

#52 Run Teacher Run

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

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: And Jack: It is election season. The midterms are almost upon us.

Schneider: I hear it all the time in public service announcements, but then again I'm a very particular kind of radio listener who ends up being targeted with public service announcements

Berkshire: Actually, Jack has his NPR tote bag on his shoulder right now... One of the things that makes this midterm election interesting and actually unpredictable is that there are a ton of teachers running for office at every level

Schneider: And even though this is not a new historical phenomenon, it is a fairly unique phenomenon both in terms of the number of teachers running and in terms of the reason why we see such a large number of teachers running for office.

Berkshire: Well, funny you should say that Jack, because I have been reading the coverage of this topic obsessively and the coverage hasn't been that interesting. We meet individual teachers, we hear about about their experiences, but there isn't any sort of broader, deeper context and as is so often the case, I find myself thinking: 'Gee, I wonder if there's an historical parallel?' and then it occurs to me, you know what? I have an education historian on speed dial.

Schneider: I'll fire up the DeLorean.

Berkshire: So full disclosure, there is a slight aspect of stump the professor involved in this episode. I found teachers who were running for office and ask them to share their stories. Then Jack is going to tell us whether what we're hearing is something that's happened before or something brand new. So Jack, before we meet our teachers, I thought I'd give you a chance to show off your historian chops. When did teachers running for office become a thing?

Schneider: Finding the very first teacher who ran for anything is something that I am not going to lay claim to, but I did find the first woman to win an election for governor. In fact, a dirty secret here: I outsourced this task to a graduate student.

Berkshire: Was it a woman?

Schneider: It was actually, s there's a sort of meta layer to this that I am going to take credit for: the work that a woman did in terms of digging into the ways that women have tried to seize power from men taking credit for women's work. I'll let our listeners rewind and play that one again. The first woman to win an election for governor was a woman named Nellie Tayloe Ross

of Wyoming, and she had been trained as a teacher and then worked as a kindergarten teacher for four years.

But I think even more interesting as a case is a woman named Georgia Lee Lusk, the first woman elected to Congress from New Mexico. She had been a teacher and an administrator and had kind of worked her way up the ranks until she was elected to the House of Representatives. And here's a case where you really see her professional experience informing her policymaking once in office. She was one of the first representatives to push for a cabinet level department of Education. This is decades before that eventually happened under Jimmy Carter, and she helped support federally funded school lunch programs, and she also defended teachers against proposed salary cuts. So here we have a very powerful case, not only of teaching being an entry for someone, in this case, a woman, into, you know, the broader social, economic, political sphere, but also a case of a teacher drawing on professional experience in policy making, which has been relatively rare, at least in Congress at the national level and oftentimes at a statewide level as well.

Berkshire: Thank you, Jack, for that very helpful bit of context. Now, let's meet some teachers. First up is a high school teacher in Orlando, Florida named Johanna Lopez, who is running for school board in Orange County. And her campaign is motivated by what I'm imagining is an age old theme. She's really tired of politicians mucking around in her classroom and this is a little clip from a speech she gave over the summer

Johanna Lopez: From the White House to local school boards, politicians have failed to provide solutions to teachers' concerns. I am tired of politicians telling me what to do in my classroom. I am tired of politicians failing to get better salaries, better evaluation systems and more autonomy. I am done begging for attention from our elected officials. Instead, I am running to take their seats. And you should too.

Berkshire: Now Jack, I want to get back to the issue of gender that you raised just now. Johanna didn't specify whether the politician she's talking about are male, but one senses that there is a definite gender dynamic at play.

Schneider: It is of course, I think, something that shapes not only the concerns of teachers running for office and the way that they understand political opposition or policy that ends up being directed to the classroom, but I think it's also important to consider when we're thinking about the kind of news coverage that we see here. You mentioned a moment ago, Jennifer, that you haven't really been thrilled with the coverage of teachers running for office. And I think a part of that is a kind of patronizing view of the teaching profession, which is of course highly gendered.

And it almost treats this phenomenon is something sort of cute to be appreciated from afar as if, you know, isn't this sweet that these teachers are running for office? And I just don't think that it

would be treated the same way if we saw, you know, dozens of lawyers running for office for the first time or you know, or hundreds of doctors running for office.

Berkshire: One of the questions that I put to the teachers that I interviewed was how does the fact that they are teachers influence the perception of the voters that they're meeting and we're going to meet somebody now who is running for the House in Arizona. Like a number of the candidates in that state, he was inspired to run as a result of the Red for Ed Movement, that huge teacher walk out last year. So let's meet him and hear what he had to say.

Eric Kurland: My name is Eric Kurland and my last teaching assignment, I'm on a leave now for campaigning, was at a kindergarten through eighth grade behavior program. There was a person that made a great difference in my life and helped turn me around. I was from a broken home and had some behavior issues and somebody just really cared for me. There was that one teacher. In our state we had last year over roughly 3000 classrooms without a teacher on it, and I'm thinking, Gosh, what about all those kids that were just like me that didn't have the opportunity to be with somebody who cared about them?

My standard greeting is: knock, knock, knock. Hi, my name's Eric. I'm a teacher here in Scottsdale and I'm running to be your representative in the State House because I want a better opportunity for our kids. Oh, you're a teacher. That's the one thing they pull out and then they start talking about their teachers or their kids or their, you know, their community. It's one of those things where teachers are the second most trusted profession. I saw this, where doctors, I think, 88 percent trust value in those doctors and 86 percent of teachers.

Berkshire: So what I hear when I listened to Eric is someone who's getting a very warm reception when he goes door to door, and I'm not just saying that because it's Arizona where the temperature is 120 degrees, but the macro context there is that the state is clearly divesting from its schools and its teachers and you can really hear both of those things happening at once in what we just heard from Erik.

Schneider: I think that it speaks really powerfully to the two minds that we have with regard to education, right? That we have are kind of abstract mind where we think about the fact that education is a very large expense when it comes to local and state taxation. We have a kind of abstract mind when we're thinking about this very abstract notion of national achievement or international competitiveness, but then we have a very concrete mind when we look at the school across the street for instance, or when we engage with the teacher.

You know, the split then is between the way we talk about the nation's schools and the way we talk about our own schools tends to be pretty stark. And I think we see the same thing with teachers where there's a national rhetoric about teachers being essentially on the dole, right? That they spend maybe eight months working from possibly 8:30 to 2:30. Then they go home and you know, fire up the pina colada blend and then spend a total of four months, if you include

Easter and Christmas vacation along with summer, relaxing in their hammocks and hanging out, down at the beach cabana.

And then of course, people meet teachers where they have teachers in their lives, and this is true for so many people because there are three and a half million teachers in America. You're more likely to know a teacher than you are a letter carrier or even to be friends with a doctor or lawyer. You're likely to have a teacher in your life. And that person is likely to be a pretty smart, hardworking person. So I think we are of two minds about teachers and I think that it'll be really interesting to see how this plays out.

Berkshire: One thing we know about these teacher candidates is that they are overwhelmingly running as Democrats. And this has not gone unnoticed by Republicans. Here's a quote from the communications director for the Republican State Leadership Committee. He says that teachers who were running for office are basically union plants who will - and this is an actual quote - "use their education platforms to defend a Bolshevik monopoly." Jack is shaking his head right now. So in other words, you have all these teachers running for office mostly as Democrats in this hyper partisan climate, which takes us to Tennessee's fourth congressional district.

Mariah Phillips: My name is Mariah Phillips and I'm running for Congress in Tennessee's fourth district. I've been teaching for seven years. It was a second career for me and I teach US government and personal finance at an alternative school in Rutherford County. Well, teaching during the 2016 election was really difficult. I've always enjoyed teaching the election process and making that a big part of uh, the semester and teaching during 2016. It was tough. We stopped talking about policy and ideas and the divisive rhetoric that was coming through our media streams. We're, we're impacting the students in the classroom and it just wasn't the kind of culture that I wanted in my classroom, but it wasn't just in my class. It actually affected the greater community. You know, friends that would sit next to each other at church or you know, you'd wave to each other at the supermarket, you know, we weren't doing that anymore because of the hat somebody was wearing or the, the bumper sticker on the back of their car and even family members on friending each other on facebook. It really became a change in our, in our culture and it just wasn't acceptable to me. And I knew that I wanted to do something about it.

Berkshire: Like most of the teachers running for office. Maria has a d next to her name. I asked her if she worries about public schools being seen as occupying one side of a partisan divide.

Phillips: That's interesting because I actually had a gentleman asked me that question yesterday and I will tell you that my experience has been that that perception is already out there. Um, and I think it's actually untrue. I think that I'm in the classroom and especially in, in public education, you know, my, the teachers that I know don't talk about their political views in the classroom and the fact that, you know, so many teachers running for office, you know, are

running on the Democratic ticket I think is just a sign that, that teachers care about our communities. We see the needs in our communities and we take action to, uh, to meet those needs. And I think that um, you know, focusing on public education is a platform and the Democratic Party and, and so it's something that a lot of public school teachers care about.

Berkshire: So Jack, my question for you is whether there are historical parallels. Do you see public education being treated in such a partisan fashion? Like what would you have seen somebody denouncing what their quill pen perhaps of Bolshevik monopoly?

Schneider: There really isn't a historical parallel to this because public education hasn't been under threat in the way that it is presently. You know, for most of American history, at least the part of American history where there were public schools beginning around the mid 19th century, public education has been a kind of unifying topic, at least for the majority. Certainly there have been groups that have been excluded from public education and they've worked very hard to win access and to win some measure of democratic control for their communities. So public education has been contentious in the fight to make it more inclusive over time. But the idea that it is an enterprise not worth continuing and that the people who work within the education system are somehow members of the status quo. That's a very new phenomenon. But I think there's some really interesting themes historically when we're looking at the role of education in particularly the role of teachers in elections.

Berkshire: Well, we are going to meet another teacher now and I think he perfectly exemplifies this trend that you were just describing, Jack - that he's running for office, not just because he thinks that the voices of teachers need to be heard, but because he worries that public education as an institution is in jeopardy.

Samir Paul: So my name is Samir Paul. I was a public school teacher in Montgomery County public schools in county, Maryland. Um, and I actually taught in the same exact classroom that I was a student in.

Berkshire: Samir was teaching computer science before he decided to run for Maryland House of delegates. And spoiler alert, he ended up losing the primary election back in August by just nine votes. But he says that his message that public schools are in danger really resonated with people.

Paul: It's not hard to see. If you look all around you, we can see these institutions decaying. We can see a strategic attempt to disinvest from these institutions. And then a complaint when they start to struggle, to get the job done because we have predictably disinvested from them. And then ultimately, the third step is always the same, you know, people choose to, to prioritize them, to sort of strip them for parts and sell them off to the highest bidder.

And, you know, I think that from the perspective of somebody who, you know, again, my family is new to this country relative to my, my parents came here in the early eighties, but even I see

the incredible importance and I guess I'll say the peculiarity of, of, uh, of our public institutions and, uh, it's just so important that we doubled down on them and, you know, both, again, renew our commitment and, you know, before we're thinking about how we can make sure that they get the job done and like in a new century,

Berkshire: While we were listening to Samir. I could see my cohost jotting something down in his notes: 'insider, outsider exclamation point.' What does that mean?

Schneider: Yeah. I think that this idea of teachers as both insiders and outsiders, uh, is pretty interesting, right? That the teachers are, in some sense the ultimate insiders that many of them are lifers and earning a paycheck that comes from state coffers that makes you quite an insider with regard to the perpetuation of systems and institutions and yet they are also outsiders in so many different ways. Teachers tend not to be the voice of power, they tend not to be a kind of political block with regard to shaping policy directly, whatever the sort of indirect powers their unions maybe. And so it's really interesting to think about, you know, teachers sort of as outsiders here agitating for a, the sort of ultimate insider institution which would schools sort of at the core of American society.

Berkshire: And once again, you have set us up perfectly for our next audio clip. It's kind of uncanny, so completely coincidentally, a friend of the program just happened to send me the ad that I'm about to play for you. He said that he'd found the school board candidate of my dreams. This is Marco Amaral and he's running for school board in Miami. Take a listen.

Marco Amaral: Growing up in our public education system, I understood from a very early age that equality, valued, and dignified education experience was not a right for all students, but are privileged for some. There are many systemic barriers still in place that we must collectively overcome if we truly want all our students to succeed. As a student at the University of California Berkeley and at the University of San Diego, I helped organize the largest junior level movement for public education over a generation as an activist across the state and the country have stood shoulder to shoulder with human rights leaders from around the world for the rights of immigrants, workers, students, the poor are indigenous sisters and brothers and against racism in all its faces.

As a special education teacher, I've been able to stop my students from joining gangs, inspire them to go to college and have served as a community resource to them and their families even after they graduate. From raising awareness on issues impacting our lives to changing the use of force policy as a member of the Berkeley Police Review Commission to helping kids get to college, my commitment has always been with the people and it always will be with the people. Now as a candidate for the South Bay Union School District Board of trustees, I will continue to advocate fearlessly for our students, our families, our schools, and the whole community.

Berkshire: So I obviously got very excited as I was listening to that, and Jack can testify that at one point I tied on a bandanna.

Schneider: She had her fist in the air.

Berkshire: I really did, and it both, you know, it sort of thrills me and fills me with hope, but it also makes me really nervous because what worries me is that the more public education gets cast in this, these sort of social movement and very partisan terms, the easier it is to make a partisan case for disinvesting from it and even dismantling it.

Schneider: Politics have always been a part of public education, but there was a very strong move in the early 20th century to quote unquote take the politics out of education. In many ways all that did was sort of subsume the politics under the surface so that, you know, many of the political battles happened behind closed doors or they weren't battles at all. There was really no opposition because there wasn't an open pitched political battle. So you know, certainly that's been critiqued by historians and by policy analysts, but there's also something to be said for that aim of taking politics out of education.

Of course, you know, you can never do that. That's impossible. This act of publicly funding free and open education for every young person in America that that is a very political position, but you're right that as the politics come up to the surface, particularly at this moment when our politics are so divisive, it does make one wonder about the future of public education.

Berkshire: We did an episode last year. It was one of our most popular episodes and also our very bleakest episode. And it was about sort of what, you know, what is the corporate vision of education and Gordon Lafer made the argument that one of the reasons that teachers have come under such political attack is that they really, you know, sort of alone and in our culture, their role is to raise the expectations of the kids that they teach, right? That the kid comes in and it's the teacher's job to convince them that they can be more than they thought they could be when they walked in the classroom. And I took away from a number of the people that I talked to and then the, some of the really stirring campaign ads that I heard that they, uh, they're sort of refusing to cede that ground, right? That if the, if our politics, our politics is saying you have to lower your expectations, these teachers are saying, no way, I'm not going to do that.

Schneider: I think this is a really good transition, Jennifer, for firing up the time machine. And specifically what I'm thinking about is not just this idea of people's expectations for what they will gain access to in this society, but also another episode that we did where we talked about people running for school board elections and gaining access to, you know, positions of political power that oftentimes these are stepping stones for people. That's something we've talked about. And I think it's really interesting to think about teachers running for office in this context because teachers have been winning elections as long as there have been elections, but the first real systematic push by teachers to run for office was among women. And I said earlier, I wanted to talk about gender and I think it's really important to think about here as a case study of teaching as a profession, giving people entry into, you know, social, economic and political life.

Because if you think about it, it makes total sense with women. You have to remember that for so many occupations, women simply did not have an open door either formally or informally. So teaching has long been extraordinarily common professional route for smart, ambitious women and that was particularly true in the early 20th century. It wasn't just the professional opportunity but the education that came with choosing to be a teacher. We tend to forget that hundreds of colleges and universities have undergone name changes over the years and that many of them were once teachers colleges, what were at the time called normal schools, 'normal' referring to the norms that would be established for teachers in such schools. So even the university that I teach at the University of Massachusetts Lowell was created by combining two older professional colleges, the local normal school and a local textile school.

So if we take a gender aware perspective, we can see the teaching has been really important in American political history. As historian Geraldine Clifford has observed, you know, teaching has been in the background of more women elected or appointed to political office at all levels of government than any other occupation.

Berkshire: And if I can just reference yet another previous episode of. Have you heard, last year we interviewed political scientists, Domingo morale about school takeovers, and he argued that part of what makes the takeover of urban districts and the elimination of school boards so problematic is that historically they've been a route to political power for black politicians.

Well, Jack, I so enjoyed thinking about this wave of teachers running for office in the context of history, which is why I so appreciate being able to basically fire off a request to my own personal education historian - at any time.

Schneider: Truly at anytime. Jennifer. That's what I'm here for. I have no other responsibilities.

Berkshire: Well, actually you do have another responsibility. You need to announce our graduate student research contest!

Schneider: We are right now hosting the first Have You Heard graduate student research contest. I haven't used the word annual because last time I used that Jennifer got a shifty look in her eyes. Uh, and what we are asking graduate students to do is to take a look at their own work, whether it be a thesis or a dissertation and ask one big question and that's why does this matter? Why does the public need to hear about this? Now that of course is not a question that you have been trained to answer if you're a graduate student. That's not a part of your indoctrination into the profession, that's a part of your Have You Heard training.

And so what we're asking you to do is to think about why this is a matter of public import and then to just send us a brief description and abstract of your research and then just a couple sentences about why the public needs to hear about this. Our expert panel will be reviewing

these submissions and then the winner will be hosted on Have You Heard to talk about his or her research. And there may even be a live presentation of this.

One of the contestants actually asked if the reviews were going to be blind. And the image that came to mind for me was of The Voice, the singing contest on TV. Now, Jack, I know that you watch a lot of TV and so the way that it works is that the judges sit in their chairs and then they don't see the contestant until they spin around. And for listeners at home, one of the judges does look a lot like Jack Schneider and his name is Adam Levine.

Schneider: Here's a secret: that I also have a singing voice like Adam Levine and, people who are Patreon members for Have You Heard, maybe treated at some point - Jennifer's mouth is wide open, agog right now. If there was a dictionary cartoon illustrating the word 'agog' it would be the face that she is making right now. In the future, Patreon members may gain access to a singing production of a song that we'll let the public vote for using the Have You Heard podcast handle.

Berkshire: I just hope our server is big enough to handle that kind of load. Well, speaking of Patreon, it is that special time again. At the end of every episode, we try to lure you to Patreon.com where you can search for Have You Heard and become one of our monthly supporters. It helps us keep the podcast going and if you subscribe at the \$10 a month rate or more, you get access to really our greatest treat, which is Jack's reading list. It's a custom-done reading list that matches every episode, if you're really eager to learn more about the topic,

Schneider: If you're a fan of the show and you don't have a little extra change kicking around in your pockets, that's just fine by us. This is a Bolshevik/Menshevik show and so you can support us by going on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts and leaving us a review, preferably a five star review. That helps people find the show and it just makes the two of us feel good.

Berkshire: Well, that time has arrived at last. If you're one of our Patreon supporters, stick around. We're headed into the weeds. We're going to be talking about an education topic upon which there is still bipartisan agreement - even in these divisive times. Any guesses what it is? For everyone else, thanks for listening and we're going to send you off with one last bit of inspiration. This is former National Teacher of the Year, Jahana Hayes, and she's running for Congress in Connecticut.

Jahana Hayes: My students were all working and I looked down at them and said, who will speak for them, you know, who will share their story with the world, and I said me and decided I was going to run for Congress.

I'm Jahana Hayes and this is my truth. This is my home where people are strong but they aren't supposed to run for Congress. Life handed me my own hurdles to overcome, raised by my

grandmother while my mom struggled with addiction, became a mom at 17, cast aside. But I had a community that wouldn't let me give up. I raised my daughter, worked nights, went to community college for my bachelor's, masters, my education degree.

What does it mean? I became a teacher, got obsessed with the idea of teaching my students the power inside them to change their lives and their surroundings. Before I knew it, I was named teacher of the year in my city, my state and then 2016 National Teacher of the Year. I'm Jahana Hayes. And my story is my truth.