

## Have You Heard episode #23 The Mismeasure of Schools: Data, Real Estate and Segregation

In this episode, Jennifer Berkshire and Jack Schneider discuss how test scores and other current metrics distort our picture of school quality, often fostering segregation in the process. What would a better set of measures include? Our intrepid hosts venture inside an urban elementary school to find out.

Jennifer Berkshire: Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire. Our topic today is schools, real estate and the complicated relationship between the two. It starts with a visit to a very particular school.

Jack Schneider: So, we're here at John F. Kennedy Elementary School in Somerville. This is where my daughter goes to school. It's the school across the street from my house. You can hear some students coming down the stairs right now. Hello? How are you?

Berkshire: If that voice sounds familiar, it's because it belongs to my cohost Jack Schneider. He convinced me to join him on a field trip on what happens to be the very last day of the school year at Kennedy Elementary.

Principal Mark Hurrie: Hello folks. Welcome to the Kennedy School. It's a special community here. It's 470 students. It's an amazing diverse community. It's over 30% special education. We have 25% of our families first language is not English. Again, it's a really diverse community that we welcome, love and support. What I would say, when it's a vertical school that's K-8, you get immersed in the diversity and it's something that's a value and an asset that we see that really prepares kids for the real world that they're going to be part of.

Berkshire: First, a little context. Somerville, Massachusetts is a city of about 80,000 people located just northwest of Boston. It has the honor of being the most densely populated area in all of New England. Over the past two decades, it's gone from being mostly a white working class city to a genuine melting pot. That diversity was a big part of what attracted Jack and his family here.

Schneider: You have students who look all different ways and whose parents look all different ways and come from all different kinds of backgrounds and head off to all different kinds of jobs each day. It was the thing that drew us to this community. That it's so rich and vibrant that you can run into somebody who has a story that is completely different from your own any day just walking across the street.

Berkshire: If you're a regular listener to this podcast, you may know that Jack is an academic researcher who spends a lot of time thinking about school quality and how we measure it. Well, part of that interest was spurred by his frustration that existing school quality measures were missing a big part of the picture about his own daughters school.

Schneider: Yeah, also, weren't capturing the fact that Somerville is a good district. So, if you look at the rank ordered list of test scores that are almost invariably published every year in the Boston Globe, you would get a pretty negative impression. Aldermen and Somerville wrote to me and said, "I can't tell you how many parents

of young children I talk to who have concluded without any serious research or inquiry that this schools suck. When I ask them how they know, they almost always say test scores or various rankings, which are based on test scores."

**Berkshire:** As an experiment, Jack tried to see if he could get the school rating tools on real estate sites like Zillow and Trulia, that help home buyers shop for homes and schools at the same time, to recommend his neighborhood school.

**Schneider:** Well, I wanted to see if I could get these tools to allow me to live where I'm perfectly happy and if I could get them to recommend my daughter's school as a place to send her, the school where she's perfectly happy and getting a good education, and I could not. My really fun experience was when I slid the quality bar all the way to 10, which is the highest and all of the schools in the area for a several mile radius, disappeared from the screen. There were homes for sale, but there were no schools that you could conscionably send your child to.

**Berkshire:** Basically, the real estate sites were telling him to forget about Somerville, instead they directed him to whiter, wealthier communities because according to their school rating tools, that's where the best schools are.

**Schneider:** Well, there were a couple of leafy suburbs that they thought would be particularity well suited to me. So, Newton was near the top of their list. I think I could get a home for about a million dollars in Newton. So, maybe once we get that Kickstarter going for the podcast I can embezzle some of it and head out west. Wellesley was another one. About the same, a little bit more expensive, I think median home value is about 1.3 million in Wellesley. Those may just be the homes currently available for sale. There are plenty of 10 rated schools, they just happen to be in extremely wealthy neighborhoods where home values are through the roof and there are very few apartments that want a good rent.

**Berkshire:** Which raises a big question, how exactly are sites like Zillow and Trulia and greatschools.org, which provides them with school performance data, defining what makes a good school?

**Schneider:** The short version of the story is they measure quality by the number of middle class and affluent white students in a building. That's not, of course, what they would tell you. So, greatschools.org for instance, their methodology is that they take standardized test scores, proficiency scores and then they balance those against growth scores, which I suppose is slightly better than just using proficiency scores. Then if you're a high school student, they also bring in SAT scores and graduation rates. So, most of these figures correlate pretty strongly with family income, parental educational attainment, and as a result of those things with race, family language. So the use of test scores as a measure of school quality is extremely problematic because a school could be doing a fantastic job at all of the things that we want schools to do, not just helping students acquire academic content in a way that can be tested by multiple choice tests. But, it specifically could even be doing a great job at that.

If students started behind for any number of reasons, they weren't read to as much as their more affluent peers, their parents haven't from birth been cheerleading for them to go to college, any of these things we know will be correlated with lower graduation rates from high school, with lower standardized test scores. Which is not to say that we should feel good about that, we should feel retched as a society about that, we should do a lot more about that, but to assert that that tells us something about school quality is a really problematic statement, particularly so when we begin to make decisions about where to live based on looking at this data.

Berkshire: Put simply, test scores often tell us more about student demographics than they do about what's actually happening inside of a school. Because those school rating tools rely on measures that correlate so strongly with student socio economic status, what they're really offering is what Jack describes as demographic data in disguise.

Schneider: We do know that students from high income backgrounds, particularly if they have college educated parents, which they are more likely to have if they're from high income backgrounds, we can go down the line of variables that end up being pretty strong predictors of student standardized test scores. All of these variables mean that these students are going to test well wherever they go to school. So if we picked all these students up and we brought them into Somerville and then we took all the students in Somerville and we sent them out to the Newton schools or the Wellesley schools, the test scores would actually follow them. So, eventually we might see some school effect, but it would be pretty minimal. So when we're looking at test scores as a measure of school quality, again, what we're really doing there is we're just looking at demographic data in disguise and that's really problematic.

Some people do look directly at demographic data when they're making decisions about where to send their kids to school and it's certainly a part of the puzzle, right? You do want your student to be in an environment that you support as a parent. So we, for instance, wanted our daughter to go to a diverse school, but there are a lot of people who simply don't know that that's what they're looking at when they're looking at test scores, or when they're looking at any number of these websites that purports to simply the question of school quality for people, whether it be [gradeschools.org](http://gradeschools.org) or [Nitch.com](http://Nitch.com) or [schooldigger.com](http://schooldigger.com).

Berkshire: Now, put yourself in the shoes of the potential home buyer. You can see on the handy map that all of the best schools are in the leafy suburbs. So, you do whatever you can do avoid the schools that don't even show up on these real estate finders.

Schneider: One of the most troubling pieces here is that because schools are valued by people and because they are associated with a real estate premium, homes in "good school districts" end up being more expensive, which means they price out lots of kids who might not have had high test scores. They become available to students who are going to have high test scores wherever they go and so you have a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy and a kind of feedback loop here where affluent parents are attracted to schools with high test scores and because they move there, the

schools then have high test scores. The reverse is true in communities like ours, although again this is beginning to change, where you see parents are scared off by low test scores and because of those particular parents do not choose to move there, they do not bring their high scoring students with them.

**Berkshire:** This episode is about schools and real estate, but we've ended up where just about every conversation involving public education seems to go these days, with the topic of segregation. These school rating tools are making the problem worse, but they're also a reflection of the fact that the way we view schools has changed.

**Schneider:** The segregation of the American schools is obviously much older than test scores, but what we've seen for the past several decades is a re-segregation of American education. You know, a big part of this is tied to people seeing schools as a private good rather than as a public good. If schools are a public good, then we are not in competition with one another for good schools. If they're a public good, we want everybody to be involved and actually the more mixed our student bodies are, the better. But, if schools are a private good, then we are in competition with each other. Then the value of my education is dictated by its relationship to the value of your education. So, if I'm getting a little bit more and a little bit more status than you, then that's good. Whether or not I'm learning anything, I mean learning is really incidental here.

So in economics this is called a positional good. So, all I really want is to come out on top. There is no sort of standard of excellence that I'm striving for. This can be tied to the increasing belief among Americans that they live in a meritocracy, that education is the way to get ahead. There's a lot of evidence that indicates that we don't see a lot of economic mobility across quintiles, so folks born in the bottom 20% of income earners, are actually likely to themselves grow up and earn incomes somewhere in the bottom 20% or bottom 40% and this seems true for those at the top. But there is this very strong belief in meritocracy and the role of education in meritocracy and there's been an increasing arms race over the past several decades is particularly middle class parents have really worked to ensure an advantage for their kids. To get their kids into the right preschool, then the right elementary school, so they can go to the right middle school, the right high school and eventually the right college. Increasingly, as we've seen more students attending college, now the aim is to get them into the right graduate school.

**Berkshire:** But, the real losers in this educational arms race are the students who are left behind in ever more concentrated poverty.

**Schneider:** The students who end up in schools with high concentrations of classmates who live in poverty end up attending schools where they feel like they have been abandoned and in many cases, because there is not a critical mass of empowered activist resource rich parents, they actually are abandoned. They do not have the ear of power the way that more resourced parents and communities have. These students look around and they see that the most disempowered people in our society are the only people in this school. That certainly has a psychological effect on students.

It's also the case that if you have a uniformed student body of students who are starting school a little bit behind, then you're presenting teachers with a much greater challenge than if you had a diverse classroom where there are a few students who need a little bit of extra attention then the teacher can deliver that extra attention, no problem. So, to create these kinds of disparities and then to pretend like unequal outcomes are the responsibility of the school, that the school has somehow failed these children just adds insult to injury.

So, the piece that really troubles me with all of this school rating and the connection to real estate is that it really does create segregated schools, which don't really benefit the most privileged and, which really have devastating consequences for the least advantaged. So, we really end up undermining our best shot at providing equal and excellent education to all students, which is to create highly diverse schools that have the resources they need.

**Berkshire:** By now, you're probably shaking your head in frustration or even despair. Once again, we've come up against what seems like an intractable social problem, but here's where our story takes a turn. Instead of just sitting at his kitchen table lamenting, inadequate and inaccurate measures of school quality that end up exacerbating segregation, Jack decided to try to come up with a better measure.

**Schneider:** You know, really what it was, was just a less insane use of available state data were we tried to not simply use figures that are just demographic data in disguise. People want demographic data, they can go in and find that, but if they want to learn something about a school, some data are helpful there like the attendance rate at a school. That's something were, sure there is a correlation between family income and attendance but great schools get kids to show up. So, that's a figure that's worth looking at or the level of curricular rigor available to students, which the state of Massachusetts on. Looking at figures on teacher turnover for instance, teacher turnover that is not due to retirement. So, our teachers just churning through this place or are they sticking around, that's a pretty good proxy for a place with a positive culture of a professional community.

**Berkshire:** This project goes back a while. What Jack just described was only part one, an attempt to work with The Boston Globe to come up with a better way to rank Massachusetts cities and towns than by test scores. That inspired a much more ambitious undertaking. What if it was possible to design a way to measure school quality that more accurately reflects what parents, students and teachers really want from their schools. He and some colleagues decided to try and to use Somerville, Massachusetts and its schools as their test case.

**Schneider:** So, we started at the beginning. The beginning is figuring out what do we actually care about, what matters? So we had parents, community members, teachers, principals, district administrators, all the principals and all the district administrators here in the district actually got to weigh in. We conducted focus groups in a number of different languages and we produced a school quality framework that really represented the things that people in this community care

about.

- Berkshire: What Jack and the other researchers found was that parents cared a great deal about academic outcomes, but their definitions of success went way beyond just test scores. Which means that the school rating tools that said to give Somerville a pass, were missing much of what parents were most concerned about.
- Schneider: They said they cared about teachers and the quality of the teaching environment, 'school culture, which includes things like safety, as well as student/teacher relationships and student/student relationships, they said that they cared about resources. So this is not just the amount of money a school has to work with but is there a science lab? Are there music classes? Are there instruments available for students? Does this school have sufficient curricular resources for teachers? Then in terms of outcomes, strong support for indicators of academic achievement, but that included things like student engagement, student valuing of learning, which in some of my research since then, we have found is often inversely related to test scores. That schools that are promoting higher test scores are often doing so at the expense of student engagement or student valuing of learning.
- Then, they said they valued the citizenship and well-being outcomes for their students. So, they wanted their young people to learn how to get along with others and to work in teams, to communicate effectively, to be socially and emotionally healthy, to be physically healthy, to be able to empathize with others and to be able to take action in their communities. So, once we figured out what people valued, then we could actually try to figure out, well, how do you measure this stuff?
- Berkshire: In order to capture what existing data was missing, they ended up building a measurement tool themselves including designing surveys that get at how students and teachers perceive their schools.
- Schneider: Some people have questioned the degree to which you can rely on these surveys, but of course, who knows a school better than the people who spend all day there, 180 days a year?
- Berkshire: The project started in Somerville, but has expanded to include six more districts. A mix of suburban communities and cities, including Boston and Lowell. It even has a name, The Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessments. I hope I got that right.
- Schneider: As it turns out, students in MCIEA schools are about one out of every 10 students in Massachusetts. So, we are scaling up and we continue to grow. We think that eventually we can scale up to become the way that schools are measured in Massachusetts and possibly nationwide, and that with people have good information about schools. By people, I mean all stake holders, so teachers, parents, community members, district administrators, school committee members. That they can engage in a more informed, more collaborative, evidence based, thoughtful nuanced, comprehensive discussion about school quality that parents

can be more engaged in the process of supporting schools. That educators will have more evidence at their fingertips to use and to track experimentation with. That school committee members, school boards, which we've done an episode on can set broader aims for their schools, rather than just saying, "We want the schools to improve in their test scores over the next two years."

The district administrators can track a much wider array of outcomes and ultimately that this can reshape the way we talk about school quality so that when people are doing things like purchasing a home, they don't inadvertently promote school segregation while not really securing for their kids a better education.

Berkshire: If you were paying close attention to that last bit, you may have noticed that Jack used the dreaded S-word, scale, but the ultimate aim here is to challenge the view of schools, there's just another product to be consumed.

Schneider: That simply isn't the way that most parents, once their kids are actually in a school, at least most parents who I talk with, that's simply not the way that they are understanding the school. The school is not a product, the school is a community that they are a part of. So, they learn the good, the bad, the difficult and they want to roll their sleeves up and get to work. The same is true of educators, right? So, educators can be steered away from schools. They look at schools that have been labeled, they're stigmatized, that's like, that's not exactly the kind of place that I want to work. But, once they're in a school community, educators are so willing to acknowledge flaws and to work really hard to try to strengthen those communities, but community is the word there.

So, you're right, we did a really grass roots process. We engaged in a really grass roots process here in Somerville and we did so for the consortium as well. My colleague, James Noonan ran focus groups with several hundred people in consortium districts and included students in those as well. What he heard from people was that they see schools as valuable because they enable young people to become the adults who they would envision themselves being someday or who they adults in the community would envision those young people becoming someday. They are not seeing schools as products. They are not treating education as a positional good. They're treating it as a public good and that each individual is a part of that public. They see themselves as being a part of a community that needs to work together to strengthen what needs to be strengthened and to celebrate what ought to be celebrated.

Berkshire: We started this episode by talking about school rating tools on popular real estate sites. Well, representatives of greatschools.org and Trulia, recently agreed to talk to Jack about the problems he'd identified. So, how did it go?

Schneider: What I recommended is that they put on their website a lot of tools for people. Put a checklist for people to take with them to a school visit so that when they're doing a walkthrough, they know what questions to ask. Put some information on there about what do proficiency scores actually tell you. What do growth scores actually tell you? Here in the state of Massachusetts, there is a figure called SGP, what does

it stand for and what does it mean? What do attendance rates tell you? How can you interpret the available state data? So, to build capacity in people. Of course, that's a lot of work. That's not a technological fix. That's not something an app can necessarily do.

So, I don't criticize them for doing the things that accompany Great Schools or Trulia or Zillow, both of which are powered by greatschools.org for doing the things that a for-profit company operating in the private sphere is going to be incentivized to do. But I do criticize them for some of the more negligent practices, like not putting some really clear language on their website about what these ratings are based on and what they do and don't tell you and how they might actually steer you in a troubling direction. That's something that they can do something about. Are they going to go out and build a new framework for school quality and collect those measures? That's not really what they were built to do. That's fine, but they ought to do a lot more to ensure that they are not causing active harm to schools and communities.

Berkshire: That was my cohost Jack Schneider who happens to have a brand new book out. It's called *Beyond Test Scores: A Better Way to Measure School Quality*. If you're thinking that maybe this whole podcast thing was just a way for Jack to move product, well, I'm Jennifer Berkshire, thanks for listening to *Have You Heard* and if I'm not mistaken, I think we're about to hear an announcement over the intercom.

Intercom: Good morning. It is now 11:56, we're gonna use the last four minutes. I want to give a heartfelt thank you for an amazing, dedicated staff for us to inspire learning this year. To student body, what a privilege it is work with you every day. Enjoy your summer. Be safe. Enjoy a well-deserved break. Make sure you give a big thank you to all the staff that have worked with you this year. Enjoy the summer. Congratulations, you've made it. It's now the end of the school day.

Student: Whoa!