Michael Aron: It's the morning of September 13th, 2010. I'm Q of NJN News. We're at the Eagleton Institute at Rutgers for the Rutgers Program on the Governor, the Thomas H. Kean Archive. This morning we're going to talk to Saul Cooperman. Saul was Tom Kean's Education Commissioner through two terms. He had been in education in New Jersey in a number of different school districts when Governor Kean plucked him out and installed him as Commissioner in the spring of 1982. And he and Tom Kean achieved a number of education reforms that we're going to talk about this morning. Good Morning, Saul, good to see you.

Saul Cooperman: Michael.

Q: How did you come to join the Kean Administration?

Saul Cooperman: I got a call, which surprised the heck out of me because I wasn't involved in politics and I didn't know Tom Kean. So he didn't call. One of his people called and said, "We'd like to interview you," and that's how it started.

Q: What were you doing at the time?

Saul Cooperman: I was Superintendent in Madison.

Q: You're a native New Jerseyan?

Saul Cooperman: All the way.

Q: Born in Newark?

Saul Cooperman: Born in Newark, raised in West Orange and my master's and doctorate were from Rutgers.

Q: And then you went right into teaching, or administering schools?

Saul Cooperman: Yeah, teaching for four years, high school principal for four and then superintendent in two districts, 13 years total.
Q: Madison and?

Saul Cooperman: Well, it was actually Montgomery Township near Princeton and then Madison.

Q: And had you been interested in state politics?

Saul Cooperman: No.

Q: No?

Saul Cooperman: No. I was not involved. In the Superintendent's Association I basically did curriculum work and got involved in policy issues, and I didn't hold any position in politics. I was not an officer or anything.

Q: So how did they find you?

Saul Cooperman: I have no idea. I really don't.

Q: Do you remember who called?

Saul Cooperman: It might have been Daggett, but I'm not sure. I'm not sure.

Q: And how did you receive this inquiry?

Saul Cooperman: Surprise, but I thought, "What a great opportunity." And I thought all appointments were going to be made by close political associates. And since I didn't know Kean I thought, "I'm going to get an interview, I'm going to tell him everything I believe, nothing to lose." And we went to some abandoned building. It was very secretive. And Cary Edwards was there, and Chris, Gary Stein, and I remember a close friend of Tom Kean’s, who is a Catholic priest, and I can't remember his name, but he was there too. And so it was eerie because in this deserted building they interviewed me for about an hour and a half.

Q: Was Kean there?
Saul Cooperman: No. He was not there. He was not there.

Q: Presumably they liked you because did you ever sit with the Governor before he named you?

Saul Cooperman: Yeah. There was one interview I had before, and I met with him and I thought the interview was very good. And I came home and told my wife. I said, "This could get serious," because I thought it was all fun and games. And then he picked someone else. He picked a guy by the name of Ron Lewis who I thought was a great appointment. And so I didn't know was I the second choice, was I the fourth choice or anything, but then Lewis was accused of plagiarism, and then I got the call from Kean.

Q: So Lewis was named and he was to be the Commissioner. Did he even start work in Trenton do you know?

Saul Cooperman: No. No.

Q: Was he from Pennsylvania?

Saul Cooperman: I don't know if he was from Pennsylvania. I know he was the superintendent of Plainfield.

Q: Plainfield.

Saul Cooperman: And he was, from my point of view, although I didn't know Ron I thought it was a good choice. I had lived in Plainfield, so I knew the problems of Plainfield. I knew some of the things he had done, but the plagiarism came out within a couple of days after he was nominated.

Q: So presumably you were the number two...

Saul Cooperman: Yeah, right.

Q: ...choice originally, right?

Saul Cooperman: That's correct, yeah.
Q: You said you thought this was a good opportunity to at least share with the Governor your ideas about education. What were your ideas back then about education? What message did you want to send to this relatively new governor?

Saul Cooperman: Well, the most important meeting I ever had with Tom Kean was the first. I had been nominated, but I had not officially been appointed, and he wanted to see me. So I came down there and I had read everything that he had written on education. I just went to all the newspapers and read anything he had. I was my own clip service. And so when I met with him I said, "Governor," and I didn't know him to call him Tom, so, "Governor, you've talked a lot about excellence. I see the word all the time, excellence. We've got to restore excellence in education. What do you mean by excellence?" And he smiled that gapped-tooth smile and he said, "Why do you think I'm hiring you?" So I knew when to shut up, and I said, "I'll be back in two weeks with some ideas." And I came back in two weeks and basically what I outlined was our first three or four years. And I said to him that, "Teachers are the core, and if you've got good teachers you're going to have a better education system and kids are going to learn." And he was interested in that, and I knew that he was a teacher so I had a receptive audience. And I said, "First of all we've got to recruit teachers. You've got to get them here," and I explained what the Alternate Route was. I didn't have a name for it then, but I told him what it was. And I said, "And we've got to hire three or four people and we've got to be very aggressive. Rather than saying, 'Teachers will love New Jersey,' we've got to go out from Maine to maybe Washington, D.C. and we've got to recruit teachers. And once we get them in we've got to pay them well, and then we've got to develop teachers." And that became, then, The Academy for Teaching. "And we've got to challenge them," and that became a grant program with replication. And I asked him if he would want to attack seniority, which was a pet of mine. Teachers have to be laid off they're laid off by seniority not by competence. And then finally there was a recognition program to recognize great teachers. And that was the whole deal from recruitment to recognition and a lot of in between. And he bought it all. He said, "That's really good," and he said, "Can you do it," and I said, "Yes," and that was our first meeting. I never forgot that.

Q: How long did it take to do all that?

Saul Cooperman: It took about four years. That was a lot of the first term. There were other things, but the Alternate Route was a Donnybrook because that was going to challenge all of the teacher education. They had a monopoly on who becomes a teacher and so people were flying in from all over the United States to say what a bum I was and what an ingrate I was because I got my master's and doctorate in education. In retrospect it was a fun time. At the time it was not so much fun.

Q: Was the Alternate Route successful?

Saul Cooperman: Oh yeah. We had independent evaluations. We got benefits that we didn't even think we were going to have. Out of 26 majors that the colleges give for teaching certification in all but one the
alternate route scored much higher on teacher exams. The only one they didn't was vocational education and those are very small numbers of kids that are addressed.

Q: I'm not sure I understand the point you just made.

Saul Cooperman: Okay.

Q: Of 26 majors in a college education program?

Saul Cooperman: Yes.

Q: Say it again.

Saul Cooperman: Okay. In New Jersey when we take all of our teacher training institutions there are 26, or there were 26 majors then, english, language, social studies, mathematics and so on. There are 26 areas you can be certified in, and the alternate route scored higher in 25 out of 26. We were able to tap people who wanted to teach, but didn't want to quit their jobs and then go back to a teacher training institute. So we could get people from your alma mater, Princeton. We could get them from mine, Lafayette, and we did because we recruited. One of the benefits is we had something like, I think, 3 or 4 percent minority teachers coming out of our teacher training institutes and that doubled when we had the alternate route, and we didn't even really think that that was going to happen, but it did. So it was a very successful program and endures to this day, and almost every other state has copied it.

Q: Were we first?

Saul Cooperman: We were first, oh yeah, first.

Q: I remember doing stories on the alternate route. I remember the Dodge Foundation being active in pushing that.

Saul Cooperman: Yes. Yes.

Q: Was it hard to get it through the legislature?
Saul Cooperman: Oh god, yes. After we announced it, well, almost all of the Assembly were against it, and we had to peel people off one after the other, after the other. And finally the breakthrough was when John Rocco and Joe Doria came to smoke the peace pipe and then we knew we had won.

Q: Rocco was a Republican, and he was the Chairman of the Assembly Education Committee at one point in time.

Saul Cooperman: Good memory.

Q: Doria was a Democrat and would be a leader. I don't know if he was just a leader at-- oh, I guess he also was on the Education Committee.

Saul Cooperman: That's right. That's right.

Q: So they were key in getting this through?

Saul Cooperman: Yes. Yes, and not blocking it and letting it go through the way we wanted it because, as you know, people will say to your face, "Oh, we're for it. That's really great," and then you get into amend, amend, amend and then a cow becomes a horse, becomes a goat. So we were able to get it through as we wanted it, and Joe and John, after fighting it for a long time, they came on our side.

Q: Who was opposing it? Who was the strongest opposition?

Saul Cooperman: Schools of Education.

Q: Trenton State College?

Saul Cooperman: Yes.

Q: Who else?

Saul Cooperman: Everyone, everyone in New Jersey, everyone.

Q: Rutgers?

Eagleton Institute of Politics
Saul Cooperman: Rutgers was against it.

Q: The Rutgers Program in Education?

Saul Cooperman: Oh yeah, they were really against it. In fact, this is a fun story now. A couple of people told me that someone had mentioned me for a distinguished alumni award and the education people knocked it down and finally said, "Cooperman, we don't want him." In fact there's a story. This may not be on the tape in the final analysis, but it reminds me when I was asked to be in Pi Delta Kappa, which is an honorary society, education society, and at that time to be in you had to do one of two things. You had to have an original idea, or you had to take someone's dissertation and say, "Is it applicable today." Well, I had this idea. This was back in '69 or '70 and I had the idea for the alternate route, so I wrote it down. And I can remember, I was a high school principal at the time, and the guy who was the superintendent in Belvidere called me into his office, and there were tears in his eyes. And I thought, "Oh my god, someone's died in his family." And he said, Saul, I am so, so sorry." And I said, "What happened, Mr. Billette [ph?]" And he said, "Well, as you know there were 20 people from New Jersey nominated to be in Phi Delta Kappa and 19 got in. You didn't." And it was because I had-- this is my political smarts. I was dumb, really dumb. I had recommended to education professors that they no longer have the monopoly on the certification of teachers, that we do the alternate route. That was in '69, '70, so.

Q: Had you published that idea somewhere?

Saul Cooperman: No. I just had the idea. I wrote about it then, and I didn't get into Phi Delta Kappa.

Q: The program, Teach for America, recruits people from other avenues of life to go into inner cities and become schoolteachers. Was that based on your idea?

Saul Cooperman: You'd have to ask Wendy, Wendy Kopp. She was attending Princeton at the time that the alternate route came out, and I had started a nonprofit board, and Wendy was on the board. And so I asked her that question. I said, "Hey, Wendy, did you copy our stuff for Teach for America?" And she said, "Well, it was kind of influential, but," she said, "it was my own idea," and so I take it for that. That's okay.

Q: So to recruit better teachers you pushed the Alternate Route, but you also mentioned pay. I well remember a big fight over minimum pay for teachers back in the '80s. I think the minimum you wanted was $17,500, is that...
Saul Cooperman: Up one, Michael.

Q: Eighteen-thousand dollars?

Saul Cooperman: Eighteen-five.

Q: Eighteen-five.

Saul Cooperman: Yeah.

Q: What were teachers being paid back then, as low as what?

Saul Cooperman: In the southern part of the state, and I cherry picked the counties, but in some of the counties, Gloucester, Cape May and so forth it was twelve-five. And I might add that when we started to discussing this very seriously I can remember one time that I was asked to come to a meeting and Gary, and Chris, and Cary, and everyone was there with Tom Kean, and we were each to express our viewpoints. And they all expressed a viewpoint that this was a dumb idea, and this would raise taxes, and it would also have an inertial effect on all salaries because if the beginning teachers made eighteen-five the teachers who were making sixteen would want nineteen or nineteen-five. And I said, "Absolutely, that's the method to the madness. Raise all salaries." I said, "You got it." And they said, "Stupid idea, Cooperman." And Kean was listening and finally he said, "We're going with Saul's idea." And so it was like five to one against me, but I got the one vote that counted.

Q: Why do you think that was?

Saul Cooperman: I really think-- I like Tom Kean very much, and I think he's a smart guy, and I think ideas mean something to him, and I think good public policy means something to him. And so he saw that this was part of a plan. It was a mosaic. You bring teacher in and you don't pay them well then why should they come in, but if you bring them in and say New Jersey has a beginning salary of eighteen-five and then it goes up from there you've taken the pay issue and you've made us really competitive in that with our neighboring states just when it's due economically and corporate wise and so forth. So I just think Kean was properly motivated. He wanted to do the right thing. I think it's as simple as that.

Q: You say that the advisors predominately were opposed to it for political reasons. Was it controversial once you tried to get it through the legislature?
Saul Cooperman: Yes, because mayors saw this as raising their taxes. It would. The only people that were really for it, and couldn't figure me out on that, because first came the alternate route then I was a bum to the teacher's union, now I was the front guy on raising eighteen-five and going all around the state. And they said, "Well, maybe Cooperman's not a putz after all."

Q: What were your relations with-- let's start with the NJEA? What kind of relationship did you have with the NJEA?

Saul Cooperman: I would say respectful, although we tangled a lot. We just didn't agree. I saw the distinction between teachers, who for reasons I gave before, I think are the absolute heart of education. If you don't have good teachers everything else goes down the drain. So a lot of what the Kean Administration did was focus on teachers, respecting them, enhancing them, paying them, developing them, so forth, but the union, I had to tangle with them. I tangled with them on certification, even on the recognition. We held it in Jadwin Gym, and we wanted to do a really wonderful thing for teachers and bring them down. And we had white linen tablecloths. We had at that time; Bill Bennett was our first speaker. The second speaker was the head of ETS Greg Adrig, so we wanted to make it a really great day, but the union was against it. I even said to the head of the union at the time...

Q: Who was that?

Saul Cooperman: Edie Fulton. And I said to Edie, "How can you be against this? We're recognizing teachers. It's a big deal." And she said, "You're only recognizing one teacher per school, therefore you're disrespecting all other teachers." And I thought, "This is the ultimate bull." I said, "Edie, this is crazy. We can't recognize every teacher. We want to say this teacher is great, and here's why they're great, and they are representative of teachers, and then-- this is funny you mentioned that. There was a guy, remember Marco Lacatena?

Q: I remember the name, yes.

Saul Cooperman: Remember the name? Oh man, this was...

Q: Who was he with?

Saul Cooperman: He was with the Teacher's Union at the college level, who also had it in for me because of the Alternate Route. But we were going to hold this thing at Jadwin Gym, and we had a nice dinner planned and so forth. And one of my colleagues came to me and said, "Hey, Saul, we got a big problem." I said, "What's a big problem?" He said, "Marco Lacatena has gotten the service workers, the
cooks to say they won't cook tomorrow." Now we're having hundreds of teachers down. We've got Bill Bennett flying in from Washington. Kean's going to speak and I'm going to be the introduction guy, and we've got all these teachers and we're going to have no food. So Marco said, "You're going to have to cancel this. You can't do this." And I sat there and what are we going to do? And do you know Hoagie Haven, Michael?

Q: Yeah, at Nassau Street in Princeton.

Saul Cooperman: On Nassau Street, yes. And so I sent a guy right down because my son loved Hoagie Haven. We lived in Rocky Hill at the time. And I said, "Go down to Hoagie Haven and see if they can make like 200 Hoagies tomorrow, tuna fish, ham, turkey, can they do it?" And they said, "Yes," they'll do it. And I said, "Okay." I called Marco up. I said, "Marco," I said, "We are going to hold it. We are going to have hoagies from Hoagie Haven and I'm going to get up there and I'm going to say the reason you're having hoagies is because Marco Lacatena, head of the AFT, told the cooks not to cook for you." He said, "You wouldn't do that would you, Saul?" I said, "You damn right I will." And so the cooks cooked and we had a nice thing.

Q: The only loser there was Hoagie Haven.

Saul Cooperman: Yeah, Hoagie Haven lost, right?

Q: Well, how does a school decide which teacher among all teachers should be singled out for recognition?

Saul Cooperman: We asked them to do that. We gave them some criteria that we thought would be appropriate, and that the kids learned, that would be important, that the teacher had the respect of colleagues, that the teacher involved in extra time after school, but we left it up to them. We said that they could select the teacher and they all did, which was the funny thing. So the teachers didn't see any problem in choosing a teacher. The union saw a problem.

Q: Was that something that you had to get through the legislature, or could you do that administratively?

Saul Cooperman: Administratively, yeah.

Q: So that was not controversial except within the communities you've just described, the NJEA, the AFT, right?
Saul Cooperman: No one else really cared.

Q: You talked about a Teacher Academy. What was that?

Saul Cooperman: That was a big deal. We felt that, and I said it, which further ticked off the colleges, that advancement on the salary guide was made, and still is, by credits accumulated, so that I know teachers in this state very, very well that will take a course in computers. There may be absolutely no transfer between their course in computers that they took and children learning, and there hasn't been, to my knowledge, ever a correlation between courses the teacher's take and the ability to teach better in the classroom. If this is so, then you have to ask the question, why are we paying all this money? Because we not only reimburse teachers to take courses at the college, but then we reimburse them by going up on the salary guide. Our point was what makes a teacher better. What makes a teacher better; a very simple question. And if we got the answer to that we would find out who is doing the great research in the universities and have they made it practical. So between the researcher in the university and the teacher in the classroom there can be a compatibility and the student will profit. And that's what we try to do in the Academy. We said we'd bring teachers down, and the teachers would learn new teaching skills to better help students learn. This was fought by the NJEA because they had their own training. This was fought by the colleges. In fact, they started a rumor. You may remember this one. They said I was going to be the Chancellor of the University of Florida, and Cooperman is leaving New Jersey in a lurch. I had a sister in Florida and I would go down every year to see my sister and an aging uncle and aunt, and they had somehow found out about this, and they said I was going to leave New Jersey. So there were a lot of dirty tricks played in this particular area. And we wanted this to be a freebie. By that I mean that the schools would pay for the teachers to come down to the Academy, but this was fought out in the legislature, and we only got half a loaf. We got half of our expenses from the school districts. I'm sorry. Half of it was going to come from the legislature. The others the teachers had to pay for themselves. And the loyal opposition felt that the teachers wouldn't pay, and they did, and they came down. And we had, for every course we gave we had to turn people away which, of course, delighted us because it was a big hit. And one time I said to Bob Braun, and you remember Braun, and I said, "Bob..."

Q: He covered education for the Star-Ledger.

Saul Cooperman: Yep, and I said, "Bob, why don't you write about the Academy?" I said, "This is really good stuff. You can come down and see it." And I wanted a building like Eagleton. I wanted a building like this, and we ended up, because we didn't have the money, in an industrial park in Edison. And, again, the loyal opposition said, "Ha, ha, Cooperman wanted a nice old building by a lake with big trees and he got an industrial park." And they came to the industrial park, and so that was, I thought, one of the big successes. Bob wouldn't write about it because he said, "What's to write about? There's no controversy." He never wrote about it.
Q: He never wrote about it?

**Saul Cooperman:** I pestered him for eight years and he wouldn't write about it.

Q: I guess that's why I don't know a whole lot about it. Who taught the classes?

**Saul Cooperman:** Pardon?

Q: Who taught the teachers? They came to an Academy to learn new teaching methods. Who taught them?

**Saul Cooperman:** Oh, I had a person that I worked with in Madison. Her name was Sybil Nadel. And my original thing was not to be a superintendent, was to be a director of curriculum, but when I was at Rutgers for my doctorate I couldn't get a job as director of curriculum. And all the people at Rutgers said, "You've got to be a superintendent. You've got to be a superintendent." And finally I had three kids, wife, no job, my dream of director of curriculum was lost, I had to become superintendent. But my heart was always in, how do children learn? And so I had hired Sybil who was one smart cookie. And she was compatible with me of reading stuff of how do children learn, how do their brains work, how should teachers teach. And so I convinced her to come down to Trenton and be the head of the Academy. She, then, hired likeminded people who were very, very capable. She hired teachers in this state. All of the instructors were teachers from this state. <audio glitch> We started out with one course, three people. One guy's name was Ron Castaldo and I can't remember the third, but we had three people, and near the end we had something like 11 or 12 people and we were teaching five or six courses. And that's the way it happened.

Q: Does it survive, the Academy?

**Saul Cooperman:** No

Q: What happened?

**Saul Cooperman:** What happened under the Florio Administration, they said they didn't have money, and so they cut the funding, and so it died.

Q: You mentioned challenge grants. What were challenge grants?
Saul Cooperman: We called them Maxi Grants. We said we'd give $10,000 dollars. That was a lot of money in those days to a teacher who had a great idea. And they had to come before a board of people, other teachers, administrators, board members who would choose the grants, and maybe we'd choose ten grants a year, $100,000 bucks. And then we'd have them evaluated by a third party. So let's say you won a grant and some other people won a grant. And let's say at the end of the year your grant got the results you said it would get. We would then say, "Okay, Michael, you now are going to have replication responsibilities." And the teachers loved this because now the thing that they believed in all their life, but they couldn't take it beyond their classroom, now it was being backed by the state. Now the state was publicizing it. Then we would bring them to the Academy and we would say, "Here is Q, and he's got this idea and it's been proven and it's been evaluated. Now, if you want to replicate it we'll give you $5,000 dollars and you can replicate." So that's what it was. And, of course, the teachers loved it because they could do real research, they could get results, and others could profit by what they did. So it was a little idea, but it was a pretty good idea.

Q: So there were teachers who hit the jackpot of $10,000 dollars during the Kean Administration?

Saul Cooperman: Yeah.

Q: And the NJEA didn't fight that one?

Saul Cooperman: No. They didn't fight that.

Q: You say that your interest was in curriculum.

Saul Cooperman: Yes.

Q: And how kids learn. Where did that come from? When was that interest born in you?

Saul Cooperman: I never thought I'd be a teacher, and when I decided to become a teacher I found you discover things about yourself. And I was teaching economics, history and sociology.

Q: Where?

Saul Cooperman: In North Plainfield High School. And I tried to find out what's the best way to teach. And one of the things I did in economics is I was teaching monopolistic competition, and the way I found that most people taught it, and I talked to other teachers in the school, is they would say, "Well, here's the
Sherman Antitrust Act, and this, this, this, and memorize it. You get it on a test. Here's the Lochner Act, Memorize that. You get in on a test. And so what I did was I wrote to Procter & Gamble-- and they were about to take over Folgers Coffee-- and I asked them what was their reason for taking over Folgers Coffee? And they told me that they thought that this would be good for the country and so forth. And it was nice, they wrote me a letter back. And then I told the kids, I said, "I'm going to put you in groups and- -"; maybe five or six, I don't remember. And I said, "Here's your assignment. You have to decide whether Procter & Gamble has a right to take over Folgers, or is it monopolistic competition and they are creating a monopoly, and they're going to force out other coffee people simply because they got the power of Procter & Gamble?" And I was amazed. Because here I was, I was not talking; I was just standing there, and these kids were working, and the bell rang and they were still working. And I said, "Oh man, I've just learned something here." And so I started to try to get an interest in curriculum and what would work, what wouldn't work. How do kids learn? How do they not learn? So I learned something about myself that--

Q: How old were you at the time?

Saul Cooperman: I was 25. I'd just come out of the Navy.

Q: What did you learn about yourself?

Saul Cooperman: I learned that I really like kids, that I really like teaching, and that I guess I heard a different drummer than most teachers. And I found out that I didn't have to talk all the time; that if I challenged them, then I could use case study a lot. And I would do that and use a lot of case study, which others weren't using. It was a lot of preparation and a lot of work but the kids seemed to like it. So I learned something about myself, that I didn't have to always be the center of attention to get the kids to learn.

Q: That's interesting. Do you think most teachers think they have to be the center of attention?

Saul Cooperman: Yes. And that's not a criticism. It's that they teach the way they were taught. So it becomes a self-perpetuating thing. I see my grandson when he plays Little League and he goes in the batter's box and he puts his hand out like this. And I said, "Hey Tim, who the heck you think you are, Derek Jeter?" And he said, "Well yeah." So they see Jeter-- what is it?-- "Time out, time out"; and he puts his hand up. So the little kids are all doing this. And in basketball, because Larry Bird used to go-- a stupid habit-- he'd put his hand on his- like this, and he'd lick and go on. So they do what they see that their heroes have done. And teachers tend to teach like their heroes have done. So that when-- we've all been in school. No matter, we've all been in school. And we see teachers teach, and we have a favorite
teacher. And so if we become teachers, we try to emulate what we thought that teacher was. So I think yes, most teachers talk a lot. They could talk less. But that's why curriculum is important.

Q: When you put the $18,500.00 floor in, what do you think the average teacher's salary was at that time? Thirty-thousand, thirty-five? What were teachers making generally in New Jersey in those days?

Saul Cooperman: I don't have that at the tip of my tongue. I don't know. I know what the beginning salary was. As I said, it was about $12,000 and--

Q: In the Deep South. How about in the North Jersey?

Saul Cooperman: In the Deep South.

Q: How about in North Jersey, what was--

Saul Cooperman: They were higher.

Q: Were they making $18,500 in suburban northern New Jersey?

Saul Cooperman: I can give you one example, because of my daughter. My daughter was a teacher in Hillsborough; and thank God she got her job before I got <audio cuts out>. Because they said, "What, did your father get you your job?" And she said, "I was teaching three years before my father got his job." But she came to me after the $18,500 was announced, and she was half-kidding, and she said, "Hey dad, you're going to have a problem." I said, "What's the problem honey?" And she said, "I'm making $16,500 or $17." And she said, "Now the beginning teachers are making that. Am I still going to have to make that?" And I said, "Good question Suzanne. Your union will take care of that, I guarantee you." Which they did.

Q: So when you said earlier that that would bump all salaries up, that's what it did.

Saul Cooperman: Yes it did.

Q: And that was fine with you.

Saul Cooperman: Yes.
Q: That was what you wanted.

**Saul Cooperman:** Yes. And, of course, Tom Kean knew that. He's a very smart dude. So he grasped that right away. So he knew that what he was going to do, if he accepted that, is there was going to be--and we had all the stats and we tried to run them out, of what the projections were and what the union would do and what the cost would be and what the tax rates would be. So I presented that all to him, so that it was all clear. Because I never wanted him to step on a rake. I wanted him to know that if I recommended something, there were consequences. And he bought it.

Q: Twenty-five years later we're in a climate where there's a lot of sentiment in this state that the education establishment sucks up too much money. What's your view on that?

**Saul Cooperman:** I agree. I was on one side, back in 1982, and now I think that we do pay a great deal of money, and we've got to have some sort of accountability and progress for that money. And I have no problem at all with teachers making $100,000.00. But I want to make sure that they are great teachers. I don't want it impossible to remove a teacher who is less than competent. And as I would not have a teacher railroaded by some administrator who just has it in for a teacher, on the other hand I don't want a teacher who has lost his or her joy of life and abilities with children making $100,000.00. So I think the people who talk about removing incompetence are on the right road. But then you have to say, "What is incompetence? How do you define incompetence? Who is going to decide on incompetence? What is their training? What is the ability of the teacher to push back against that administrator that wants them?" So there's got to be due process. It's got to be very, very careful. But I think if you're going to pay $100,000.00, you got to get something for it.

Q: Did you fight tenure, the tenure battle, in your terms; either teacher tenure or superintendent tenure or principal tenure? Did you take those on?

**Saul Cooperman:** All of the above. When it came time for the whole idea of the takeover, the bankruptcy of districts, the whole idea there was to remove the superintendent, to remove the director of curriculum, to remove the person who controlled the money, and to remove the person who controlled the personnel. Because in some of our urban areas-- and we proved in a court of law beyond any doubt, said the judge, that in Jersey City Tony Cucci had his man who was appointing his friends as director of personnel. His son--

Q: Tony Cucci was the mayor of Jersey City.

**Saul Cooperman:** He was the mayor of Jersey City. He appointed the director of personnel. He appointed his son-in-law, Arsenio Silvestri, who was the business administrator. Now by removing those
people, we were removing tenured people. We also wanted it to come down to principals. We wanted to be able, with cause, which would be proven in a court of law, we wanted to remove principals. The NJEA won that one because they saw that coming too close to teachers. So they fought us on removing tenure from principals. And as a sidebar story on this one, which I remember, one of my guys said, "You got to see Carmen Orechio on this particular bill."

**Q:** Carmen Orechio was the senator from Essex County who was Senate President at a certain point in time. Was he Senate President at the time of this story?

**Saul Cooperman:** Yes, yes. And he's from Nutley. You remember? He was wonderful. And Carmen was the Senate President. And so my guy Bob Swisssler said, "You got to see Carmen in Nutley." And I said, "I don't want to go up there. Let me-- I'll see him when he comes down. Why you want me to see him in his office?" And he said, "No, no, it's very important you go up and see Carmen in his office." So I went up and saw Carmen in his office, and I said, "Carmen, this bill, this takeover bill, is good for kids." And I said, "It really is." And I said, "I can take five minutes or five hours and go over anything you want. "Saul, I know it's good for kids." And he said, "It's a good bill." And I said, "Great." And I stuck out my hand and I said, "Thanks for your vote Carmen." And he said, "I didn't say I'd vote for it." Political lesson learned by Cooperman. And I said, "What do you mean you're not going to vote for it?" And he said, "Well I'm in Nutley" and he said, "It's a tough district." And he said, "I'll tell you what. Would you give me 10 young people who will come and work for one week before the election and knock on doors and say, 'Carmen Orechio is a friend of mine and he's a really good guy'?" And I said, "Carmen, I can't do that. You know I can't do that." And he said, "The NJEA can." And he said, "Your bill is important." But he said, "There are a lot of other bills that are important." He said, "I got to get reelected." And he voted against it. I didn't get enough votes, and the tenure of principals, which I wanted to do away with-- and that was your question-- I didn't get. And then also-- and I don't know whether Tom Kean said this-- but in the second term, I went in to see him, and I said, "We've been pretty successful in what we've done." And he nodded. He knew something was coming. And I said, "There's two other issues that might be good for you to tangle with in your last term." And he said, "What are they?" And I said, "Consolidation and tenure." And he smiled, and he said, "What do you have in mind?" And I said, "Well in consolidation" I said, "I think we ought to appoint an absolute blue ribbon panel that is just untouchable; by their very names people would know that they're not in for a con, they're not in because some organization put them in. And just ask them the question, Should New Jersey consolidate districts? And if the answer is yes, how? And then take their recommendations." And he smiled and he said, "Yes. On tenure?" And he said, "What do you have in mind?" And I said, "We do away with teacher tenure and we give them five-year contracts which are renewable, and then we have a system put in that no teacher can ever be removed because of a capricious or arbitrary action by an administrator. I would defend that teacher to the death. But there's got to be clear criteria; the criteria must be implemented by at least two administrators who have been trained. And if you have that, then after a five-year contract you can remove a teacher." And he said no. And it was the first time he said no to me. But he said, "No, no. No to the consolidation and no." And he told me a story. And he asked him about this like two years ago. And he said, "I don't quite remember that." The story was this. He said,
"Saul, remember when we were kids?" Because we're the same age. He said, "Remember when we were kids and we used to see cowboys and Indians, and the cowboys had the wagons together and the Indians are riding around shooting arrows at the cowboys?" I said, "Yeah." And he said, "We're the cowboys." And he said, "Lots of people shooting arrows. How many arrows do you want coming in?" And I said, "Well I think this is good" and all of this. And he said, "No." He said, "We got too much going on now." And he said, "If we do this, we could lose it all." And he said, "Not taking on those two issues."

Q: And what do you think about that today?

Saul Cooperman: I think he was wrong. But he's the governor, and I wasn't. So until this time, I've never publicly said anything about it.

Q: So you didn't take on teacher tenure. You didn't take on principal tenure. Did you take on superintendent tenure?

Saul Cooperman: Only in the districts where it was takeover. And of course the only district, when I was around, was Jersey City, on takeover, and we took the tenure away from that superintendent. So that was-- that obviously was a precedent, that it could be taken away. But then my term ended and I didn't continue under Florio.

Q: Because I think at some point superintendent tenure was taken away, but it was not on your watch.

Saul Cooperman: That's correct.

Q: It was later.

Saul Cooperman: That's correct.

Q: The takeover battle was very big in the second term, wasn't it?

Saul Cooperman: Yes.

Q: Explain what it was you were after with the takeover law.
Saul Cooperman: I read business magazines, and I can remember the day. I was sitting in my backyard reading *Fortune*, and I was reading about a Chapter 11, of a takeover removing the board, removing the CEO, putting it under new leadership and trying to turn it around. And I remember that under the Constitution it says every child has the opportunity for thorough and efficient education. And others will evaluate my job and what I tried to do. But I had felt that we had a monitoring system, and there were some districts, mainly urban districts, that could not get out of the batter's box. In other words, one of the things you had to do was you had to have a curriculum, you had to have a written curriculum for the kids. And that's not the hardest thing in the world to do. You can hire people who are competent to have curriculum from kindergarten through 12th Grade. So there were many urban districts that didn't even have the basics done. And we had this monitoring, and they were in Level 1, and they'd fail that, and they'd go into Level 2. And it was like spinning your tires. After Level 2 if they didn't succeed, we would tell them, "You're bad boys." And then we would say, "Here's opportunities. We're holding these workshops" or "Why don't you go to this district and see how they've done it?" But if they didn't pay any attention to us, we had no real power. So I thought why don't we institute a Chapter 11 in schools? And I presented that to the governor, and I had it all thought out and--

Q: Do you remember what year, or how far into the eight-year term?

Saul Cooperman: About the end of '86, beginning of '87.

Q: Right. It was a second term issue.

Saul Cooperman: Oh yes absolutely, absolutely. And I think the court case was in '88. And there were people-- once we came out with this, then people criticized us, but mainly me. And I think part of it was justified. They said, "Well since you're doing this, and this is <audio cuts out> the power of the commissioner's office. Why don't you just do it? And if you care about--" this was the toughest criticism I had-- "If you really care about kids-- you say you care about kids-- then why do you want to go through a court situation? Why don't you just do it? Do what you say you want to do; take it over, remove the superintendent, the business, the curriculum and the personnel person, and try to turn this district around?" And I thought that was a good criticism. But my point was we were under all sorts of attack: Republicans; it was a race issue, white guys, plantation politics. There were all sorts of criticisms of going after an urban district rather than trying to help the urban district. I tried to counter that by saying, "I've been here for five years and it doesn't seem-- maybe my help hasn't been good, or maybe they haven't tried to take the help that I've offered. But the bottom line is kids are not learning. Kids are dropping out at unprecedented rates, and so something has to be done. This is my answer. You got a better answer? You tell me. Otherwise this is my answer." And that's what we tried to do.
Q: Well I remember a big fight in the legislature over takeover. Now was that before you went to court against Jersey City, that you had to get— or was that simultaneous with, or did that come later? What was the sequence there, with the legislation and the court case?

Saul Cooperman: Legislation first, court second. The legislation gave us a Level 3. Level 3 said if you fail the Level 2 in monitoring, then we give you so many months to do certain things. If you don't, we come in with a very unusual team. We would come in with an accountant, a lawyer; a cop really. We would come in with very unusual people, and we would tear into this district like never before, trying to turn over every rock to see what's going on. What makes the district run? Are people hired on merit or are they hired on who you know and political connections? What is the superintendent's policy? How is a policy communicated? How are principals selected? All this sort of stuff. And a report came back to me, in this Level 3, this was all in legislation; and the battle was very, very tough. This has never been done before in the United States. So here we are saying a district, which is sacrosanct, especially in good old New Jersey, where we had at the time 610 districts. I don't know how many there are now but there were 610 districts. Each fiefdom was its own boss; local control. And so here we're challenging the whole deal. We got the legislation through. It went through. We were defeated the first time because we wanted to take tenure away from principals, if we could prove their incompetence. When we lost that battle, Kean came back again and he worked very, very hard. And there were all sorts of pressures on us, and wheeling and dealing. I remember one guy, Haines, who was a Republican, and he--

Q: From Burlington County.

Saul Cooperman: Yes.

Q: Or Essex? Burlington County, yes.

Saul Cooperman: He wanted to make a deal, and he called me on the phone and said that he would vote for it if we widened a certain highway. I don't remember the name of the highway. And I talked to Swissler. I said, "What the hell is this guy doing?" He said, "He owns land." And so he wanted the highway. So I told him I wasn't going to do it. So he said, "Why don't you call Hazel, Hazel Gluck?"

Q: She was the transportation commissioner.

Saul Cooperman: Yes. "And you tell Hazel to do it." I said, "I can't do that." And he said, "You can but you won't." And I said, "Okay, I won't do it." He voted against it.

Q: Urban Democrats, did they vote against it?
Saul Cooperman: Hell yes.

Q: Yes?

Saul Cooperman: Yes.

Q: Suburban Democrats, how did they--

Saul Cooperman: I don't remember. All I know is the second time we won the vote by a pretty good majority.

Q: It sounds a little bit like No Child Left Behind, from 20 years later. Was it similar to the idea behind the Bush, No Child Left Behind?

Saul Cooperman: Certain elements, yes, yes.

Q: Three districts were taken over under that law; Jersey City first, I think Newark second and Paterson third.

Saul Cooperman: I'm not sure the order. You might be right.

Q: I think that's it.

Saul Cooperman: But I was only there for Jersey City.

Q: Yes, Newark was a big court fight in the '90s.

Saul Cooperman: Yes.

Q: And now takeover is considered to have been only partially successful, and Jersey City has been returned to local control, and Newark has not; Newark is still a state-appointed superintendent. Paterson, I think, is still a state-appointed superintendent. What's your verdict on the program that you designed 25 years ago?
Saul Cooperman: I think what you said is fair; partially successful. The only reason I wanted to stay on as commissioner under Florio because of Jersey City. That was my only reason. Because after eight years of battering and so forth-- but after the court case, there was a period-- and you could look it up, I don't remember exactly-- there might have been five or six months when it seemed like we were doing nothing. And then people said, certain people said, "You're phony. You got the law but now you're not going to use it." These are the people trying to push me, "Use it, use it." Teddy Roosevelt, speak softly, big club. And I wasn't going to do that. I was going to make sure that I had overwhelming evidence that the district was corrupt to the core.

Q: By going to court?

Saul Cooperman: Yes. And I wanted to go to court because I wanted to prove, beyond any doubt. Rather than Saul Cooperman feels that a district is no good, I wanted to argue it in a court of law, and I wanted to win that way, and therefore people-- it would be very hard for them to say that this was Cooperman's folly, or that he's got a vendetta, or anything that they would make up. That's why we went to court. And our-- Jaynee LaVecchia, who is now on the Supreme Court, she was the assistant to Al Ramey. Jaynee was probably 26-years-old, 27-years-old. And we had these two lawyers, Ramey and LaVecchia, up against Shea/Gould. This was Shea from Shea Stadium. And these guys came in, about nine lawyers with $300.00 suits and--

Q: Representing Jersey City?

Saul Cooperman: Yes. They got a lousy school district but great lawyers. And I said to myself, "Oh God Cooperman, are we going to lose this in court?" And of course we won, and the judge said some very nice things. And we had so much evidence. I'll tell you, my guys brought in boxes. And one box would say, "Nepotism." The other box would say, "Ripping off the medical and health system." Another box would say, "Using workers to work on board members' homes." And I read each of these boxes. We had so much evidence. It was a case that we couldn't use at all of where did we lock it up real tight? So the stuff we used was we thought our best shot at winning. And even though they had good lawyers, we prevailed. And then we took over Jersey City. And I had about six months to go in the term, so it didn't work out time wise for me. And what we were able to do in six months was change all their policies; fire Franklin Williams; fire-- I forget the name of the guy who was the head of Personnel; fire Arsenio Silvestri, and make the district honest. But then time ran out for me, because that was the end of my eight years. Florio was elected and then he wanted another commissioner. So therefore I did not continue.

Q: You hinted a little while ago that you sought to stay on in the Florio Administration. Did you approach them about being the commissioner?
Saul Cooperman: No they approached me. A guy by the name of Gus Rue was working for me; I trusted Gus very much. And Gus came to me and he said he had talked to Steve Perskie, who was one of Florio's guys, and said that, "The governor, the governor-elect, would like to meet with you and talk with you about possibly continuing." And I said, "That would be great." And I had then met with Perskie, and I said, "Steve, tell the governor that if he doesn't like my ideas, I will resign; or if his direction is such that I'm not compatible with it, I will resign, and so he can get the commissioner he wants." Because I felt very strongly about that. And Perskie said, "Well wait, you're going to talk with him." And then what I found out-- it was like a month later, after Governor Florio had been in a month-- that a guy by the name of Angelo Tomasso came to me and he said, "Saul, a woman by the name of Perry Fordalucchi [ph?] is going around the state asking who would make a good commissioner?" And I said, "I can't believe this." So I called Perry, who I knew, and she started stammering and so forth. And I said, "Perry, I'm not going to embarrass you anymore. You've given me the answer." And other superintendents then called me and said they're going on. So I asked Perskie, "What the hell is going on?" And he said, "Well the governor's under pressure because he didn't like your decision in Abbott vs. Burke, and it would be very difficult for him to have you continue. But he still does want to talk with you. But he does want to interview a couple of other people for the job." And I'm usually slow to simmer, but I do have a temper, and I just said to Perskie, I said, "I'm not competing for my job." I said, "As you know, I have a contract. I've got two years to go on my contract." And I said, "You'll have my resignation." And I handed in a resignation.

Q: Were there five-year terms for commissioners in those days?

Saul Cooperman: Yes. So I was reappointed and-- under Kean. So I had either two or three years to go under Florio. So I could've stayed but that would've been meaningless.

Q: It was a Constitutional point that the education commissioner serve longer than the governor?

Saul Cooperman: Yes.

Q: Five years instead of four.

Saul Cooperman: Yes.

Q: We don't have that anymore?

Saul Cooperman: No.
Q: I think they did away with that.

Saul Cooperman: Yes.

Q: You say your position in Abbott vs. Burke caused problems for Jim Florio. We haven't talked about Abbott vs. Burke.

Saul Cooperman: Right.

Q: What role did you play in that long-running court case?

Saul Cooperman: Well it comes up-- there's a decision by an administrative law judge, and then it comes to the commissioner and winds its way up ultimately to the Supreme Court, if they hear it. And this one, of course would. So when it came down to my decision, I basically made a decision-- it's more complex than this. But I said money is important if districts don't have books. Money is important if districts don't have a science lab. And money is important if roofs are leaking. I said, "Those are money issues. But the way we should attack this is we should use our monitoring system, our inspectors, and we should find out what's wrong with the district. If it's money, we should give money. But if it's managerial incompetence, then we should deal with that; that's not money." And that in essence was my decision. The Supreme Court didn't agree. They said money was the issue.

Q: Do you remember at what point in the '80s this came to a head?

Saul Cooperman: It was first term; no, it was second term. So it was second-term Kean. I don't remember the year.

Q: And the Supreme Court said money is fundamental here.

Saul Cooperman: Yes, yes.

Q: And we've been fighting this fight for 35 years in this state.

Saul Cooperman: Right, right.

Q: And where do you stand today on this question?
Saul Cooperman: I don't want to seem stubborn but same place. I think if there's- if you've got an incompetent superintendent who is screwing it up and I think one person can make a difference. One person is so important and if you've got a capable leader they can turn things around, and if you've got a jerk they can screw it up. And so I think that sometimes it's not a money issue; it's a competence/incompetence issue. Sometimes it's a curriculum issue. Sometimes it's a training issue. Those tend to be non-money things so I think that money sure as heck is important. If children don't have eyeglasses and can't see, that's a money issue. If there's not a gym for kids or a library, that's a money issue. So I think you've got to parse it out and you can't just say it's money- everything's money.

Q: Have we thrown too much money at schools over the past couple of decades?

Saul Cooperman: I think that's ultimately what happened. It was 25 years after I made the decision, but that's where they are now and they've said money is not the only issue, there are other issues, and so that's what the boys down the road here of the Education Law Center are still fighting and bravo for them. They're good guys and they want kids to learn too. We just respectfully disagree that money is everything.

Q: The last governor, Corzine, changed the school funding formula so that even suburban districts or even affluent districts would get some of this type of aid if they had needy kids in the district. Does that make sense to you?

Saul Cooperman: Actually, years before there was a guy in Washington by the name of Chester Finn who is a real thinker. He is a guy who is many times way ahead of the crowd on educational issues and he formed a group which basically said the money should follow the child and he asked me to sign on to it, so I signed on years before Corzine made the decision. And what Chester did was he would go around the country trying to get people to buy in to this concept of money following the child so if-- Newark of course has lots of children who are in great need and if they are in need it's like inspection. I'm going to go to the doctor today and have my hearing checked and if they find out I've got a problem then they'll say, "Okay, Saul. Your options are A, B or C." Well, if we find a child who is not learning and is in a family of poverty and they've moved four times within the last year, then they're doing a check on that kid and when they find things wrong there should be remedies and remedies may take dollars and then dollars should be given to a child like that.

Q: There's a sense that American education is in crisis. Do you share that?

Saul Cooperman: It's always in crisis. We want our children to learn. Brain power is what makes countries succeed or fail, and so yeah, I'm glad that--I'm not trying to be flip--that there is crisis because if people say it's crisis they're going to pay attention and hopefully the best minds will figure things out.
Q: Do you think American schools have fallen behind their counterparts in other countries?

Saul Cooperman: In some countries especially in math and science, yes, but I think we are catching up. I think we've got capable leadership I think in Washington. I am very impressed with Arne Duncan and his plans. I think he's absolutely on the right track and I respect him and admire him.

Q: How often did you meet with Governor Kean when you were education commissioner?

Saul Cooperman: Probably once or twice a month. I don't actually remember.

Q: You had to deal with a state board of education. What was its role when you were education commissioner?

Saul Cooperman: Two roles. Role number one was regulatory so when the legislature passed a law the state board had to put it into code so they had to crank it down to the next level of practical school level, and that was a kind of minor responsibility, very tedious. The other one was if the commissioner, myself in this case, decided not to go to the legislature then the board was the one who would make the decision, and I would tend to want to go to the board rather than do unilateral action for two reasons. One, I was used to dealing with boards, and second I wanted public discussion whatever I said. I knew lots of time I could have done things myself rather than go through the board. The risk of going through the board is that they would turn me down, but that's an interesting dance because you have a board who has authority to make decisions. You also have a governor, and at times you almost play it like a violin that the governor I saw as my real boss--I'd never do anything to get him into trouble or open my mouth that he didn't know about it--yet on the other hand I would sometimes tell him, "I want to go through the board rather than go through you." One of the things we discussed was the recognition program so I didn't go through the legislature for that; I went through the board. The alternate route and the takeover, which I thought was super important, I had to go through the legislature.

Q: Was the board a strong board, a weak board, easily manipulated, defiant? How did you see it?

Saul Cooperman: I saw them as extremely bright people, had a great deal of respect for them. There were a couple of people every once in a while I felt were wheeling and dealing for their own sake, but mostly they were real solid people.

Q: Do you remember who was president of the board during your time?
Saul Cooperman: Yeah. David Brandt was president. He is a lawyer, a very, very bright guy, a very fair guy. John Klagholz was president for quite a while.

Q: He would become-- That was Leo Klagholz.

Saul Cooperman: That was Leo's brother. Yeah. Yeah. So those were the two when I was there. I'm not sure if Jim Jones was president for a year. He might have been but I- I'm not sure.

Q: It sounds from our discussion like you were an idea man. Is that what you've been in education for--

Saul Cooperman: I'd like to be thought of that, yeah. Yeah.

Q: You told me on our way in the door here this morning that you're working on an idea.

Saul Cooperman: Right.

Q: Do you have an idea?

Saul Cooperman: Yeah. Right. <laughs>

Q: Do you want to share it?

Saul Cooperman: Sure. Schools haven't changed much since we were kids and high schools really haven't changed at all. They're copycats of colleges. They have departments. They fight for turf, they fight for money, and I've had focus groups who have over a hundred kids and I asked them what's good about school, what's bad about school, and just to sum it up they say lots of good things about their school but when they say what's not good is the bell rings, I have to put down Teddy Roosevelt and I have to go in and learn about photosynthesis. The bell rings, I put down photosynthesis and I have to learn about Longfellow and there's no relation, there's no relevance, there's no connection. And what I want to do is I want to totally--here we go back again to my roots--I want to completely change the high school curriculum in the country and I want to do it from a kid's point of view and still get in all the subjects. So for example, what kids do is they look up at the sky and say, "Where does it end? Who made it?" And as we look at Stephen Hawking now he says, "God didn't make it. Science is responsible," well, his interesting debate. So I would teach three things. I would teach first of all the universe. The second thing I would teach would be individuality, a student about themselves, and then finally society; they have to act in a society. And just to give you a quick glimpse, as far as the universe I would teach astronomy--it's
never taught in our schools--and I would teach religion, which is able to be taught as long <break in tape> and so I'd teach astronomy and religion. Geometry would be taught from astronomy. The foreign language would be taught from the terms that one uses in astronomy, geometry, etc., etc. Everything would be interrelated; everything would be connected. All the teachers would work together as a group of scholars. That's just a glimpse into it. I've got it all thought out. <laughs>

Q: Interesting and quite different.

Saul Cooperman: Oh, yeah, quite different. Only a million and a half, Michael.

Q: That's how much you need to get it--

Saul Cooperman: To get it done.

Q: To get it done? Where?

Saul Cooperman: Done.

Q: In some pilot school?

Saul Cooperman: Yeah, to do the curriculum, and mainly- and this is what I wanted to do when I couldn't be a director of curriculum because I would get 14 outstanding teachers from New Jersey and I would lock 'em up for a year and we would write this curriculum.

Q: Fourteen, interesting number.

Saul Cooperman: Yeah.

Q: You said that a leader can make all the difference in a school district. The superintendent is the leader of a school district. The current governor, Christie, has proposed capping superintendents' salaries at $175,000 a year, the same level as the governor makes. Your thought on that?

Saul Cooperman: I really haven't thought it through. It might sound crazy but I haven't. On one hand, I really believe in free market and that if people are willing to pay I boggle at some guy that can hit a round ball with a piece of wood making 15,000 a year- 15 million a year and a teacher doesn't make 100,000.
That boggles my mind but I say, "It's America. If that's the way it is, that's the way it is" so- for free market, and I guess that's where I would come out. Whatever people are willing to pay, they're willing to pay, and there should be supply and demand rather than trying to cap it, but I understand what he's doing. He's got huge problems and he's trying to solve the problems.

Q: What about another current issue, merit pay? There's a lot of talk in Trenton these days about the merits and demerits of merit pay. Do you have a view on it?

Saul Cooperman: Yes. I'm for it. In fact, I had convinced Edie Fulton that she should do it back in our first term and Edie got her head chopped off as I'm sure if you talk to her she would remember because in God's name had she told Cooperman that in concept she was for it so I think it could be worked out. In everything else they make distinctions. Why did you get your job? Why did Nancy get her job? Because you were evaluated and someone thought you were pretty good so you got it. Maybe the criteria was objective and specific, maybe it was judgmental, but you've got to make some decisions, and I think some people are better than others and they ought to be rewarded for that.

Q: You said that you tried to convince Tom Kean to take on consolidation in school districts through a high-level blue ribbon task force. I think since then we have gotten rid of the 23 or so districts that had no schools in them and now we're down to about 585.

Saul Cooperman: Big deal.

Q: Do you think we should have county-based school systems--

Saul Cooperman: I'll have to figure it out. I go to Florida and- Jan and I go to Florida. We'll be leaving in another month and a half and they have county systems so I think it's Delaware or Maryland the commissioner of education once told me, "I can meet with all the superintendents in one room. Can you meet with the superintendents in one room?" and I said, "Yeah, if it's Jadwin Gym or Atlantic City I can meet with them all, all 590" or whatever it is. So yeah, I think there should be consolidation. I know the argument for local control. I also know people do not want to give up their positions on school boards or superintendents, but there was someone by the name of Ruth Mancuso was on the board when Fred Burke was commissioner and she came out with the Mancuso Report. And it basically said that all districts should be kindergarten through 12th grade and I'll give you one example of that- why that makes some sort of sense. I was a principal of Belvedere High School in Warren County. We had four districts that were sending districts that reported to Belvedere and each district wrote their own curriculum. Now our science teacher in ninth grade could say, "Oh, I know where you're from. You're from White Township because a science teacher there taught a lot of electricity" or "You're from Harmony because you've got a
lot of biology,” and so it was crazy. We had these four districts that fed in to Belvedere. There was no uniform curriculum and why not- why not have? Is that too much to ask, a uniform curriculum from K to eighth grade so that when the kids come in to ninth grade there are certain understandings, there are certain things in science they've all had, in math, in history and so on? So yeah, I wouldn't have recommended it to the governor unless I thought it had benefits, and then as far as the monetary benefits that would be- the Blue Ribbon Commission would hack that out.

Q: You mentioned a thorough and efficient education clause in the state constitution which guarantees a thorough and efficient education for kids age five to 17 I believe.

Saul Cooperman: Uh huh.

Q: And then the courts in the late nineties, the state supreme court, mandated pre-K in the Abbott districts provoking criticism that it was rewriting the constitution to embrace three- and four-year-olds, not just five-year-olds. Do you have a view on that?

Saul Cooperman: Yes. I think it's positive because I started a mentoring program in Newark. I worked in Newark for ten years. I was not—

Q: After being commissioner?

Saul Cooperman: Yeah. Yeah, and I worked for a foundation, the Amelior Foundation in Morristown, and so I was not the commissioner and therefore I would go in and people would lead me around the school, show me what they wanted to show me now as just a guy going in to the schools and in to families. I had once made the comment that I had probably been in more African American homes than any Caucasian in the state of New Jersey because in this mentoring program I was in homes two or three times a week talking predominantly to the moms. And when you look at the poverty, you look at the mobility, you look at the lack of a father figure and you see these kids growing up and there are no books in the homes and sometimes it's very, very difficult, and I remember--it sticks in my mind; I'm just pulling this right out--I can remember my first year as commissioner and someone from the Trenton schools when I was going through the schools she said, “You know what you ought to do?” and I said, "What?" And she said, "You ought to be able to get the kids in kindergarten and make sure they know their colors and they know the difference between a square and a rectangle,” and so she was saying to me, "When the kids come in they don't have the preparation to do simple things that we need to move them forward." So yes, I think pre-K is very, very important. I wish it were not so but the realities are that the kids are behind and they're behind when they're three years old and they're behind when they're four years old so anything that can be done to help them should be done.
Q: When you were commissioner there was also a department of higher education which Governor Whitman did away with in the nineties. Do you have a feeling about whether that was good or bad for the state?

**Saul Cooperman:** I really don't have an opinion on that. It was at times difficult for me to work with the chancellor of higher education.

Q: Who was he?

**Saul Cooperman:** Ted Hollander.

Q: Why was it difficult?

**Saul Cooperman:** I found him difficult to work with.

Q: Just give us a little more of a sense of how the department of education and the department of higher education stood in relation to one another.

**Saul Cooperman:** Well, the whole idea of certification. Certification rightly or wrongly was put in the department of education because the teachers are going to be working in the public schools so way back when someone in their wisdom said the department of education ought to have this yet the department of higher education had a legitimate claim. It's our teacher education schools who are teaching these people how to be teachers so you had an obvious clash there for turf, authority, policy and so forth and so on. So sometimes I think a difference of opinion is good. It sharpens the debate and it makes for a better outcome. At times it's not productive and you just got politics and it doesn't lead anywhere.

Q: When you look back on those eight years were there any reforms that failed?

**Saul Cooperman:** The merit pay never got off the ground. The takeover, which I only had six months and we cleaned up all the excesses, the patronage, the money, the people that we put in jail who were working on summer homes for people, but we didn't have time to do the curriculum which I really wanted to do, the heart of it, the learning. So I would say that really disappointed me that I didn't have a chance to work on that, and again we couldn't get the tenure and the consolidation. That never got off the ground as a policy issue, but everything else— Kean was- in our working relationship was all I could have asked for.

Q: He became known as the education governor. You derived some good feeling from that I guess.
Saul Cooperman: Oh, yes, yes, and I see the- some of the problems with a governor and a commissioner and we hit it off and I had great respect and admiration for him. I think down deep he's a policy guy. He's smart. He cares about people. He's not volatile. I never saw him really upset and at times I'd get in the hot water or something and up-- One story here. One time I was kind of upset. I was going to see him and I knew that he went out to stump for Lou Bassano who was a senator from Union County and he was helping Bassano get reelected, and I had just read in the paper that day that Bassano slammed Kean on something and it was strictly partisan 'cause it would play well with—

Q: Bassano was a Democrat or Republican?

Saul Cooperman: Republican, and so I went in and I had to talk to Kean about education issues but I couldn't help it. I said, "I just read about Lou Bassano and he bad mouthed you in the paper. Did you read that?" and he said, "Yeah," and I said, "And you've been going out trying to get him reelected" and he said, "Yes." And I said, "He's a sleaze" and Kean smiled at me and he said, "Yes, Saul, but he's our sleaze." <laughs> So he- nothing upset Kean.

Q: Who did you work most closely with in the Kean administration?

Saul Cooperman: Because we were doing a lot he assigned a person to me because on our initial thing when I had all these things about teaching and then he had- suddenly he had a big agenda about teaching and education so Daggett was the first person he put in so I had to- I had a hurdle. I had to get through Daggett to get to Kean, and then after that there was Marla Ucelli and Marla was then the education person. I had to go through Marla to get to the governor, and then finally it was Rick Mills and Rick Mills was my assistant and this was like the relationship I had with Kean, which was wonderful. He asked me then who should be his next assistant when Marla left and then I said, "Are you asking me? This person is supposed to challenge me and sift my ideas and- before I get to you," and he said, "No, no. That's okay. Who do you think is really bright, would ask tough questions and so forth?" And I said, "Rick Mills" and so he said, "Okay. I'll interview Mills" so he interviewed Mills and then Mills was my assistant and he became the guy I had to go through to get to Kean.

Q: That works, doesn't it?

Saul Cooperman: It did work. <laughs> It was great for me.

Q: Did you ever think about leaving early?
Saul Cooperman: Sometimes when it was really tough and the pressure was hard I'd come home and I'd say, "Why did I do this?", that type of thing, but I never- I can take hits so I never really thought of leaving. I got upset, I got down, but no. It's like having Martin Brodeur in goal. I had Kean in goal so he could stop shots.

Q: What have you done in the 20 years since?

Saul Cooperman: Yeah. I worked with Ray Chambers for Amelior in Newark and that was ten years so that was the longest I ever spent in a job, and that was from the time I was- when I left in '90 to the year 2000 and I worked almost exclusively in Newark and that's what I wanted to do because I- a suburban kid, West Orange, and then all the districts I worked in were suburban so I wanted to work in an urban area. So I worked there for ten years and then I started this program in Washington which is kind of a big deal in the country and so I did that and—

Q: What's it called?

Saul Cooperman: New American Schools, and I was able to- I was on the board. I was the only educator on the board and the rest of the board were CEOs, a guy by the name of Shrontz who was the head of Boeing and there was a guy IBM I- but his name slips my mind right now, oh, Lou Gertsner, and people of that ilk. And so I suddenly was meeting with corporate-type people I'd never met with before so that was fun, and then in the last few years I've been I guess you'd call it retired or semiretired. I started a company and was back to what I wanted to do again, teach teachers how to teach better, and then I did that with a fellow Lafayette grad. He had called me on the phone and I hadn't seen him in about 25 years. He said, "Hey, Saul, let's start an education company" and I said no initially and then did it so we did that for about five years and we just ended the company when he moved to Texas last year. And now I just published a book about my mentoring relationship with a young man in Newark. I've been mentoring him now. He's a friend of mine. I met him when he was eight, now he's 21, and I wrote about us.

Q: What's his name?

Saul Cooperman: Well, in the book it's Eddie. His real name is Johnny. Now he- when he gives interviews he says his name is Johnny but when we discussed the book, writing the book, he said, "Mr. Cooperman, you won't use my name, will you?" and I said, "No. I'll call you something else" so—

Q: When we were changing tapes you said that you remembered a story about meeting with John Lynch, the senator from Middlesex County, when you were being appointed or when you were nominated but before you were confirmed?
Saul Cooperman: Yeah.

Q: Want to tell us about that?

Saul Cooperman: Sure. I was two hours into an interview 'cause you have to be confirmed by senate, nominated by the governor, confirmed by senate, and so they were asking me all sorts of questions and then finally Lynch smiled and he said, "Well, I can say one good thing about you, Cooperman," and I thought finally, a compliment, and he said, "You're the only one in Kean's cabinet that didn't give him a penny" and so I kind of smiled at that and I thought that's a dubious compliment.

Q: When you look back on the Kean era how does it look to you? What should we remember about the Kean years in New Jersey?

Saul Cooperman: I think it's generally about Kean that he was- first of all he had somewhat of Ronald Reagan. You couldn't get mad at him even if you disagreed with him 'cause he's generally a likable person. He's a good man. He's a good person. So it was a good time, a good governor, a good man who tried to do good as he saw good and whether it was in education or whether it was in environment this was a good governor. Yeah.