

Have You Heard #42 Wisconsin Wakes Up: Signs of Spring in a Scorched-Earth State

Jennifer Berkshire: Welcome to Have You Heard, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider and I guess I'm reporting from afar even though you're actually on the ground.

Berkshire: Well, discerning listeners will note that you and I are not in the same place and that's because I am reporting live from America's Dairy Land

Schneider: And you're doing so with all of the dairy-based remunerative benefits I would assume, and hopefully you'll be bringing some back to Massachusetts.

Berkshire: They call it cheddar for a reason. So it can be kind of hard to remember in this moment when teachers who are banding together and demanding higher pay are viewed as heroes and heroines, that it wasn't that long ago that they were actually being blamed for causing the Great Recession.

Schneider: Yeah. Teachers have a been called a rapacious special interest by conservatives, who have been after teachers, particularly around their inflated pay and benefit packages, which are a burden to taxpayers or so say those who would like teachers to be working hourly wages as easily fired at will employees.

Berkshire: Well, I thought that in this season of teacher uprisings that are sweeping across the land, it would be really interesting to go to Wisconsin, which was really the state that kicked off our current era of scorched-earth, state level politics. I wanted to talk to people about the continued impact of Act 10, but also find out whether Wisconsin is showing any signs of the sort of rebellions that we're seeing play out in other states.

Jack: I feel like a listener now, Jennifer, because I'm not there with you, so I would appreciate at least being updated on whatever you found out.

Jennifer: Well, I would suggest that you listen to the episode that is about to play. But also Jack, I had a great idea while I was on my trip. I think both of us should go on the next Have You Heard hits-the-road tour.

Schneider: That's perfect. As long as it's in Alaska where I am scheduled to be then I'm happy to travel.

[Music]

Berkshire: It's been almost a decade since Act 10 was passed in Wisconsin. That was the infamous "budget repair bill" that Governor Scott and Republican legislators passed in 2011 that

basically eliminated collective bargaining for teachers and other public employees in Wisconsin. And what can be hard to imagine now in this moment when suddenly teachers who band together and demand things like higher pay are being celebrated is that back in 2011 and 2012, the debate over Act 10 really cast teachers as the enemy. I met a retired teacher named Carol Lenz, and she described to me feeling like she was viewed with suspicion by everyone around her. Even the people she went to church with.

Carol Lenz: I retired right after Act 10. It's not the reason I retired, but it was already in the works. It was just disheartening to me during that whole process. I remember the messaging that was coming out of Madison, out of the state capital, and how teachers felt so under attack. I remember going to church one Sunday and feeling like everybody was looking at me as the enemy and I knew the people there loved me, but I just felt like that. I felt different and that I was responsible for the ills of the world.

Berkshire: I heard stories like that for many of the teachers I talked to. And the same word kept popping up: "scarred." Doug Perry is a retired teacher from South Milwaukee and he serves on the school board there.

Doug Perry: It definitely scarred the state and those scars remain. I can just tell you personally, in my wife's case, it put a wedge between she and her family. They started posting things on Facebook and saying things to her about her career—my wife is also a teacher—and about her being a public employee. Very nasty stuff. So it separated friends, it separated families and those separations, those segregations continue to this day. This was not only about teachers, this was about municipal employees, corrections workers. So it put this wedge between people. I will say to this day that this was a policy to reduce public funding is what it really was. And by controlling WEAC— which is our statewide teachers association, we no longer could lobby for kids like we had lobbied for kids forever. In a later bill you saw \$1.6 billion being cut from education. And really that's what this was all about. It was about the privatization of schools. And we were in the way.

Berkshire: And that's pretty much what's happened since Act 10 was enacted. Union membership cratered, and with it political influence. In fact, as of last year, the ones powerful teachers union no longer had a lobbyist at the State House. But the story here is more complicated than just 'Scott Walker crushes unions.' As I learned in my travels, public education has emerged as a potent political issue just like it has in states like West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona. There was a poll done this spring that found that public opinion in Wisconsin has shifted dramatically over the past few years. A resounding majority of voters now think that investing in public schools is more important than cutting taxes. So what happened to cause that shift? We need an expert to help us here. Someone who can translate the state's complicated system of funding at schools into terms that anyone can understand.

Heather Dubois Bourenane: All right, well thank you for the opportunity to put the fun in school funding. That's like my new full time job in this state and it's a job that I neither relish nor

appreciate, but has somehow become like my mandate from the state because there's not anyone else who's really translating what's happening at the state level into terms that parents and communities can understand. And so what our group tries to do is take these kind of complicated state funding issues and make them make sense to regular folks. So let's start with revenue caps.

Berkshire: That's Heather Dubois Bourenane. She's the head of the Wisconsin Public Education Network and was also my tour guide. Heather: How many miles do you think we drove?

Dubois Bourenane: I don't know. I hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds. I know I filled up on gas four times.

Berkshire: Back to revenue caps. So in 1993 in response to anti-property tax fever that was sweeping the state, Wisconsin imposed limits on what each community could spend to fund its schools based on a figure that the communities themselves came up with.

Dubois Bourenane: And so districts boards went to work and they decided, 'well, you know, I guess we could get by with \$8,000 a kid.' And in another district they said, 'well, you know, we're, we're closer to 11 or we're closer to 12.' And some districts were like, 'we can't spend a dollar less than \$18,000.' And so they wrote those numbers down and they sent them into the capital and they were stamped into law and we've been operating under those revenue caps ever since. And so that's the amount that the state allows your district to spend per pupil.

Berkshire: That means that there are huge disparities between what school districts in Wisconsin spend. Take, for example, Oak Creek, which is in the southeastern part of the state. Here's school board member Leah Schreiber Johnson.

Leah Schreiber Johnson: So what that means is that our district gets much less per pupil from taxes than many of our surrounding communities. And it puts us in kind of a competition situation because we have this big community and our school is really running very efficiently. I mean, it's a great. I'm always impressed with what we are able to do with our low revenue compared to our neighboring school districts. The school district just next door to us spends something like \$2-3,000 more per kid than we do. And of course you're going to have better facilities. You're going to have more activities. You're going to have all these things because of that huge difference in what you can spend per student.

Berkshire: So part one of our tour through Wisconsin school finance was revenue caps. Part 2: spending cuts. We think about Act 10 as a law that went after teachers unions, but it also contained deep cuts to school spending. Here's Heather Dubois Bourenane again.

Dubois Bourenane: People were shocked to see that it included not just the suspension of collective bargaining rights for our educators and all other public employees, but a \$1.6 billion cut to public education over the two year biennium. As a parent who had been volunteering in

the schools and seeing what their needs were, and as somebody who was at the time working at the university in some K-12 outreach programs and had already seen the vast disparities between have and have not districts around the state, I was shocked and thinking: 'how is our district going to absorb this? What is this going to mean at the local level?'

And I think that that kind of made people think: 'why would anyone do this to us?' How could you do this to kids? That outrage still drives me to this day. The sad, sad story of Wisconsin is that we have been continuing through local level organizing and by voting to raise taxes on ourselves to make up the difference between what our schools need and what the state will provide. All of this time, we've been resisting, resisting, resisting these continued assaults on our public schools and trying as hard as we can to send the message to whomever will listen: you are not going to do this on our watch. You are not going to do this to our kids. We have plenty of money to pay for our schools and we demand nothing less than equal opportunity for success for every single kid in this state.

Berkshire: She's talking about property tax referenda. That's when a local school district says to voters, 'we need more money for the schools,' and these days, that applies to almost every school district in Wisconsin. Increasingly, communities are having to ask voters to tax themselves just to operate the schools. To which voters are saying 'yes!' This spring, for example, 65 referenda went before voters and 55 of them passed. Okay. You are now officially an expert on school finance in Wisconsin. You understand revenue caps and spending cuts and how the combination of the two has led to an explosion of local property tax referenda, but there's still one more piece of the puzzle: vouchers. Heather?

Dubois Bourenane: One thing that a lot of people don't know about Wisconsin vouchers, and Wisconsin was the birthplace of a state mandated voucher program in Milwaukee, is that when vouchers were expanded statewide, it was done through a midnight maneuver in a budget adjustment. Vouchers have never been subject to an up, down vote in this state, neither in Milwaukee or any other part of the state. A couple of years later, after the statewide expansion, we saw the inclusion of special needs vouchers and now we're in a position where even at the same moment that as our schools are being chronically underfunded, facing dire teacher shortages, crises of every sort of fiscal nature, we've expanded this voucher program to the tune of \$274 million dollars a year. That money is coming out of the same bag that the public school money comes from, off the top, before anyone else is funded and it's simply not fair. Meanwhile, the public schools are still providing busing services for private schools in their communities, all of the special education services for students at the private schools, and the cost is just unsustainably high.

Berkshire: When you talk to people in Wisconsin about what's happened to their state during the Walker years, they'll often use the expression 'divide and conquer.' Now that's a reference to something. Walker got caught on tape telling a wealthy donor about his plans to drive a wedge between public and private sector unions, but it could really refer to almost any of the divisions in this polarized state. Rural versus urban, red vs blue, white versus black. The irony of Act 10

and the policies that followed it is that everybody now seems to be mad about the same things. Take Wisconsin's severe teacher shortage. Rural districts have been especially hard hit, but they're not the only ones. Remember Carol Lenz, who was convinced that everyone in our church viewed her as the enemy during the Act 10 debate? When she retired in 2011, people lined up for the prospect of being the new band director at her school in the Fox River Valley.

Lenz: There were a over 120 applicants for my position and I got to go through them, which was kind of a fun thing. Butt now two years ago, there was another position open in my school district for a band director. There were only six applicants for that job. We've lost a lot.

Berkshire: Or take vouchers. By expanding Wisconsin's private school voucher program statewide and shifting the burden of paying for it onto local communities, Scott Walker and the legislature have made so called voucher transparency a cause from cities like Racine to remote rural regions like Superior.

Christina Kintop: My name is Christina Kintop and I am a school board member from Superior, Wisconsin. I am the vice president of the board for the last several years, and for those that may not know, Superior is located in the very northern part of the state, the very tip of Lake Superior, probably the one of most beautiful areas around. I am a little biased.

When I talk about the transparency bill, as an elected official on the school board, one of the things I feel very strongly about is that we should be transparent. We should be, we need to be transparent in our money and our business and what we do. How can that not be at a state level? if we're taking taxpayer dollars and funneling them to private schools, which fill a need in many communities, why aren't they having to play by the same rules that the public schools have to play by.

Berkshire In Racine, which is as far from Superior as you can get and still be in Wisconsin, the Racine Education Association is rallying local voters from both parties around the very same issue. Here's a union president, Angelina Cruz.

Angelina Cruz: It's sort of a unifying topic. People care very much about what their property taxes are being spent to fund in the community. When the voucher program started, initially the state footed the bill. Since then, the cost has been transferred to local property tax payers. It was done in a sort of not very evident, sort of nefarious way. The burden, the cost burden, has shifted onto the shoulders of the local taxpayers without any say in what has happened.

Berkshire: Wisconsin hasn't seen teacher protests like in Arizona or Oklahoma, but there is something else that the states have in common. Wisconsin's divestment from its public schools and the students who attend them is spring teachers and other candidates who care about education to run for office. You met one of them in this podcast already, Leah Schreiber Johnson, who is now on the school board in Oak Creek, ran for office last year after having something of an epiphany

Schreiber Johnson: What happened was I realized that my interest in politics, my desire to follow politics closely was not actually doing anything. It was just me kind of obsessively listening and I realized that the only way that things are going to go the way I hoped they would go is if people like me actually decided that action was vital. And so I started from the bottom. I said, 'okay, well, what do I do? How do I get going on this?' And my first choice was to start attending local civic meetings. I went to the Common Council meetings, went to the school board meetings went to listening town halls that were held by our local representatives, and really quickly people were telling me about other opportunities to really get involved. I was introduced to a program called Emerge, which is a nationwide training for women who are interested in running for office, specifically Democratic women.

So I applied and had the wonderful opportunity to go through Emerge Wisconsin's programming. They had a special class in 2017 because they had such a surge in interest from women wanting to run for office that they had to double their offerings. So I was part of a group of 25 women from Wisconsin that were interested in running in the spring elections. At that time, I actually wasn't positive what I was going to run for. I just knew that I needed to do something.

Berkshire: Marcelia Nicholson had a very similar thought after she got laid off from her teaching position in the Milwaukee Public Schools for the second time due to budget cuts. She decided to run for Milwaukee County Supervisor. She won and now she's encouraging her friends to run for local office too.

Marcelia Nicholson: I was a product of Milwaukee Public Schools, or am a product of Milwaukee Public Schools and I had great teachers that nurtured me and so I became a teacher. I wanted to pay it forward. And when I got into the classroom I learned that my students were dealing with worse than I had as a child growing up in the 53206 zip code. And what it did was encouraged me to get more involved, to learn why they were so disenfranchised. Our schools were underfunded and I learned that it was political and that it was a problem that had been colorized in our city and that our students were being used to divide our state. And so I got more involved. I got more engaged in the community. I started showing up at rallies and protests and speaking up, and then it eventually led to me running for office. As a legislator, I'm able to create policies that directly impact my students and their parents for the better.

Berkshire: I asked Nicholson if she thinks that concern over what's happening to Wisconsin's public schools could bridge the state's deep political and racial divide and maybe even shake up the political map here.

Nicholson: I absolutely agree in that race has been used to divide the state. Public education is important to people everywhere, but unfortunately Milwaukee is often targeted and used as an example of a problem. And so it leads people to think that, 'okay, if we cut education, then only Milwaukee will be impacted.' They later find that they are also impacted by those same cuts. I think the way we get around that is to continue on the route that we are now. I know it's a little

late, but you mentioned that people are starting to be more engaged and aware, people who weren't even ordinarily aware of these issues in the past. I think it's provided a platform for people like me to step up and run for these offices and I think it's going to take more people like me, public school teachers, parents, stay at home moms, to step up and do the things that need to be done for the people that they are, that we are.

Berkshire: And then there's this guy.

Randy Bryce: I've spent my entire life in southeastern Wisconsin. I can see what's needed, and I could do so much more, and will do so much more by taking my voice, our voice to Washington. I decided to run for office because not everybody is seated at the table and it's time to make a bigger table.

Berkshire: That's Randy Bryce, better known as Iron Stache. He's running for the seat that GOP Representative Paul Ryan is leaving. I ran into Randy at a meetup of local public education advocates and I asked him to talk about the surge of grassroots activism that has bubbled up in Wisconsin in the wake of Act 10. Here's what he said.

Bryce: So there was a feeling of hopelessness, especially after we were able to get close to a million signatures for the recall and and have this historic event. We weren't successful in recalling Scott Walker, but you're seeing is that groups like this one were forged out of that experience. They're a fantastic advocacy group for public education. This is one of the areas that that's taking off, but there have been other people who've gotten very involved around other issues too. Mine have been labor issues and veteran issues. Back in 2011, 2012 when all this happened, there was definitely that feeling of 'we can't do anything because we don't have any power.' People would ask me: 'why do you still take off of work and go testify in Madison? You know how they're going to vote.' My response was that we need more people to do that. No matter what we think the outcome is probably going to be because when we stop doing that and they don't hear our voices, they're going to think that what they're doing is okay.

Berkshire: Bryce has gotten a lot of attention. In fact, his campaign to repeal and replace Paul Ryan as he puts it, has attracted almost \$5 million dollars, mostly from small donors, but what you might not know about Bryce is that part of what motivated him to run for office was seeing the impact of cuts to education funding in his son's school district. His son who started school early require extra help to catch up with the other kids and he got it until Walker's budget cuts went into effect.

Bryce: During that time, Scott Walker was elected governor and the first thing he did was cut almost a billion dollars from public education. My son needed extra help, because he was so young. He wasn't as advanced as far as being able to read, his handwriting needed extra work. But working with the teachers, he got special one on one help that kept him where he needed to be and from falling behind. Once the budget cuts took place it, his summer school ended up closing down. So his summer slide was pretty drastic. When they tested him at the beginning of

the next year, he needed a lot of help. They also closed a school in his district because of the budget cuts so that the students were dispersed throughout the district.

Several went to the school he went to and because some of those students scores were lower than his, he got bumped out of the Title 1 program. And the only way to keep him from being held back was to talk to the teacher and get help directly from the teacher. She gave me some websites, some advice, books that I could find that were on his reading level and just told me to make sure he reads so much per day and does these kinds of activities. So I did that, and it was working with the teacher that he was able to finish up that school year with a B in reading. I've gotten to have a fantastic relationship with the Racine Educators. I mean I owe them for, where my son is today and where he's going to go in his future.

He wanted to be an ironworker for awhile. And I was like, well, if you do, that's great. Now he wants to be a lawyer and he wants to have long hair. I told him there's nothing wrong with being a long haired lawyer. Hopefully he'll do something pro-worker or environmental. Something like that. Whatever it is, I'm sure I'm going to be proud of him because he's a good-hearted kid.

Berkshire: A big thank you to everyone in Wisconsin who talked to me for this episode and patiently answered all my questions and if you would like to hear more of my interview with Iron Stache, it is available on our Patreon page. All you have to do is go to www.patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast and become one of our supporters. Your contribution will help us keep the podcast going and allow us to take the show on the road again to Arizona, North Carolina, who knows where we'll go next. Until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire. And what's the name of Wisconsin's favorite podcast?

Bryce: Have You Heard, of course.