



STATES' IMPACT ON FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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*TOM HEHIR*



**Narrative Biographical Summary**

Supplemental to the recorded oral history interview  
conducted with Tom Hehir in June 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 June 2015 between Tom Hehir 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 audio and print transcripts.

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.

With generous support from  
The New York Community Trust – Wallace Foundation Special Projects Fund

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**A Narrative Biographical Summary of  
Thomas Hehir**

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

## **A Narrative Biographical Summary of Thomas Hehir**

*As told to Anita Hecht, Life History Services, January 2015*

Thomas Hehir was born on February 2, 1950, in Worcester, Massachusetts, to parents of Irish Catholic heritage and a large extended family. He was the middle of three brothers born to Elizabeth (*née* Hussey) and Leo Hehir.

Tom's maternal grandparents immigrated to the United States from Ireland and had five children. Four of the five Hussey children received a higher education. Tom's mother, Elizabeth, completed high school and studied at the Teachers College of Worcester. A stay-at-home mother during Tom's youth, she resumed teaching third grade in the public school system when Tom entered Junior High.

Tom's paternal grandparents were born in the United States. His father Leo completed high school and a bit of junior college, and became a firefighter in Worcester. Tom recalls that, in those days, firefighters were not unionized and wages were low. The Hehir family was working class, but managed to buy a three-story apartment house where they raised their family and rented out the extra units.

The Hehirs were observant Catholics and valued public education. Tom's uncle, Thomas Hussey, was both a Jesuit priest and president of Al Hikma University in Baghdad, Iraq. Tom and his brothers were sent to public schools in Worcester, first Adams Square Elementary and then Burncoat Junior and Senior High School, where Tom excelled as a student. Tom was both intellectually and athletically inclined and participated on both the tennis and ski teams.

After graduating from Burncoat High School in 1968, Tom attended Holy Cross College, a private, all-male Jesuit school in Worcester. Tom's college attendance fortunately provided him with a deferment from the Vietnam draft. Tom's parents helped cover the cost of tuition (\$1,400/year) as did Tom, who worked as a groundskeeper at Lincoln Country Club, as well as at a local ice cream store.

The social gospel and ethos of giving back one's community had always been strong in the Hehir family. While at Holy Cross, Tom began volunteering for the Association of Retarded Children (ARC), helping kids with intellectual disabilities. Through ARC, he was exposed to the effects of institutionalization and the growing efforts to deinstitutionalize disabled persons. During these years, Tom also worked as a tutor in a juvenile detention center.

While his initial goal was to study biology, Tom switched his major to psychology and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in 1972. During his last year of college, Tom student-taught at Our Lady of Mercy School. At the primary level, he taught children with Down's syndrome, and at the junior high level, he taught kids with behavioral issues. He recalls that the nuns were wonderful mentors to him, and his love for teaching and working with disabled children flourished.

After graduating from college in 1972, Tom applied to Syracuse University where he received a graduate fellowship and earned a Masters degree in Mental Retardation, with a minor in Learning Disabilities. Tom cites Burton Blatt<sup>1</sup> as one of his great

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<sup>1</sup> **Burton Blatt** (1927–1985) was a pioneer in humanizing services for people with intellectual disabilities. As an advocate of deinstitutionalization, he helped initiate community living programs and family support services. In his clinical work he emphasized the provision of education to children with severe disabilities, those whom he called "clinically homeless." As a national leader in special education, he called for programs to integrate students with disabilities into public schools and worked to promote a more open society for them. ([http://bbi.syr.edu/about/who\\_was\\_burtonblatt.html](http://bbi.syr.edu/about/who_was_burtonblatt.html))

intellectual influences. By this time, Massachusetts had passed Chapter 766,<sup>2</sup> which later served as the model for federal law PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act.

From 1973 to 1977, Tom worked as a special education teacher at Keefe Technical High School in Framingham, Massachusetts, a regional vocational technical school. It was the first voc-tech school to integrate kids with disabilities into training programs that prepared them for real jobs. Programs were developed for deaf students, as well as for those with intellectual and learning disabilities. Though under-resourced by today's standards, Tom recalls the programming as powerful and successful.

By 1977 Tom's bosses decided to replicate the program, and Tom was hired former superintendent, Dan Donahue, to help integrate students with disabilities at voc-tech schools across the state of Massachusetts. Specifically, he helped to integrate blind students at Cape Cod Technical College, students who had previously been considered a safety risk. Programming included following kids in their home communities as well.

In 1978, Tom was recruited by the Boston Public Schools to serve as a project director, where he helped both vocational schools and high schools develop opportunities for disabled kids. In 1980, he became director of High School Special Education Programs, and in 1983, he was named Director of Special Education for the entire city of Boston—this at the young age of thirty-three.

During these years, Greg Anrig was the Commissioner of Education for the State of Massachusetts and was aggressively promoting equity and access for disabled students, in part due to a lawsuit (*Allen v. McDonough*) filed against the Boston Public School by

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<sup>2</sup> **Massachusetts Chapter 766**, passed in 1972, was the first non-categorical law guaranteeing all children the right to a free, appropriate public education. Chapter 766, as it became known, later served as the model for the first federal special education legislation. Team evaluations and annual reviews were conducted to develop an ongoing individual education plan that ensured an appropriate education. (www.mass.gov)

the Massachusetts Advocacy Center, for not providing adequate services to students with disabilities.

From 1987 to 1990, Tom returned to graduate school to earn his Ed.D at Harvard in Administration and Social Policy. Like today, Harvard did not have a separate department for special education. Tom's doctoral dissertation researched and discussed the influence of due process on hearings regarding special education programs. Indeed, he was awarded for his work with a Dissertation Of The Year Award from the American Education Research Association, Division A.

In 1990, Tom moved to Chicago where he served as associate superintendent, primarily working on issues of special education, as well as gifted and talented programming, and all student support services. Again at play was a lawsuit, this one filed by the US Department of Education, charging the Chicago public schools with discrimination against special education kids. If the school district failed to bring itself into compliance federal law, it was at risk of losing its federal funding.

As Tom recalls, most policy improvements in special education were spurred by the efforts of parents, agencies and such lawsuits. He affirms that state education agencies (SEAs) in both Boston and Chicago took their role seriously and tried to affect positive change in special education, often without having the money or capacity to do so. During his tenure in Chicago, the district was able to reach a much higher level of compliance with IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), leading to the eventual removal of the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights as overseer.

In 1993, Tom returned to Boston for personal reasons and while there received a call from the Clinton White House offering an appointment to the US Department of Education. Tom was vetted and appointed, as an openly gay man, to serve as director of

the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), where he served from 1993 to 1999. As director, he was responsible for federal leadership in implementing IDEA.

Tom also played a lead role in developing the Clinton administration's proposal for the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA, working closely with Secretary of Education Richard Riley (also interviewed for this project). The 1997 reauthorization included, among other things, increased funding to SEAs to look at outcomes of special education and inclusiveness practices. Tom states that the focus on research and the results of special education programming was a new and much needed focus. The 1997 reauthorization was also successful in getting national assessments (i.e. NAEP exams) to be administered to students with disabilities, including data on their graduation rates.

During this time, Tom was aware that he was the only appointee working in the field of disability who did not have one. This awareness of ableism had a profound impact on him. Indeed, he authored the book, *New Directions in Special Education, Eliminating Ableism in Policy and Practice*, in 2005.

At the end of the Clinton presidency, Tom returned to Harvard to teach on school leadership and federal policy, as well as study and write about special education in the reform movement, due process, and least restrictive environment issues.

He states that developments in federal policy throughout the 2000s, including passage of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top legislation, have had a positive emphasis on special education, insofar as they look at much larger data sets and disaggregate assessment data. On the other hand, he states that much of NCLB policy is deeply flawed with its overemphasis of accountability placed on schools and teachers rather than on districts and systems. For example, some schools appear to have poor outcomes because of the number of disabled students they serve, leading them to drop some of their special education programming altogether.

Tom continues to follow developments in special education in various states, such as Texas, Ohio, and California, and confirms that both states and localities have a large impact in shaping federal policy.