is technology. We have a lot of school districts that think, "we'll buy every kid a computer and that will solve all of our problems and every kid will be at grade level in reading and math." No. You know. And how do we know that? Well, Finland tried that in the early 1990s and early 2000's. They thought the ways to really improve the education was to go heavy into technology so that's what they did. Big huge technology test. Kids weren't doing any better with reading, math, or science then they were. So then they decided "well, we need to invest in our teachers, build capacity with staff give them time during the day." A high school teacher's schedule in Finland look more like somebody who teaches at a college or university in the

United States, because of the time that they have each day to work on what they need to work on or collaborate work with other teachers. Right now, we just don't have the political will to do it the way that we know it works in other countries that are really successful.

Hunter: Do I assume from that that you're not a fan of No Child Left Behind?

Stoakes: No. [laughs] And the other thing about No Child Left Behind is that – the, basically the federal government has assumed and now we are 100% responsible for the success of our educational programs to the federal government. And that never was intended to be the role of federal government. That should be a state function. And we should roll that back and tell each state, you know, “you’re responsible to make it happen.” Federal government should back out of that. I think the federal government's role should be with equity and some equalization. There are certain states in certain areas of the country that really struggle financially.

Hunter: And maybe with ESL or something—stuff like that.

Stoakes: And that’s where the federal government should come in and try to provide. But the accountability should be a state function in my view.

Hunter: Yeah. I always think it's kind of a – because its' all based on the standardized test.

Stoakes: Can’t get there anyway.

Hunter: All the children will be above average – just like Garrison Keeler.

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: Okay. Okay, well this is cool. I'm going to go on to your accomplishments as of your years as superintendent, 2003-2006. Do you have anything else you want to say about the high school years first?

Stoakes: Um, let’s see. You know, I think the other thing about those years and this would have been. You know, also from the, you know, from the board’s perspective and you know, Clem was superintendent. That, even through the budget cuts we were able to hang on to a comprehensive high school program. You know, whether it was, you know, the Fine Arts, the outstanding Fine Arts programs, you know, and all those things that we were able to keep in place. Some of them had to be cut back a little bit but you know, if I went back through the last, um, nineteen years of my career and figure out how many years we had to cut budget out of those nineteen years it’d be a bunch.

Hunter: Yep.

Stoakes: You know.

Hunter: Yep.

Stoakes: So.

Hunter: Scary.

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: Okay. Um, major events from your ten years as superintendent.

Stoakes: 2003-2006. Um.

Hunter: Nickelbee was coming in.

Stoakes: Yeah. Yeah. And we really didn't have a lot to deal with No Child Left Behind at that time because we were as I, you know, Grinnell has always been a very good school district. I don't think we got to the great school district, um, I don't think very many school districts are, you know, really really good. But, the No Child Left Behind stuff really hadn't started to kick in for us because we were, we were ahead of the curve.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: All the way through. We knew it was going to catch up at some point. Um, I've just trying to think of what—well, the, the bond issue vote for the high school gym/auditorium and that project's science areas was that fall.

Hunter: 2003?

Stoakes: 2003.

Hunter: Wow.

Stoakes: Because that was my—

Hunter: Okay.

Stoakes: You know.

Hunter: That's right. Because that had been sort of in the transfer from Clem to you.

Stoakes: Yeah and that had all obviously Clem had done all the work on that and, I'll never forget my first board meeting as superintendent. That Dave Smith and Tim Marshall came with the fundraising of, what was it? Three and a half million dollars or something.

Hunter: Yep.

Stoakes: You know. And so they walk in and say, "Here's a check for three and a half million dollars to kick start the bond issues." And we had the bond issue and that passed. Was that in October? Maybe?

Hunter: Maybe, yeah. And then you were—

Stoakes: So then, from then, it was just a matter of, not a matter of, but a lot of that time was final design and we had a real struggle because the bids came in overestimate. And even before we broke

ground we had to cut about a million dollars out of the project.

Hunter: Wow.

Stoakes: So there were some things that were, that had to be removed to make the whole thing work as I recall. A couple of them, you know, it's just too bad, you know, there's a lot of steel siding on the upper portions of the gym you know that was all originally going to be brick. And okay, we can live with that but you know another big ticket item that would have been nice, now that whole main hallway that runs the whole length of the gym on there there was going to be clear story windows on the top of that. So there would have been all natural light in that hallway. And I think that would have made a huge positive difference.

Hunter: I agree. I remember I was on the board then and—

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: I remember cutting those.

Stoakes: We didn't have, there wasn't, which was really too bad now in retrospect because would have made big difference because that hallway is so long.

Hunter: Yeah. Did you have, were you, I always felt like we ended up putting our superintendents and assistant superintendents in the role of building contractor, or, general contractor for the building. Did you feel that in that project? That you were—

Stoakes: Yeah, I spent a lot of time. I even did that as high school principle.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: With the two editions we did while I was high school principle. I guess I should have talked about that we were, during that ten year period. Because when I came to the high school we still had four portable class rooms.

Hunter: Portable classrooms. That's right.

Stoakes: Temporary classrooms that had been there for twenty-five years, you know. And then, so then we build the first floor classroom edition and then came back and did the rest of it. You know, with the math classrooms and the art rooms.

Hunter: That's right. The first floor was in the middle.

Stoakes: Well the first floor—

Hunter: No.

Stoakes: Were on the south end on the side. We just extended the corridors to the south.

Hunter: Oh. Okay. Okay. Oh.

Stoakes: So four of them were English and four of them were social studies. That's the way we...

Hunter: Okay. Okay. Then the second one was the other end of the building?

Stoakes: Then the second one was, we filled in between those two wings with—

Hunter: Oh.

Stoakes: Um, math classes and the two art rooms.

Hunter: Oh. Okay.

Stoakes: So.

Hunter: We also did some stuff with vocational.

Stoakes: That happened during, with the gym and auditorium project.

Hunter: Did it? Okay. Okay.

Stoakes: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, and the science.

Hunter: Okay. I was just down there today because they've got the, what is now called the Independent Learning Center down there.

Stoakes: Oh sure.

Hunter: It's kind of—

Stoakes: How's that going? Is it going all right?

Hunter: It's going okay. I was just writing an article on it for the *Herald Register* and everybody seems, there was one student I talked to who said, "This sucks!" [laughs] But other than that everybody was really positive. And, including all the other students I talked to.

Stoakes: Oh. Yeah. Good. Sure.

Hunter: It seems they like being there and being able to access all the counselors and a few classes here and there and lunch and stuff like that. Yeah. Look for my article. [laughs]

Stoakes: Yeah. So then. So then when I left for Cedar Falls in 2006 that project was just getting wrapped up. And we hadn't even moved in.

Hunter: Ah.

Stoakes: And we hadn't even moved in when I left. There was still quite a bit of work, I think maybe a whole other year before we moved in because...



Hunter: Is that true? I'm trying to remember, because one summer Mike and Eric spent a good deal of time out there trying to negotiate among all the contractors because they were doing things like putting lights struts in the way of lights and, I mean, just things you can't do in theater. So he learned how to read blueprints that summer. But, it was yeah, it's interesting how things get done in education.

Stoakes: Well one of the things that really hurt us on that project was that we had used a construction manager for the second edition that I talked about at the high school. Through Subtegone. And they had a guy on site every day. That was tremendous. And he would come to me with things like, "you know, this is what it says in the plans but you know, I think what's going to happen is, with high school kids banging their backpacks up against this" or "you know, this isn't going to hold up I think we ought to do this". Or, I mean, he was, he was fantastic.

Hunter: Alright. He knew what he was doing.

Stoakes: He really knew what he was doing. Well, because of that success everybody wanted to use, myself included, wanted to use the construction manager again, however that guy left and they brought in somebody else who was just, as I've learned, since then because you know, I spent a lot of time doing construction projects in Cedar Falls too—

Hunter: Oh, did you?

Stoakes: that if you, he was terrible. You know, and didn't really know what he was doing.

Hunter: Yeah. Yeah. And I think it's hard to get anybody who knows about theaters. But you're saying generally he was—

Stoakes: Right. Right. But if somebody, um, I think if they would have had the guy that we had the first time, if Mike and Eric would have gone to him and say, "Look, I think we really can't do it this way", I'm sure he would have said that makes sense and you would not have had the big fight. It would have been okay. Let's do it that way. So.

Hunter: Yeah. Alright. Okay. I didn't realize you were only superintendent for only three years.

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: That's, I remember, I remember talking to you at one point and you were saying days you'd had in the past two years, and it was something like four.

Stoakes: In the nine years I was superintendent in the two different school districts I was out of the office for ten consecutive days once in nine years.

Hunter: Wow.

Stoakes: It was the summer that Jackie and I took a trip to Alaska. We were gone for twelve days.

Hunter: That's. So it was similar up in Cedar Falls?

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: Wow. Are they the same size as Grinnell? They're a little bit bigger. Quite a bit bigger?

Stoakes: Yeah. Two and half times bigger.

Hunter: Oh. [laughs]

Stoakes: So we had about 4,200 kids when I went there. Now's there's about five thousand.

Hunter: Oh, okay.

Stoakes: So they've been growing.

Hunter: Okay. Yeah, I think we do need more support for administrators in most districts. Is that, would you...

Stoakes: Well and that was one of the big differences um, you know, when I got the superintendency here I was able to, remember it was a difficult time financially for the district.

Hunter: Right. Yeah.

Stoakes: And the board was interested in you know, I don't know what had happened with the other candidates but you know, I know I ended up taking the same money that Clem had made that year.

Hunter: Is that true huh? Okay. Okay.

Stoakes: Yeah. You know. But I was, you know, I was able to do that in my mind for two reasons: one, I didn't have to move my family and I was able to make a career move.

Hunter: Yeah. Yeah.

Stoakes: You know, in, so that was, that was huge. Um, and I didn't know if I would make another move or not but you know, Cedar Falls was one of those districts that I knew about and it was a huge raise. To leave and then the other thing was there's just so much more help. You know, when you get in a district that size and um, the time demands, the job demands now for superintendents and administrators are just incredible. It used to be that we would talk about, "okay my philosophy is to work the job and if that means I got to work seventy hours a week" you know some weeks most of the year and then during the summer you know we have a little bit less time and it all would balance out. And now, you really have to work to try to find some time to maintain a balance and most people can if you're going to do the job and get it done, get it done right. The summer that I decided to retire, um, was a summer that I—one of the things that I tried to do in Cedar Falls during the summers was just work forty hours a week. And that summer I'll never forget it was um, the summer that we had Terry Bransted had his big education summit. And there was, I'd taken two days of vacation on a Thursday and Friday and we, I was going to be gone for the summer a couple days the next week and I think you know I worked an eight or ten hour day on the weekend just to be able to... and that summer I worked most Sundays. You know, most Sunday afternoons I was in the office for three, four, five hours every Sunday afternoon just trying to stay caught up and at that point, you know, when you get to be

retirement age, you say—

Hunter: Doesn't look so good.

Stoakes: The balance just isn't, the quality of life just isn't here.

Hunter: Yeah. Yeah.

Stoakes: So.

Hunter: Yeesh. One of the things I remember from your time as superintendent is that you really worked a team approach with the other administrators.

Stoakes: Absolutely.

Hunter: Can you talk about that a little bit?

Stoakes: Sure. Um. Well. There's a couple of different, there's a couple of different ways you know, leaders can operate. And I really think that the public sector is quite different than the, than the private sector. Um, lot of people don't think so. Um, but I'm really a disciple of ah, Jim Collins—

Hunter: Ah huh. Ah huh.

Stoakes: And *Good to Great*. And he wrote a monograph called *Good to Great and the Public Sector*. And really talks about how you can become great in the public sector without a bottom line of measuring profit. Um, you know and a lot of it has to do with brand and how you make sure that you make sure that your brand is what it needs to be and how do you focus your resources on the things you do really well and then try not to allow other people and idea to come in and get you too fragmented. And that's always been a problem in education. We always get so fragmented you know. Some of it, a lot of it has to do with state and federal mandates.

Hunter: Mhm-hm.

Stoakes: It forces us to be fragmented but. And then the other, you know the other big, piece of leadership that I recall is that especially in the public sector the, you know, the real strong personalities, the charismatic figures who can come in and maybe get things done in the short term and will do it, because of their personality or their strong personality and the fact that maybe it's top down. When you do it that way when that person walks out the door usually the things that they did went out the door with them. So if you wanted to have lasting change then you really needed to work with people and have a team approach, have a shared vision and collaborate. And you know the leader has to have a big picture idea of where you're going.

Hunter: Right.

Stoakes: No question about that. You've got to lay that out but, as you do that if you could involve others in those, that decision making along with that. And in the process of how you go about it is so important. That if you include others, you know my goal was always for when we got done with something for the people that worked on the project to say "Oh, we did this ourselves. Look at what we

did.” You know it wasn’t about me, you know. If you look at the research of effective leaders it’s people that are humble, that probably aren’t charismatic, are more concerned about the results than they are in getting accolades for themselves.

Hunter: Getting credit, yeah.

Stoakes: You know. And so that was always the— I just felt like if you did it that way things would stay in place after you left. I think that was true there for a certain period of time. But then I think some of the things that we did, you know the team teaching just became, at the high school, became victim to budget cuts. At some point you just couldn’t sustain it any longer.

Hunter: Yep.

Stoakes: Even though that was the absolutely the best way to teach.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: You know.

Hunter: Yeah. And I think there was more job satisfaction among many administrators just because of that inclusiveness.

Stoakes: Sure.

Hunter: Because of that, being part of that change.

Stoakes: And you know, it was always, it’s always, a challenge for me. You’ve always got this dynamic tension of, as other administrators how much authority and autonomy do you give them? In Cedar Falls I had a great cabinet of four other administrators. I had a CFO, the business manager, I had a Director of Human Resources, and a Director of Elementary Education, a Director of Secondary Education, and they each had the autonomy you know, and responsibility for their particular area and I wasn’t going to micromanage them just like I wouldn’t micromanage a teacher.

Hunter: mhm-hm.

Stoakes: If I was a building principle. So, you know, you want those people in those positions to feel like they enjoy coming to work every day, have got some freedom to make decisions the way we need to make decisions or based on my expertise and experience we need to make decisions. So for example, we had four union contracts in Cedar Falls. We had four different unions that we negotiated with. Well our HR Director had the complete authority to be the sole interpreter of each one of those contracts from the administration view-point in the district. Because you can’t have two people trying to interpret the same contract and probably interpreting it differently and then you’d really have mixed messages.

Hunter: Right. Yeah.

Stoakes: Sent around, sent around the district in different situations. So now when we wanted to change the contract or if there’s something that came up, yeah, then it was a team collaborative decision. And also every once in a while, not all the time, not every day but sometimes, you know, the

decision had to be mine—

Hunter: Mhm-hm.

Stoakes: About, you know, about what we were going to do. So there's always that give and take about that. How much freedom do we give and how much do we, you know, how much do we rein-in our administrators. But one of the areas that we struggled with and made progress with in Cedar Falls is—when we had—we had six elementary buildings.

Hunter: Ah.

Stoakes: Well we were, we were a district and we wanted our elementary buildings to be more similar than dissimilar. If you were going to go to each one of those buildings you should come away from there with the similar education. We shouldn't have six independent elementary buildings and kids coming out of there with all different strengths and weaknesses and skill sets. You know, and so it was always that same kind of dynamic tension. You know, you want, sometimes in a building you have to do so things based on the kids that you have.

Hunter: Yep.

Stoakes: But you got to remember that we're a district and we've got a big picture that we're going to do certain things. For example, we taught reading the same way—

Hunter: [laughs] I was just thinking about the reading program here.

Stoakes: Across the whole district. And we had a, and again, with a bigger district you have the resources to do that. We had a central office staff member who was our reading consultant who taught all of our teachers how to teach reading.

Hunter: Ah.

Stoakes: Based on what our reading program was. So every, you know, every year, two or three times a year all the first grade teachers were in for PD on reading. All the second grade teachers. You know, um, and so—

Hunter: PD being Professional Development.

Stoakes: Professional Development right. Yeah. Yeah.

Hunter: Okay. Yeah. Okay. Yeah.

Stoakes: Yeah. I guess that's one thing I guess would. I think that's one of our areas of growth here in Grinnell right now is that I think we still have—and one of the advantages that I see of having one elementary building is that you can get people more on the same page.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: In terms of their methodology but again, not that anybody's doing anything necessarily wrong.

Hunter: No, no.

Stoakes: It's just too different, you know, and then you wind up with all those kids coming together at another point in time, sixth grade or seventh grade and they have different skill sets.

Hunter: Yeah. Yeah. My next article is supposed to be about the reading program. Actually about the writing program and that goes along with the reading program. So.

Stoakes: Yeah, that's another whole area that you know, from the state perspective I have no idea why we don't have a writing assessment.

Hunter: I know. I know.

Stoakes: It's crazy. There are a lot of states that have one.

Hunter: Well, it makes me nervous that they'll have a machine graded one. [laughs]

Stoakes: That's true. And... that's true. But we could do something. You know?

Hunter: Yeah. Yeah. It's true.

Stoakes: To be able to give some feedback to teachers and—

Hunter: Yeah. Yeah.

Stoakes: And parents.

Hunter: It's the truth.

Stoakes: About writing skills.

Hunter: [laughs] Okay. So this is, sort of a summary question okay? In your view how did your being here change this district? What would have been different if you hadn't been here? This is a little uh, *It's a Wonderful Life* question you know [laughs].

Stoakes: [laughs] You should probably ask some other people! You know you always make decisions that a group of people don't like and ah, you know, especially when it comes to discipline at the high school level there's always people that, you know—and a lot of those, it's kind of interesting because a lot of those situations that the people that were in them recall very vividly you know because it was their child.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: And you know, I just, I can remember some things that were, you know, okay there was an issue with that student but I don't remember what the particulars were.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: Because every year you had major issues that came up in terms of student discipline.

Hunter: I remember you dealing with my daughter on one. Did I tell you about that? You don't remember this? My daughter and a friend wore a T-shirt to school, what was it? Ah, they were, they met with somebody after school and he was not supposed to be at the school. They didn't know that at the time. But somebody came and chased him off the campus and said he couldn't be on the campus. And the next day they wore T-shirts to school that said free this kid.

Stoakes: [laughs]

Hunter: And they were, you know they were absolutely ignorant and didn't realize why he had—there were good reasons why he—

Stoakes: Oh.

Hunter: Why he had been kicked off the campus, having to do with one of her favorite teachers. And you sat the two of them down with the school district lawyer and they had an hour long talk about right of free speech and—

Stoakes: Now I remember.

Hunter: It was the most wonderful thing I have ever—thank you. [laughs] I mean it may be your fault she's a lawyer but you know.

Stoakes: [laughs]

Hunter: [laughs]

Stoakes: Is that Jenny Johnson?

Hunter: Yep my Jenny and Jenny Johnson. Yep. Yep.

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: The two of them.

Stoakes: Okay.

Hunter: Yeah, yeah. But that was, I just was so pleased with that because you, you got the point across to them but you, you made it in a way that respected them.

Stoakes: Yeah. And I've heard that from some people that they appreciated my willingness to listen. We might not always agree—

Hunter: Mhm.

Stoakes: But, and that was one thing that I tried to do is sit down and make sure people had the

opportunity to express how they felt and their view and you know. Make sure that they had at least an avenue of sharing.

Hunter: And I've also heard that you were, [laughs] this, I'm doing my little *It's a Wonderful Life*. You were, in dealing with the teachers, you made them better teachers.

Stoakes: Oh. Okay.

Hunter: How did you do that? [laughs]

Stoakes: I don't know. [laughs]

Hunter: Well I know for example that Liz Hanson says that you sat down with her and you said what? "Do you want to do to become a better teacher?" And Liz was already a pretty good teacher.

Stoakes: She was.

Hunter: You know.

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: And, but you made her want to think about it and change her methods and experiment with different things and you, I don't know, you just sort of inspired her.

Stoakes: Yeah and I think it goes back to that kind of that collaboration piece. It wasn't "Liz this is what you ought to do", you know?

Hunter: Yep.

Stoakes: It was, "Okay, you know you're a professional," you know and, one of the things that I tried to do was keep up on the professional reading so I could share that with staff. You know, from time to time.

Hunter: Mhm-hm.

Stoakes: One of the things that I really enjoyed about being a high school principal was being in IEP meeting with parents and kids and special ed. staff and trying to problem solve, to brainstorm ways to, to find out a solution for a particular student's learning style or what they were struggling with.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: You know and I think we were, from time to time we were very successful with some of those kinds of things. You know, that's one of the things that I missed when I went to the—

Hunter: Superintendency.

Stoakes: Superintendent's office. You know.



Hunter: Ah.

Stoakes: Working with teachers and kids.

Hunter: Interesting.

Stoakes: And uh, in that regard yeah.

Hunter: Okay. Yeah. Are there any tools you wish you had had? I mean tools in the metaphorical sense. In either as a principle or as a superintendent.

Stoakes: Well I'm glad I didn't have to deal with Twitter and Facebook as a high school principle.

Hunter: Oh yeah.

Stoakes: You know? That's just...

Hunter: [laughs]

Stoakes: The technology has just made that job so much more difficult. Well it's even made, you know, and it's even made the job of all administrators in all positions, you know, more difficult because the communication is instant which can be good, which can be terrible. You know, um, you know, things, negative things are spread so quickly. One of the things that was really difficult, in Cedar Falls we had a local TV station—

Hunter: Oh.

Stoakes: You know, so, and one individual parent with the concern or an issue could get on the nightly news. You know, and I'll never forget one time we had a student that was diagnosed in the summer with a peanut allergy and we'd already had one building in the district that was peanut-free and we had to make another one. And that was communicated and, 99.9 percent of the parents were completely at the in line with that. That you know, yeah, if it was my kid, we'd want the same thing no problem. You know. But let's make the change and one parent just went, you know was so upset, didn't think it was fair and you know gets on the nightly news out, interviewed out in front of the school. And puts this black eye on the whole school district because basically one person with an axe to grind. You know, and that, that was always hard to deal with that kind of thing, you know. But the—yeah back to your question about a tool. What tool?

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: You mean like—

Hunter: Power, would have, do you wish now that you had had then.

Stoakes: What'd Doug say?

Hunter: I didn't ask him. [laughs]

Stoakes: [laughs]

Hunter: I should get you and him together. He was giving me names of people I should interview and he said, "You got to get Jack Marcum and Sherry Hagen but you got to get them together."

Stoakes: Oh yeah sure.

Hunter: Yeah. So.

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: I'm hoping to do that. I think that's a hard question because it's —

Stoakes: Yeah it is.

Hunter: It's—

Stoakes: Probably, if I could have had access to someone that was trained and had a skillset in mass communication and marketing.

Hunter: Wow.

Stoakes: Really would have helped. Whether it was you know, bond issue situation or you know some of our really large districts have a communications specialist.

Hunter: Yep.

Stoakes: You know. And part of it is because there is such a demand now for instant communication from these school districts. You know, the lock down in Des Moines the other day, you know they notified parents within thirty minutes.

Hunter: Yep.

Stoakes: You know. And they were upset that it took them that long to notify them. Well guess what, the principle, the secretary; the people were a little bit busy.

Hunter: Busy. [laughs]

Stoakes: Try to deal with that kind of stuff.

Hunter: Yeah and then I heard people are, got on the radio this afternoon. There were some people complaining that when the threat exited the school they didn't stop the lock down right away. And they said, "But he hadn't been apprehended. He was still in the area. He could've come back." You know, yeah.

Stoakes: Well and then the next day *The Des Moines Register* has a negative headline.

Hunter: Yeah. Yeah.

Stoakes: You know and they handled it beautifully from everything I can tell. And nobody is going to handle any one of those situations perfectly because they're, every one of them, is completely different. But, you know, and you can never have enough, can never train for all the specific variables that could come up in one of those situations. You know.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: But—

Hunter: So you feel like somebody with experience in marketing and communication would just ease that challenge.

Stoakes: Yeah.

Hunter: Of, of communicating.

Stoakes: Plus it's a time thing too. You know, it takes a long time to you know—and some of our training for you know, emergency situations like they went through we actually had boiler plate press releases already in place. But you would still have to tweak them somewhat.

Hunter: Tweak them.

Stoakes: But if you have something that's come up and you don't have, you know, you don't have a press release for or, whatever, it could take you half hour, forty-five minutes—

Hunter: Sewer gas.

Stoakes: Absolutely.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: You know.

Hunter: At the high school.

Stoakes: You know. If you don't, if your grammar is not perfect you know you're going to hear about it. And you do it as fast as people want.

Hunter: Yeah.

Stoakes: You know. And we and we were just at that point in Cedar Falls where we needed to get a school district, you know, get set up on Facebook and—

Hunter: Mhm-hm.

Stoakes: Where we had a mass communication system where all of our parents who wanted to could sign up for you know, communication that came from my office right to their cell phone. You know.

And so we were just starting to tap the breadth of what was possible with that.

Hunter: Yeah. Yeah.

Stoakes: But again for me to do that it was, you know, twenty minutes. I'm just trying to think. I used it most for weather calls.

Hunter: Mhm-hm.

Stoakes: And by the time I made the decision to and then notify all the TV stations and the radio stations and then send the parent you know, about as fast as I could do that was fifteen or twenty minutes.

Hunter: Yeah. Yeah.

Stoakes: Um.

Hunter: Interesting.

Stoakes: I just think that would have been—

Hunter: Useful?

Stoakes: Yeah. Very useful.

Hunter: Okay. Okay. And let me just, last question I promise. I want to go back to educational reform.

Stoakes: Mhm sure.

Hunter: And sort of, how do you see the national push towards education reform as effecting Grinnell-Newburg? Now? And maybe in the future. What, what do you think?

Stoakes: Yes, it's really. There are so many things that districts have to do from a paperwork perspective. Counting and keeping track of all the student data and reporting it takes a huge amount of time. Uh, in Cedar Falls we had, probably three central office secretaries that spent the bulk of their time just doing that kind of stuff for state and federal reporting.

Hunter: Wow.

Stoakes: That's a crazy use of tax dollars.

Hunter: It is. [laughs]

Stoakes: So from that respect you know I see more negative than positive. And the other thing about the current federal reform, you know the No Child Left Behind which was originally the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and they reauthorize it every so often and the latest iteration has been No Child Left Behind. Okay. I don't like the fact that the Secretary of Education, Ernie Duncan, and I don't care if it was a Republican in that slot, has the authority to make lots of modifications, waivers,

without having that vetted through Congress. So basically, whichever political party is in power can really drive their agenda through the schools of the country without having some compromises put in place.

Hunter: Mhm.

Stoakes: You know. So for example right now we have the whole idea of teacher evaluation based on test scores that's coming from the Feds. Now the only way you can be eligible for some of the big federal grants—I just finished up reviewing grants, latish round of race to the top grants, ninety-five million dollars. If you don't opt in to that system as a state you're not eligible to apply for the money.

Hunter: Right.

Stoakes: So Iowa and Grinnell were completely because philosophically we don't agree with that approach which I'm good with.

Hunter: Yeah me too.

Stoakes: We're not eligible for the federal money. Which makes states and districts winners and losers.

Hunter: Yeah well that whole metaphor of race to the top is "wait a minute, it's supposed to be everybody is going to the top!" You know [laughs]

Stoakes: Right. Yeah.

Hunter: Yeah. Yeah.

Stoakes: So right now, like I said from a federal perspective, I see more negatives for Grinnell than I do positives because of the resources it takes to fill all their requirements and then it really doesn't help us do things for kids.

Hunter: Yeah. Yeah. Measure them, that's about it. Thank you very much Dave.

Stoakes: Yeah, that was fun.

Hunter: I appreciate that.

[End]