

## Washington insider shares experiences in education, politics

Growing up and going to school in Chicago, Clare resident John “Jack” Jennings wasn’t entirely sure what his future would entail.

Jack attended the Archbishop Quigley Preparatory Seminary during his teenage years, a school administered by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago that was geared toward men considering the priesthood. After deciding this wasn’t the path for him, he studied at Loyola University Chicago, where he was involved in the Young Democrats of America. Throughout his college years, as well as his time at the Northwestern University School of Law, he networked with congressmen and also served as a precinct captain in the city’s 41st ward.

At the age of 24, Jack graduated with a law degree, and he didn’t know what he was going to do. So when then-Congressman Roman Pucinski offered Jack a job as subcommittee staff director for the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Education and Labor, he agreed.

“It was not pre-planned,” he says. “Like for many people, it was happenstance.”

So the day after he was sworn into the bar, in 1967, he headed to Washington, D.C. And that was the beginning of a 50-plus-year career in politics and education policy.

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### Working on Capitol Hill

Over the course of 27 years, Jack advanced from a subcommittee staff director to general counsel for the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Education and Labor. He dealt with three different committee chairmen, set up hearings, drafted legislation and led negotiations. He helped to expand funding for the schools, to improve education opportunities for children with disabilities and to forbid discrimination in education against females through Title IX.

“I never liked politics just for the mechanics of it,” Jack says. “I liked it because I could do something to help people. In Congress, I was handling bills that were helping people to help themselves by getting more education.”

Early on, Jack learned the importance of bipartisanship in getting bills passed, and he refused to hold meetings unless both Democrats and Republicans were present. He came to understand that alliances change, as do people’s opinions. He also realized all knowledge doesn’t exist in one party, and no group possesses all truth.

“I went from being a very partisan Democrat when I first went to Washington to believing that a bipartisan approach was far preferable,” Jack says. “The broader the coalition you create with people with all types of views, the stronger the legislation will be.”

Of course, bipartisanship wasn’t always possible. During Jack’s 27 years on Capitol Hill, there were times when bipartisanship simply wasn’t on the table. Still, there were far more major successes than losses.



Jack Jennings with late Congressman Carl D. Perkins and key aide Bill Gaul.

“No major education bill went through that I wasn’t at the table negotiating,” Jack says. “And in my 27 years there, we didn’t lose any major bill that we sponsored.”

### Founding a think tank

By the end of 1994, Jack was ready to move on from Congress. He fielded job offers from law firms, universities and other organizations, but he decided instead he wanted to launch his own think tank.

“I had always been bothered that people couldn’t agree on basic facts,” Jack says.

And so the Center on Education Policy was born in 1995, a nonpartisan, nonprofit education research organization. It was tough going from the start, as both the budget and the staff were quite small.

Even so, Jack made it his mission to produce objective, fact-based reports. Since his staff had extensive experience in Washington, they were well aware of the education issues that could arise and were poised to conduct thorough and accurate research.

“Half of something is producing a good product,” Jack says. “The other half is selling it, and you can’t do one without the other.”

So promote their reports they did. The center worked with the likes of The New York Times, the Washington Post and the Associated Press to get information out, and many of the reports issued then proved quite influential in the discussion around education.

After former U.S. President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act passed, the center set out to explore its progress in the first year by surveying all 50 states and dozens of local school districts about its implementation. The research was released within a year of the law being signed.

“I knew that would be a blockbuster,” Jack says. “And it established our reputation of being fast, accurate and relevant.”

Despite their commitment to truthful, unbiased work, however, Jack and his team realized that leaders would use the reports to further their own ends. An ironic instance involved later No Child Left Behind research. One such report produced by the center found that mandatory testing in reading and math as required by the law caused other subjects to be slighted. Another demonstrated that student scores were increasing on state tests, but not as much on national tests.

“Both were accurate, but President Bush took the latter and said it showed success, and his Secretary of Education took the former and said the results were a bunch of malarkey,” Jack says. “We could not stop



Jack Jennings with former President Jimmy Carter.

people from using our reports for their own purposes, but even that brought additional attention to our research.”

After Jack retired in 2012, the Center on Education Policy became associated with George Washington University, which helps it to raise money. In 2015, the Harvard Education Press published Jack’s book, *Presidents, Congress and the Public Schools*. This summer, Harvard and the University of Tokyo will release a Japanese translation of that book with a new chapter updating the issues, and in September, the Kappan magazine will publish this new

chapter in English.

In August 2017, Jack returned to Chicago, where he now lives at The Clare with his husband, Steve Molinari. He is less and less involved in politics and education policy, though he does write the occasional article and takes to Twitter to offer commentary on current issues.

“The problem now for the country is, how do you improve education for everybody?” Jack says. “It’s very hard to do in a country like this, where everything is so localized.”



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