Interviewee: James McPartland

Interviewer: Stuart “Bill” Leslie

Subject: James McPartland and the Center for Social Organization of Schools

Date: October 29, 2015

BL: This is Bill Leslie. I'm with Jim McPartland, or James McPartland, who was former Executive Director of the Center for Social Organization of Schools. And we're going to talk about the history of CSOS and its place in Hopkins.

But I thought first we would just get a little bit of background on your undergraduate work and then what brought you to graduate school at Johns Hopkins.

JM: Okay, well, I went to Cornell University as an undergraduate. I actually got a scholarship from my father's trade union. He was an electrician in New York City. And they had this scholarship, which I won. And so I was in the labor relations school for four years.

But Cornell is an unusual university. It's both state and private. And you can take any course, any place. So I took a kind of awesome sciences major. But then I stayed for two more years as a statistics major. So I have a master's in statistics as well.

But I didn't want to solve other people's problems as a statistician. I wanted to have my own issues and interests, so sociology appealed to me. I came here then as a graduate student, and it was a very interesting department at that time. But I was here about a year, and Coleman got invited to do the famous Coleman Report, and invited me to move to Washington and be on that project.

So I'm an author way down the thing. I tell this joke that for a few years some of my friends would send me Christmas cards addressed to “et al,” because I was way down the list.

BL: That's good.

JM: Then I wrote my dissertation on the Coleman data about school resegregation. And got invited to join the staff of the Civil Rights Commission that was doing a school resegregation study. So I
stayed in Washington another year or two as a staff member there. And wrote some chapters for a report called Racial Isolation in the Public Schools. It's about school resegregation as an issue.

But at that time, the government was beginning a program called Labs and Centers. And the idea was centers would be university-based, around a theme. And they would develop ideas that then the labs would pick up and disseminate. At that time they were, I think, five or six centers all with a different theme like vocational education or psychology. And Coleman submitted an application for one in sociology of education that's Center for Social Organization of Schools. And we won it.

And it was small to begin with. A couple hundred thousand dollars. And it was Ed McDill was the director. I was the co-director right at the beginning. And Coleman and Mac wrote the proposal.

Now what made the center, I think distinctive at Hopkins was R&D. So we were not only doing basic research studies about what the problems are and what potential solutions were, but the idea was to develop concrete solutions, a prototype model school, a prototype curriculum. I'll talk to you about the examples.

And that was very unusual in social science departments. You did basic research, you published, kind of stayed at home. If you did lab work it was probably a contrived simulated lab. So applied work and certainly doing development was not a very academic thing. And more than that we also wanted to disseminate what we had developed. So you'll hear a whole list of products, but we also wanted to run a business and get it out there, sell curriculum packages and have a support team that would actually go in schools and facilitate.

And this was very far to the university. We were running a major business, a multimillion dollar business out of kind a Xerox fund, you know, a revolving fund. And it was causing a little heartburn. Of course we would go into debt and – well, we were running a business.

So I think we were unique at the university in being this kind of research and applied development and dissemination, as an unusual kind of operation. You know there were research labs but were they really R&D labs in the social sciences? Not really. And were there research development and dissemination operations that not only did the basic ground work of what might work then try to –
Now I want to try to contrast this with – and part of the reason I was interested in it was the usual way sociology did work those days was really natural variation, surveys of natural variations in school design and so on. That was the Coleman Report really, too. A big survey of how schools differed and what mattered and so on.

So we would use either our own original surveys or the government developed a whole bunch of surveys called, I forget, “High School and Beyond.” A whole bunch of national surveys to run. And you use that data. And I found it very unsatisfying, because there really wasn't a great deal of variation even in the public schools. I mean the size, maybe, but a rose is a rose is a rose. The schools were really quite similar. So we were finding not much impact of school differences, because the differences weren't very large.

You need the variation to get the impact. And the variations usually weren't theoretically very interesting. Or you had to figure out why they were interesting. So the idea then of having a center that would invent, have kind of social inventions based on what you think might have a potential impact, and then do it! And evaluate it. So it was a very new way of kind of going about social theory building. It wasn't, again, studying census data or surveying the natural variations. It was trying to create experimental field interventions. And then evaluating them against a controlled school or evaluating against its own baseline.

So the history of the center then is we did a bunch of kind of basic studies, I'm going to list some of the findings over the years. But really what makes us distinctive is, we didn't want to just find the source of a problem or the ideology of a problem. We wanted solutions. How can we fix the dropout problem? How can we fix the issue that –?

BL: Would you trace that character back to Coleman himself?

JM: Well, in a way yes, but he was really more – he did talk about social inventions, but he himself was a basic research guy. Well, let me say also though, I mean he was interested – he himself was kind of a public intellectual. When he died the New York Times Magazine that does their hundred most influential people each year you know? Here old Coleman shows up with John Unitas and, you know, other strange individuals.

BL: Two great Baltimore figures.

JM: Yeah, right. Because he was a friend of Daniel Patrick Moynihan. He wrote in the public interest magazines. The kind of intellectual – so he did have an interest in the implications of his
work and did comment on—he got in trouble or famous for “white flight desegregation,” as this counterproductive thing that drove out white families.

But when he was active in the center the first couple of years, we were doing survey studies. We were not doing interventions. We were not inventing things. But one of his examples, though, it's not well known, it was something he called Academic Games. It was a way of teaching sociological theory by simulating a board game where you’d learn the theory by trying to build the game. One was the legislature, for example. How the legislature trades off interests and represents the constituents, and so on.

But I think really he inspired it, but he didn't encourage us to go build. Let me give you some examples of the products, the practical reforms. One was something called Student Team Learning, cooperative learning. It was how you organize a learning activity where kids work in teams to compete to get the answer right. So there's a whole bunch of variations on it. Bob Slavin was the—

BL: Oh, I don’t know him.

JM: Have you talked to Bob? Have you heard that name?

BL: No, I have not.

JM: All right, Bob Slavin is one of the real stars here at Hopkins. Still here in the School of Education in education research and development. He's probably going to be a president of AERA at some point. He's a highly productive household name in education research and development.

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He also invented a model called Success for All, SFA. It's an elementary school comprehensive reform model. He has curriculum to teach kids how to read. It's a phonics-based curriculum. But he also has a way of finding kids who are in trouble and giving them extra help along the way. So it's a very interactive with kids' problems. They get tutoring and all kinds of things. And it's been widely evaluated, successful, and it's one of the most renowned school reform elementary school-level models. It's all over the country. He's got his own corporation, Success for All Foundation.

So he was one of the initial members of the center and was responsible for developing successful and cooperative learning. The early days, though, what we were doing was kind of policy research. We did just a bunch of studies on school
desegregation itself. Our specialty was what's the long run impact, adult impact, of going to a desegregated school or not for both black and white kids. Most the controversy on school desegregation was did it improve test scores and help attitudes? Did it have an immediate impact on kids? And nobody could ever really figure out the answer. I mean, we believed it was positive and had some evidence, but nobody ever did experiments. So it was always, was it self-selection or not?

We wanted to study if it had long term impact. So we did adult research and so on. We found, we wrote papers that said school desegregation is a kind of investment in whether you're going to have a desegregated adult society. So a graduate of a desegregated school, a white person, was more likely to live in a desegregated neighborhood, want desegregated friends. And the same thing for black kids. They were more likely to enter an adult mixed world.

So we said that was part of the impact of going to school where you learn together with another race.

**BL:** Now you weren't doing a longitudinal study for the school board?

**JM:** No, we surveyed adults and found out what their school experience was. So it was retrospective. Of course we needed the adult results, couldn't wait to age the kids, yeah.

**BL:** Unless you're Julian Stanley or wait 50 years and see.

**JM:** I know. We also studied tracking, which was a big issue, separating kids into academic and vocational programs. Was that a good idea or not? Very big controversy in sociology. So we did research on that.

Dropout prevention, what causes a kid to drop out? What can you do about it? But those were all studies that we published in academic journals. That's by the way – makes us different than CTY. We're a real research – we wanted to get everybody famous as a scientist first. That was our first thing. So we were doing these various kind of basic studies.

**BL:** And you were doing them at 3505 North Charles? Is that where you were?

**JM:** We started – we had three –

**BL:** I ask because my office was there once.

**JM:** We started, believe it or not, the first year or two, I think our first grant was something like $400,000. And there was Ed McDill, me,
and a couple of other people and a couple other faculty members. We then evolved to be a self contained unit. CSOS is not a branch of sociology. We were our own kind of quasi department in Arts and Sciences.

And our funding really grew. I think we were one year $15 million or something. I think we were second biggest unit to physics or something. So they treated us like a department. I went to department meetings as a representative of CSOS and so on in Arts and Sciences.

BL: Did you also teach while you were working in CSOS?

JM: I don't think we did. I don't think we taught. So it was really soft money funded research. Actually that was something that bothered Arts and Sciences, that we didn't teach. What are you doing just research? We would sometimes joint teach a course in sociology or something.

But we were so busy doing grants and studies that we were mainly R&D. That was what we did. We have recently switched to the School of Education. Mainly, I think, because the business side of it, the selling materials and doing consulting services and so on got so big it drove Arts and Sciences nuts.

We're not a business. And I think we went a couple of million dollars over. So they didn't really want any part of us anymore. And Education was begging us to join, switch to the School of Education. They just opened the School of Ed.

BL: I guess that we had a School of Education.

JM: Well, it was never a school. It was never a school. It was SPSBE—I forget what it was called. It was really an adult ed program that had an education course as part of it. I guess there was McCoy College or something, an evening college.

But recently, within the last ten years, it split off as an independent school. Now, remarkably, it's rated first in the nation.

BL: I saw that.

JM: It has amazed us all. I think CSOS helped them get that rating and so did Slavin. So the early years were successful cooperative learning, besides these basic studies.

BL: And in developing these were you working with Baltimore schools or—?

JM: Well, we started Baltimore usually. It's usually we would have a
partnership in this area. The most recent model was something
called talent development, middle or high school talent
development. They're now all over the country. And we started
that here in Patterson High School in Baltimore. But it's now all
over the country. Most of the major cities have an example of it.

They buy our stuff. They follow our model. That model is a typical
school organization comprehensive model. We create smaller
schools within a school. We call them career academies. So a kid
goes into one of our big high schools, they start in a separate 9th
grade program. During the 9th grade they choose a career
academy. There's usually three or four or five of them. And they
go to that. And that would be a self contained school within a
school.

So the first thing we were trying to do was to create better
relationships between kids and teachers by letting the kids have a
choice of where they went, to what kind of program they were in, a
small unit. The career academies, we called them. We usually had
like 150 kids, so everybody would know everybody. There was
none of this anonymity problem.

When we first started that program, we always took the very worst
high schools, the most troubled high schools. The one we went to
Patterson in East Baltimore, we were asked by the superintendent
that we just put that school on – they were going to take it over.

And they said, "Will you go and work with them?" So we
did. And it was a wild school. I remember the first day we were in
the school, the principal said over the public address, "We have
visitors from Johns Hopkins University here today. Please be on
your best behavior." And they set a fire in the hallway to greet
us. It was one of these where kids were running the place.

So when we developed this academy structure, smaller schools
within a school within a 9th grade, everything calmed
down. People liked the school. They bragged about it. So that all
worked to get the climate under control.

And then we developed a whole curriculum to help the kids learn
to read better. A math program and so on. Built around not
memorization but understanding of concepts and a lot of hands-on
kind of activities and so on.

So we now have this comprehensive model called the Talent
Development High School with Career Academies. That's all over
the country. We run a whole business here. We have a business
model that charges fees and I can introduce you to these
folks. There's a CEO that runs the damn thing.
BL: But all as a nonprofit?

JM: Yeah, right, right. All nonprofit. But as I say that was very foreign to Arts and Sciences. I remember poor – I'm trying to remember the woman's name that was the dean visiting. We just drove her nuts with this business. And we drive the School of Education a little nuts with it, too.

But we found that the model of research and develop and prototype and then sell it to some corporation didn't work. They wanted to overprice it and – so we decided we had to do that ourselves. We had to not only develop it, we had to disseminate it and install it and evaluate it.

So that's another model. The talent development model. That's middle and high schools that compliments what Slavin does with Success for All in the elementary schools.

BL: Did the Success for All also have a Baltimore component in the beginning?

JM: It did start here in City Springs. But again it quickly expanded. It's now, I think it's thousands of schools. Slavin is quite a remarkable character. You want to talk to Bob Slavin. He's got a joint appointment here and in London. So he's constantly going across the pond, as they say.

So also some other examples of development and—Joyce. You talked to Joyce. She has another good prototype. It started with basic research on parent involvement work and she designed this whole intervention program. And again she's got a network of schools all over the place.

So I think that kind of makes us unusual. Most of the other centers at universities they do not do that development part. They draw implications. They give practical recommendations. But they don't really design a full blown solution. And they certainly don't disseminate it.

So again, it was a different way of getting evidence. Again my own case – we have been learning things from surveys. But the natural variations left us cold. You had to depend on finding some –

BL: Now were these your surveys?

JM: They would be national surveys, usually. But we did our own surveys, too. We did a 50-school survey where we try to purposely pick schools that were overachievers. We were hoping to expand the variation, so to speak.
But again, we found size mattered and having a common core curriculum, having all kids required to take algebra. We found some things from surveys. And Coleman also, all his work was on surveys. His famous work on the public/private schools was all survey research based.

But again you were limited to the natural variation that was out there. And also since it wasn’t experimental design, you had to kind of intuit what was causing the impacts and so on. You know you never really could – the variables was multi [inaudible]. They were all fouled up with each other. Usually the schools had different student bodies. And you had to separate that out. So it was hard to really –

BL: Wasn't it a challenge dealing with data in the early years?

JM: Oh, absolutely.

BL: Looking out my window at 3505 at that carriage house, I'm recalling a photograph of I don't remember which model. But –

JM: 1401, yeah.

BL: 1401.

JM: We had our own.

BL: Could you say a little bit about that?

JM: Well, this was again we were survey based. That was in the days of punch cards. There was a disk drive you could put on. But again we were doing our own survey research. And I'm going to tell you the story of the night ghost. So to have it read data in and analyze it, we wrote our own programs, too. Mostly cross tabulation programs, dichotomous data. Eventually we got to regression and so on.

But it would take so long to read the programs and data that it would have to run all night. We had this kind of shelf where you would line up the card. You put the program, then the data, then the analysis cards. It would run for five or six hours.

That was called a night ghost. Who gets the night ghost tonight to run your data and so on? Of course the only big machine was then out at Applied Physics Lab. There wasn't an onsite mainframe here in those days. So we did have our own computer.

BL: Was IBM supportive? I thought for sure that they prepared.

JM: Yeah, they did.
BL: I thought, well, that's interesting.

JM: Well, they were trying to peddle a 1401 to the universities and so on. But that was the Coleman influence also. You know we're social science, science in the service of school improvement. So we're having to do studies and it wasn't case studies of qualitative impressions and so on.

It was evidence with statistical tests and all the rest. So any rate, so that center has evolved over the years. We always had what we called – another way of saying what this research and development was, they used the word “long term programmatic research.” That's what the centers in the government's eyes were supposed to be.

Pick a problem. Stick with it for at least five years and a have program of research, not just isolated studies, but a way of attacking it. Like dropout prevention would be an idea of a programmatic research. Now what are the causes of dropout prevention? What can you do about it? Can you recover kids?

The idea of these centers was supposed to be long term programmatic research. You stick with a problem. We had a series of five year grants from the government. The first one was tiny, like $400,000. Then we're getting up to the $5 million a year kind of level. The CSOS one, every five years we would get renewed with another one. So we had all these internal different names.

For a while we were CRESBAR. That was the title of the proposal. Center for Research of the Education – I don't know what the hell it was.

BL: You didn't survive but no one remembers what they were.

JM: In those days we were a big operation at Hopkins. We were a major funding source. We were an Arts and Science – we were the second biggest source of overhead for a long time. We paid full 62 percent overhead or whatever the hell it was.

BL: Now I saw some of the early site visit reports.

JM: Okay.

BL: From the Department – it wasn't called the Department of Education. I forgot what it was actually called.

JM: NIE or something like that.

BL: Yeah.
Yeah.

And I get the sense that there were tensions between the center and its federal patrons?

Well, first of all, we were all young. We had our own staff. So we were still developing our research reputation. We had Coleman in the background, but he might have left for Chicago by that time. But I think we always got – you know the site reviews were always supposed to probe. And were we getting the taxpayer's money's worth. And I think actually we were there when the agency itself had to try to get refunded. We were one of their stars, because we had things to show. It wasn't just more studies on the shelf as important as basic research was.

We could demonstrate school improvement and we had superintendents that would write letters that said these folks have really helped us turn our school system around.

So I think those periodic reviews were tough. They were supposed to be tough. We were getting $5 million a year, for god sakes. We were getting—a significant proportion of agency's money was going to the labs and centers in those days.

I think by and large that program flopped, because most of the centers were not developing things. They were only doing basic research. So they weren't really turning something over to the labs. They were doing good basic research, cognitive learning. There was one in Pittsburgh that was Bob Glaser and Lauren Resnick were – they helped evolve the cognitive learning aspect of psychology. It's not just memorizing, it's interacting with materials and so on. But I think we were one of their stars even though –

I think you might be the last survivor. I didn't check.

Well, we don't have a center grant anymore. We don't have a –

Then there aren't –

And they're tiny now. They're only $200,000 a year. They've gone back to really being tiny. But we lost a competition a few years ago that would have renewed us. But now they're not big prizes. They're not big investments. I think the labs are about to see their demise. This is 50 years later, though.

That's a long time for a program.

Yeah.

Did you ever have anything as controversial as the original
Coleman Report and some of those? Because those were really
public documents and of course you were one of the authors. I just
wondered whether – not that you would court controversy, but
whether the –

JM: Yeah, well, I think the whole school desegregation issues in our
eyears we were doing those studies. Art Stinchcombe was a
professor here. He did a study of the tipping point. At what point
does a school get too black and the white kids leave? And then we
weren't really part of the white flight issues. That was Jim
Coleman more himself. But that was a major flap of whether this
was counterproductive in that if you forced busing, the white
parents would leave.

And no matter what the impacts were if it didn't have staying
power, you know, what was the point. But we were pressing again
the long term impacts that it was in the national interest if you
want a society that functions well, an adult society, investing in
learning experiences with the students had a payoff that people
then would work for a minority boss, would value a desegregated
neighborhood. Kind of were not only tolerated, but welcomed an
adult environment, neighborhood, and friendship group that was
diverse.

And that we were finding that was much more likely to be the case
for both blacks and whites if they had grown up together in a
school setting. The problems though in desegregated schools, we
also wrote about was, resegregation within the school, because
often the black kids were the struggling students and the white kids
were the gifted. So if you weren't careful you would have – that
was my school dissertation actually, Ph.D. dissertation, was it
would resegregate. So you would have segregated classrooms
within desegregated schools. And you had to have real programs to
avoid that. And still have the kids – this was a version of a tracking
issue.

BL: But you were doing that or had done that just before you went to
D.C.? You were working for the Civil Rights–?

JM: Yeah, right, that was part of it. The Civil Rights was more impact
on learning. The center's work picked that up and said besides that
is the long term impact. So that was what we tried to
inform. Because we're not always getting anywhere. They were not
clean studies. There were always self-selected kids that were doing
better in a desegregated school. You try to control for that.

We still had science problems of course, with the long term
research. So I think that was the closest we came. And we had
federal officials that were very liberal that let us know that we
want you to continue the desegregation research. They said you
know the chips are going to fall where they are. So yeah, but you still better stick. We need somebody studying this stuff.

BL: I've always heard that about Coleman and also Peter Rossi who was here at the time.

JM: Right.

BL: But whatever their own political inclinations they were very much, “Do we have the data?”

JM: Oh, yeah. I think so. Coleman actually disappointed some of the students that came here to study with him. Not in any intellectual way. He was the most creative, inspiring, just both methodologies, statistics, and theory, concepts, I mean he just was an active mind with new ideas and was a really regular guy too. A very nice man to work with.

But he got in the headlines for–he and his wife and children got in the newspaper. They were desegregating some amusement park. And he somehow got part of that demonstration. But he was not a demonstrator. I mean he was interested in public policy sincerely, but he was not an active – he was not a marcher. He was a scholar. But he did, as I say, he was a public intellectual. He did talk to the senators and –

BL: You were saying he disappointed some of the students?

JM: Because they thought he was going to be a radical reformer. He was going to be marching with them. And he kind of discouraged that. He says, "You know, you guys stay home and do your work." I mean –

BL: What was he like in the classroom? I’m curious, as a graduate in a seminar…

JM: Let me tell you a story of the early couple of years of the department. So I'm now a social relations student that came here to study with him. And it was a very small program. Half a dozen faculty members, if that much. But very bright students. The graduates, it was only graduate students. And again maybe ten of us or twelve of us or something like that. There were no required classes. But there were classes offered. And the classes offered were the professors doing that are research in front of you.

Discussing what's next and how can we solve this and so on. What was done was you had to submit yourself to five exams that were sit down exams for three or four hours and one had to be in theory, one had to be in methodology. But then you would pick a specialty. And the students learned from each other. We would
study together for these exams. You know with reading lists. They give you a reading list of the classics. And the questions were always crazy questions.

It wasn't compare Scholar A to Scholar B. It was some wacky, challenging question. As a matter of fact one of the stories was one of the students Ben Zablocki wound up being a professor at Columbia. He just announced, "You don't have to study for these things. Just be imaginative, creative. You know, do a couple of citations here and there. But say something interesting on how you would prove it. You don't have to read anything."

And he announced that. They flunked his ass on the next exam. And they started asking [for us to] cite scholars and so on. But it was a very freewheeling and very fun place to be. And this is before Rossi came.

And that's the way he would teach. He would teach the chapters of the book he was doing at the moment. And Coleman was a brilliant statistician but he wasn't – he was a kind of instinctive. He would develop his own methods. Sophisticated—he himself had been an engineer before he got into sociology.

BL: I got chemical engineering degree.

JM: Yeah. So he was trying to develop things with differential equations and all kinds of crazy things. He developed an impact model. It died on the vine. I used it myself in my studies, but he would have a method to meet the question. It wasn't “Let's apply the T test or develop a regression model.”

The Coleman study itself, EEO study, he developed a way of separating—the problem with the natural variation studies is confounding. How can you separate correlated variables from one another? So he had a whole system of unique contributions, joint contributions where he would show how the data reflected things you could not separate, to the degree you could separate them.

So he would teach this mathematical sociology course and he would give us all a weekend exam. We could take the entire weekend to finish the exam with problems he couldn't figure out.

These are problems that had him stumped. So it's very creative and free flowing and again no requirements. Just go to work, do the exams, write your thesis.

BL: Did he give you a lot of latitude in picking your thesis?

JM: Oh, yeah, total. Absolutely, total. That was one of the problems, actually. At lot of early students didn't get off the stick and get on
with it. When Rossi came it got a little more regularized. He started courses where you had to write a paper every week. We were bad at that. We were bad at getting our work done, because it was all fun and games and so on.

So at the early days, now there are requirements and course regulations and all the rest. Which you have to do when you get bigger. But I'm telling you this story to reflect the kind of Coleman élan, which was very creative and imaginative and search for something new, interesting. It wasn't just following the course of what's the next step in this question. It was much more creative.

BL: I always wondered, it had that unusual name, Department of Social Relations, whether it actually was distinguished –

JM: Well, it had an anthropology professor then too. One of these hyphenated Englishmen, Neville Dyson-Hudson. But it had a social psychologist, I think also. But they found out the title was hurting students. What the hell does social relations mean?

And it really was a sociology department. Anthropology became its own department eventually, and so on.

So that was just the early years. It was always a sociology department though with an anthropologist on the staff. It never really – that was his image. But it really was a sociology department from the beginning even though it had that strange name, in my opinion.

BL: And what you said since he was the founder, Coleman was the founder. Was there a legacy within the department later, or when he went back to Chicago it just became a more traditional…?

JM: Well, no, I think well it became more traditional when it got bigger. They had to have regulations and course requirements and maybe they didn't have to, but I know we really learned from each other as students. It was a wonderful way to learn. I mean we as colleagues, I mean we would all divide up the reading list and figure out and discuss it.

So getting ready for these exams was really the learning experience, and it was a really great way to learn. I mean the students were all great, serious scholars that really studied like hell. And we would get ready for these exams together.

So we really were learning together in a very creative way. It was really wonderful. But I don't think that was sustainable when it got bigger. I'm not sure. It's probably my romantic reminiscences of it here too.
I think there's something about the founding days, the same with anthropology. When Price and Mintz came, people recalled it as really –

And every once in a while he added stuff. Again he got this kind of discipline of, “Turn it out.” Learn how to write a paper on deadline and such. So I think it improved the – again a lot of students weren't getting their degrees. They were just kind of hanging around, it was so much fun. I wasn't one of those. I wanted to get out as soon as possible.

What convinced you to stay on?

Well, I was invited when this new center came about McDill was put the head of it.

He was new at that time?

He was a postdoc.

He was a postdoc.

That's how he got his foot in the door, actually. It was an attractive idea of programmatic research, sticking with a problem to a solution. It was quite different than the usual academic, you know take off. It was more rather than an individual scholar, that you had a program, where a team would work on something to try to make headway on an issue like dropout prevention.

So I don't know. It was just an attractive—I was familiar with Hopkins, of course.

Yeah, we're of course looking back. We had advantage of 50 years of perspective.

Right.

But if you were going to pick out – you talked about some of the signature accomplishments, but if you were going to look at themes, narrative themes over that 50 years which would be the ones that would be the most important?

We always had kind of a general model that we were looking for manipulable variables. Variables that you could consciously change like size, how grades were given, tracking how students were assembled by their past abilities in classes. How teachers worked in teams.

And how that would then theoretically connect to the intangibles of...
the learning environment. Intangibles would be things like norms. Do you expect – is there a norm of high standards of a school? Do kids come to school where it's a real school? You're not here to play. You're here to work. Or was it a place that the students didn't feel attached. Personal relationships, that would be another intangible, because the students and teachers respect one another and behave and –

BL: How did you measure that?

JM: You can measure it. You can ask kids survey questions about “Are the teachers are on my side,” “When I have a problem, the teachers will recognize it.” We have all kinds of scales of relationships. Norms, too, the expectations here for behavior. Teacher commitments, are they committed to the school? Are they going to work hard, stay late? Those are kind of learning climate...

Also, grades: would you work for a grade? Or student commitment to the program. We had another word for it. Engagement, I guess. What we found was when we gave kids a choice of a school, like in the Patterson we had four different academies. A business academy, an engineering one, a health one, and I think a journalism one. And we helped the kids figure out what their interests were. They could pick the school. But they became more committed when they made the choice. This is my school. And they're doing something for me. It's not what they want me to do. It's what I want to do and so on.

So the overall model was how can you figure out things you could change that would have impacts on the learning environment or these intangibles of motivation and engagement that would then connect to staying in school, coming every day and learning at a high level.

Curriculum would be another kind of thing. How do you teach reading? And of course you can manipulate how you present a lesson. So it was these kinds of structural variables that connect to environmental intangibles, learning environment intangibles, which connect to outcomes like staying in school and learning at a higher level.

So we're always trying to figure that out. That's our kind of model for a different way of grading, a different way of using time. A different way of giving teachers planning to time to work in teams. So all of our models usually have complex organizational interventions. Size, choice, teacher teaming, student choice, things like that.

BL: Did issues of race and integration remain part of the –?
JM: Yes, it did. That would actually be one of the variables of how well the students were integrated in classrooms. And how was that working? That was really racial issues.

BL: That's your resegregation?

JM: Yeah, right, right. Often our schools, I mean it's hard finding a desegregated school in America. It's sad to say. So Patterson was one. But I think that's the overarching thing of – it's called structural functionalism in sociology. Structure affects function, affects individuals. And it's kind of a way we think. These manipulative variables, structural variables that of themselves don't have direct impacts but somehow connect to relationships and norms, incentives and motivation and engagement. All that stuff.

That's how we're trying to figure out social organization of schools. Social organization of schools means the learning environment, how it connects to all the pieces of the building, and so on.

We did a lot of studies of sustaining reform. Part of the problem of school change is it doesn't stick. When the principal leaves or the inventors it reverts to same old same old. So how can you have variables that they have to consciously break down? It doesn't just degenerate. It doesn't just like – there's some word for falling back to its old –

BL: Like entropy.

JM: Entropy, that's the exact word. Social entropy, how do you combat social entropy? And some of these organizational structures like the school within the a school built around career themes. It's still at Patterson, 40 years later. Although we haven't been there. I don't think it's working. So maybe that would be it. The other is you got to evaluate everything. So you can't just use testimony: “This is working great, we love it.” You really need to do studies of impact.

And we're now doing randomized studies. We actually have a set of schools and half of them get it and half of them don't. So we have purer scientific evidence of whether it works or not.

BL: Like a clinical drug trial?

JM: It really is.

BL: The placebo.

JM: It really is. Absolutely.
BL: And this is a national –

JM: Well, there's a push now in education research to get away – well, for a long time it wasn't quantitative at all. It was case studies and ethnographic studies and so on. You learn things, but it wasn't evidence. And then it was a lot of good studies. I mean you would see – you do over time studies, before/after studies.

We would see when the intervention occurred things would change. But it still wasn't comparison groups and randomization and so on. So you ought to talk to Slavin too. He's a very interesting guy, Robert Slavin. He does experiments. He preaches this, "Evidence, you got to have evidence. Evidence based reforms."

BL: It sounds like Coleman and Rossi?

JM: It sure does, yeah. Absolutely.

BL: Were there any programs that you thought should have worked and just didn't?

JM: Oh, I'm sure there were.

BL: Research projects that –

JM: Well, it was always an iterative thing. It was back and forth. Well, I'll take again this – the first thing we changed in the talent development model was the school organization. So we had everything calm down by the school within a school and kids making choices and so on. The kids liked being there. The teachers stayed. They called home. And we really improved relationships and the climate. It was a nice place to be.

But the test scores didn't move a bit. Nothing happened for – the kids stayed longer. So you know they were attending better, but we realized we have to intervene in the instructional domain as well. It wasn't enough to just get everybody liking everybody and with serious purpose. You needed a new way of teaching, rather than the rote memory and so on.

So we had to then learn about teaching reading and teaching math. And so we now have – I had to become an expert in reading instruction.

BL: Now did you learn that by working in partnership with teachers?

JM: Yeah, partly and but also derivation from basic research. I mean there are all kinds of clues and implications of studies of
In reading the whole issue is comprehension. Are the kids thinking along and remembering what they read and reading with a critical mind? Investing in the reading process, rather than just scanning and memorizing and so on.

So how to teach comprehension skills became a challenge. And there was a lot of work going on. We stole from it and developed a better reading program. Same thing with math. Got to problem solve. It's not just dredging up the algorithm. It's a problem you never heard of. How do you tackle it without just recognizing it's a quadratic equation or whatever?

So the whole math reasoning problem solving. So that's why we try to teach instruction. It's the new push too with the Common Core of teaching the mind, not the memory. All that teaching understanding and problem solving and independent learning and so on.

So we then had to develop these reading stuff. We now sell curriculum. Sell packages of books with training modules and so on. It became much more complex than we first thought, and it didn't always take. You know you had to get commitment of the staff. So we have a whole planning process thing now. We take a year and a school commits to work with us. We don't just come in as experts. They have to get ownership and they have to develop to their own special – the career academy, what would be good? What are you good at already?

So there's a whole reform process, and it's nothing foolproof. I mean, it doesn't take every time. And it doesn't stick every time. We learned that being very specific--it's not just, give them a good idea. Give them a package. Use this. Get adapted. But do this. It's not "We need higher expectations" and we don't preach at them. We give them stuff. We can adapt. It'll work. Make it your own. Because the other stuff is too vague. Nothing happens. And it's gone. It’s a zephyr that disappears.

BL: I want to read something to you that I just happened to find. It was written by Ross Jones, who was the president's assistant.

JM: Sure. I know Ross very well.

BL: And it's from '69. But it could have been written yesterday, by Daniels yesterday. "A crucial element in improving the stability of the community is directly related to the quality of the school system. The good stable families who are needed to undergird the community," meaning Baltimore, "simply will not remain here or move into it if the school system is poor. We must seek as many ways as possible to strengthen the local public schools."
JM: Right.

BL: Was that and has that continued to be part of CSOS position?

JM: Well it's now – I think we're more national than local. Although we do often have schools here. But that's what the dean of School of Ed is all into. I mean he's really a Baltimore dean. He's a good friend. I'm blocking on his name. But the new guy. He's really wonderful. But he's got a model school now down by the hospital.

And he on the part of the School of Education is very much committed to the city. The city has a potential laboratory for us to start things and we welcome if they want to adapt the program. We will work with them. But our audience is more solving the national dropout problem. Baltimore is part of it. Glad to help. But that's not our focus. It's not an exclusive focus, I would say.

Is maybe where you fit again, maybe we're more like those labs that you're talking about. We're kind of research into practice, we're kind of this unique basic research but then development and then dissemination. And we're taking responsibility for all of it. I think that's quite unusual in academic environments.

BL: I was surprised to see Julian Stanley's name pop up in the early CSOS. I think there was an advisory group that – I wondered about the relationship if any with the CTY?

JM: We're really separate operations. CTY – I don't want to be critical, but they don't really do research. I mean they have a program that's very valuable. That they disseminate. There was a little bit of research when Julian was still alive. CTY is more an outreach program, there’s really no research component. There may be now. But it was never started with research. It was Julian trying to save the gifted kids.

BL: Yeah.

JM: I think he might have been – I'm not sure he was ever part of the Center. He might have been.

BL: No he was just a – I think he was on the advisory committee.

JM: I knew him very well. Yeah, yeah, yeah. We had great advisory committees here, by the way, over the years. CSOS had top notch people. Sandy Jencks from Harvard. All kinds of top notch people just come once every couple of years to over look us or so on.

Now Bob Balfanz and Joyce and Doug Mac Iver are really the key people at CSOS now. Balfanz is another major name in the country. He's a dropout prevention specialist. And he's now taken
the talent development thing and run with it. We have a whole
damn business. At one point Gates Foundation wanted to give us
money, but before money we're going to have to have a better
business model. So they hired –

BL: Coming from Gates, I guess that's –

JM: They hired this damn Mitt Romney group. Whatever the hell their
names were. And they came in here and lived with us for a few
months. And how to price things. How to disseminate? We're
running a real business now. Chief Financial Officers, projections
and everything. We're running a goddamn business. That's what
made Art and Sciences so uncomfortable.

BL: But I'll bet it's less fun than it was when it was a start-up
operation?

JM: I don't know. I'm not sure. Balfanz has still got the zing
going. They all do. And dropout prevention, that's the other thing
we might be known for. Not so long ago people thought the drop
out problem has been solved. That was a 60's problem. But
somehow the census statistics were so weird it looked like
everybody was graduating from college.

And we knew there were many sites where less than half of the
kids were getting out of school. Bob calls them dropout
factories. And somehow even though everybody in education knew
it, the world didn't know it. They didn't think dropouts was a major
issue. Our work from CSOS alerted the country. We disaggregated
the data and we showed them, I don't know how you're counting
this, but you're wrong. The dropout rate is about 75 percent
nationwide. And there are many, many schools, hundreds of
schools, where less than half of the kids survive.

That's a problem. And they denied it for a while. “Our statistics
don't show that.” They were counting it wrong. I don't know what
they were doing wrong. But they weren't counting a freshman to
see whether he made it four years later. Some stupid census
statistic made it look like it's not a big problem. The Hispanics a
little worse, some blacks a little worse, but not to worry. And it's
an absolutely severe serious social issue.

So we helped define the issue. Balfanz and myself and others redid
the data and published it. And then, what are we going to do about
it? So we now have a center within CSOS called Diplomas Now or
Dropout Prevention or I don't know. Some name like that.

But it has its own center within the center. So the dropout is kind
of our thing now. Dropout prevention.
BL: Now 50 years is a long time for any center anywhere.

JM: And soft money. We never had anything but soft money.

BL: And that's basically still true?

JM: Mostly true. I think some of the members now teach part of a salary from the School of Education. We've only been with the School of Education two or three years. And it's tougher now to raise money. We used to get these $5 million a year one grant for five years. It's now little piece-y grants. So you got to hustle a lot more. And the foundations, the money is with the feds. You don't get a lot of multimillion dollar grants from foundations. We got one from Pepsi right now.

Part of the reason was people would always say, how can you get these folks that could just pick up the phone and get a full professor at any of the great schools? I could just do it. How do you keep them here? How do you keep Slavin and Balfanz and Epstein when they can--? Well, they liked this whole idea of your research is going to go into practice. We want you to be a famous scholar. We're going to judge you like any other department on scientific productivity and renown. We want you to be famous for scientific ideas and publications. But we expect not just tell us what the implications are, draw out the implications. Develop it, evaluate it. And disseminate it. And lots of folks liked that. You don't get that in departments. What are you doing wasting your time out there with the schools? Because it takes time. It's really away from other things. You know you can be doing more writing.

BL: Of course you don't get grad students then, that's the other scenario?

JM: Yeah, we don't get grad students. That's right. We had a postdoc program for a while. We had a grant for postdocs. We had really renowned – it was a very good postdocs. This is all changing, since I retired a couple years ago. We're now the School of Education, I think that we're more in the training part of it.

BL: You think that's going to be a good thing in the long run for the next half century?

JM: I absolutely do. Of course again I think we had this model of, do a social invention as part of your science. If you have an idea do it in a kind of human lab, not a contrived lab. As a way of extending knowledge. Try it out. Make a change. Intervene. And evaluate the social intervention. So we're kind of preaching that and most social science scholars don't do that. It's either a simulated lab or natural
variation studies. It's not tinkering, they call it. We want to tinker with schools as an institution.

BL: That's what you call it? That's what CSOS calls it, tinker?

JM: Somebody calls it that.

BL: That's a good word.

JM: Get over that tinkering. Do some more basic research. So I think it would be fine. And students are a source of energy and inspiration and so on and so forth. So I think it will be a good development. And it's tougher to raise money now. Even though education is a prime thing. The money is not there as it was. Especially in the social sciences. It's much tougher to raise money now. It's just not in big packages. It's more hustling and little pieces. And so –

BL: The only other division that faces the same problem is public health where it's, all eat what you will and –?

JM: But again you got cancer and you know HIV and things.

BL: That's true. Muller's comment –

JM: No one ever died of history.

BL: English, English! It could have been history.

JM: Yeah, right.

BL: That's absolutely true. I only have a couple more questions. Which is is there anything that I didn't ask or that you would like to add to your reflections on CSOS?

JM: No, I just think this research development and dissemination being a kind of distinctive aspect, and that we are our own unit, too. I mean we're great friends and contributors, but we're kind of a quasi-department that's not really beholden. I mean, sociology was a founder, but we became independent. We kind of became our own unit.

BL: Okay.

[End of Audio]