



STATES' IMPACT ON FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

RICHARD RILEY



Narrative Biographical Summary

Supplemental to the recorded oral history interview
conducted with Richard Riley in July 2015
on behalf of New York State Archives

compiled by Anita Hecht, Life History Services, LLC
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Project Background

While U.S. education policy is widely discussed and well documented, the impact of our nation's states on that policy has received much less attention. Launched in 2003 and led by the New York State Archives, the States' Impact on Federal Education Policy Project has worked to create and foster the use of a comprehensive, accessible, nationwide historical record that documents the efforts of states to affect U.S. education policy since the mid-twentieth century.

The Project has connected leaders in state and national education with archivists to ensure the preservation of and access to the record of education policy, and supported sustainable connections between the two communities. The policymakers are themselves repositories of stories and wisdom not captured in the written record. The interviews presented here enrich the written record of education policy during this dynamic and critical period. Our narrators helped to shape the course of education policy in the United States over the past decades. We invite you to learn from their unique experiences and perspectives.

To the Reader

This narrative biographical summary is supplemental to the oral history interview recorded in July 2015 between Richard Riley and Anita Hecht of Life History Services, LLC, on behalf of the States' Impact on Federal Education Policy Project of New York State Archives. Accompanying this biographical summary is an oral history interview and print transcripts, also housed at New York State Archives.

Oral history interviews contain first-person accounts of historical events, individual experiences and significant memories. In this spirit, let it be understood that these interviews do not attempt to recount "absolute truth." Instead, they intend to relate the stories that hold meaning for the particular narrator. Interviews are not always chronological or complete with regards to specific data. Accuracy is always the goal, though there may be corrections, and certainly additions, to any oral history.

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Interviewing & Production by Life History Services, LLC
www.lifehistoryservices.com / 608.255.9669
Madison, Wisconsin USA

**A Narrative Biographical Summary of
Richard W. Riley**

**States' Impact on Federal Education Policy
New York State Archives
Oral History Project
2015**

A Narrative Biographical Summary of Richard W. Riley

As told to Anita Hecht, Life History Services, June 2015

Richard Wilson, aka Dick, Riley was born on January 2, 1933, in Greenville, South Carolina, to Edward P. “Ted” Riley and Martha (*née* Dixon) Riley. Together with his older brother, Pat (Edward P. Riley, Jr.), Dick grew up in Greenville, which has always remained his residence. He attended local public schools and was a good student, as well as co-captain of Greenville High School's football team and president of his senior class. The Riley family attended Buncombe Street United Methodist Church in Greenville, where Dick continues today as an active participant and current board member.

Following high school graduation, Dick joined the Navy Reserve and while attending Furman University. He became a Reserve Officer’s Candidate, spending two summers training on the West coast. Dick graduated *cum laude* in 1954 with a degree in political science. He was then on active duty for two years and served for six months as an officer aboard a US Navy minesweeper off the coast of Africa. When Dick returned home, he attended the University of South Carolina School of Law and earned a J.D. degree in 1959. He then went to Washington DC to serve on the Senate Committee on Trading with the Enemy. Upon returning to Greenville, he joined his father and brother-in-law’s practice at Riley & Riley in Greenville. At the time, Dick’s father was the lawyer for the large Greenville public school district, and Dick’s early work as a lawyer focused on many education-related issues.

In 1957, Dick married Ann “Tunky” Osteen Yarborough, a teacher by profession. Together the couple had four children, all of whom attended public schools. Tunky was active with the PTA and the couple was strong supporters of public schools. Dick and

Tunky were married almost 51 years when Tunky Riley died in 2008. Together they had fourteen grandchildren.

In 1962, Dick was first elected to the South Carolina Legislature and served continuously for fourteen years – four years in the SC House of Representatives (1963-1967) and ten years in the SC Senate (1967-1977). During his years in the legislature, he was known as one of the leaders of the “Young Turks,” a group of progressive reformers who championed autonomy for local government, judicial reform, legislative openness, revision of the state constitution, support of quality education for all, and a general modernization of state government.

In 1976, Dick chaired the Carter for President campaign in South Carolina. In 1978, he ran for governor of the state. Starting with only three percent name recognition across the state, he was elected with more than sixty percent of the vote. He took office as Governor of South Carolina the same day that Bill Clinton was inaugurated as Governor of South Carolina. Due to the high approval of Governor Riley during his first term, the people voted to amend the state constitution to allow governors to serve two terms. Prior to that, governors were limited to one term. Governor Riley was reelected in 1982 by a seventy percent majority and served a second term as South Carolina’s governor until 1987. In fact, he has never lost an election.

During his eight years as Governor, Riley won national recognition for his education improvements in South Carolina. The improvements resulted from his Education Improvement Act (EIA) of 1984, which was heralded by the RAND Corporation as the most comprehensive education reform measure in the United States. The EIA called for competitive merit pay for teachers, smaller class sizes, school building programs, and accountability measures, among others, funded primarily by a one-cent increase in the state sales tax dedicated to funding the EIA education improvements. During this time, Riley also led the fight to keep schools open during battles over busing.

After his tenure as governor ended, Riley – along with his father and brother – joined the law firm of Nelson, Mullins, Riley, and Scarborough, where he worked from 1987 to 1993.

In November 1992, President-elect Bill Clinton appointed Riley to his transition team, in charge of hiring all sub-Cabinet personnel. Then in 1993, Clinton selected Riley to serve in his Cabinet as the U.S Secretary of Education. He was confirmed unanimously by the U.S. Senate the day following the President Clinton's inauguration and served in that post for the entire eight years of the Clinton presidency.

Secretary Riley's first order of business was to gain Congressional passage of the Goals 2000 Act, which defined national education goals and provided states with federal funding to create standards based, systemic reform at the state level. During Riley's two terms, he led many other successful initiatives to improve education through reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Higher Education Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and other legislative, regulatory and programmatic vehicles. Among others, these included increased aid to poor and disadvantaged students, expanded loans and grants for higher education, increased parental/family/community/business involvement in public schools, early childhood education, afterschool programs, GEAR UP, E-Rate, promotion of international education and life-long learning, to name a few. He also had to fight off Republican efforts to demolish the Department of Education.

Since leaving public office, Riley has served as a senior partner in the law firm of Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP and its affiliate, EducationCounsel LLC. He counsels clients on business, governance, financial and government matters, as well as education policy, strategy, advocacy and law. With full support of the firm, Riley remains an ambassador for improving education in the United States and abroad. Since leaving

public office, he has served in a number of local, state and national capacities devoted to progressive education reform – and continues to do so. Among other current service, he advises The Riley Institute at Furman (created in his honor) on its education, diversity and other initiatives and he co-chairs the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

Among hundreds of other awards for his contributions to education improvement and public service, Secretary Riley has been inducted into the South Carolina Hall of Fame and, in 2009, TIME Magazine named him among the *Top Ten Best Cabinet Members* in our nation's history.