

## #56 The Farce of School Reform

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

**Jack Schneider:** And I'm Jack Schneider.

**Berkshire:** And Jack, our regular listeners know that when we did our last episode, I was dragged into a territory that for me was very alien and I'll describe it only as something like statistical research hell

**Schneider:** I feel like I'm being set up somehow right now and I am willing to go along with it, but I don't feel like this is going to work out well for me.

**Berkshire:** Well, let's just say that I am going to have my revenge today by taking us to a territory that is so far from where we were the last time that it's almost inconceivable.

**Schneider:** Uh, I, I, I am clearly speechless.

**Berkshire:** We're going to talk about a novel today.

**Schneider:** Oh, perfect. I'll get my highlighter.

**Berkshire:** Well, Jack, before you roll your eyes and and make that little snide comment that you just made for everyone in our listening audience to hear, let me just say that the novel that we're going to be hearing about, it's called Adequate Yearly Progress by Roxanna Elden is really, I think, one of the smartest books about education policy that I've read in a while.

**Schneider:** So you expected me to be completely unprepared for this, but the joke is on you, Jennifer, because I actually read the book in preparation for today because after 9:00 PM I do read novels. I was really struck by the way that you end up looking back on the NCLB era that we continue to live in, and when you are looking at it through the lens of a kind of darkly comic novel that it kind of fits in the same way that David Foster Wallace's last book was really appropriately about the IRS.

**Berkshire:** Well Jack, I actually thought a lot about your work as I was reading Roxanna Elden's terrific novel because in some ways you work in similar ways. You take a lens as you just described it and you sort of zoom in and you say that, 'you know, if you, if you look at these issues from too far of a remove, you miss all of the kind of three dimensional complexity that make schools such interesting, complicated and, ultimately, you know, difficult to transform spaces.

**Schneider:** And I totally agree with you. I just had never thought that it was important to do so from a kind of fictive comic stance. I think it even says on the back of the book something like, you know, this is for schools what *The Office* was for, you know, cubicles and I find that to be totally appropriate.

**Berkshire:** Well, we've actually got Roxanna Elden standing by, but before I get her on the line, Jack, I want to use this opportunity to trot out something that I'm not sure that I've ever mentioned on this program before. Everyone who listens to the show knows that you are an education historian. We hear endlessly about it

**Schneider:** Here come your credentials...OK, get going.

**Berkshire:** I never get to mention the fact that I have a PhD in English.

**Schneider:** We should rename the show something like "Ask the Doctors." I feel like we have a right to say that.

**Berkshire:** That's an excellent idea. Since we're wrapping up this season, I think we'll let that rest a little bit.

**Schneider:** Or we could come back to it next season with a sort of new spin on, you know, uh, it'll be like *Dr. Oz*. I feel like you and I know as much about medicine as *Dr. Oz* does and we are doctors.

[Music]

**Berkshire:** It's the beginning of the school year at Bray Hill Valley High, a struggling urban high school in Texas and I want to start out where the novel does. Teachers, many of whom we will be getting to know over the course of 320 pages, have been summoned to the auditorium for a back-to-school faculty meeting. Here's Roxanna Elden reading from the opening pages of adequate yearly progress.

**Roxanna Elden:** Hernan D.Hernandez slipped in at the back of the auditorium. The back-to-school faculty meeting hadn't officially started yet, but it felt too late to walk to the front of the room to join the rest of the science department. He slid into a nearby seat, its springs sighing at the year's first interruption. A presenter from the district stood onstage, grinning at no one in particular. She was one of those heavily accessorized, well-connected former teachers who had long ago retreated to offices within the district headquarters, emerging at the beginning of each school year to give PowerPoint presentations. Behind her a screen glowed with a picture of a beach at sunrise, hundreds of sea stars dotting the sand, all of which suggested that they were going to start with the starfish story.

Hernan pulled a pen from his computer bag. The bag had spent the summer in his closet and it's reemergence was one of many reminders that summer was over. No more soccer games with his nephew, no more helping his father in the backyard or experimenting in the greenhouse of the Hernandez plant nursery for the next 10 months. He'd spend most of his time indoors.

Good morning y'all said the presenter. Conversation sounds dwindled as a few teachers returned he greeting. "I know everyone is sleepy, but we can do better than that. I said GOOD MORNING!"

**Berkshire:** Roxanna, welcome. As I made clear at the start of the episode, I absolutely loved Adequate Yearly Progress and that section you just read captures why. In many ways the novel is about the enormous gap between the messy complex lives of these teachers and the discourse of school improvement that is swirling all around them. Brae Hill High, as we learn early on is a school that very much needs to be improved and its staff members are being sent forth to do that work with a little inspiration from a starfish. Tell us more.

**Schneider:**

**Elden:** For your listeners who may not have heard it, the idea is that there's a starfish stranded on a beach and there's this, t's always like a kid or some innocent person picking them up and throwing them back into the water. And a very cynical guy comes up to him and says, 'you know, there's thousands of starfish stranded on this beach and you're throwing one at a time back into the water and how are you ever going to make a difference?' And then the boy throws one last, you know, starfish into the water, and he says 'it made a difference to that one.'

What I've noticed about this story is that, first of all, it's not a bad story and it's not untrue as far as what we're trying to do as teachers. We do like when we've made a difference to one student. But then when you pull back the camera a little on the context in which the starfish story is told, it's often told in like a terribly planned staff development meeting or it's often told in, you know, some emergency meeting where teachers are about to get terrible news about things that are happening to their career that actually don't in any way help them make a difference for students.

And on top of that, if you pull back the camera even farther, every teacher who's sitting in one of these meetings listening to the starfish story is also a human being and they've got their home life and their classroom challenges and they're hearing it through all of those different filters. So I wanted to show that auditorium where the starfish story is being told and hopefully later in all of those things, by the end of the story.

**Berkshire:** You take as deep into the lives of some of the teachers at Bray Hill High and you let us see that teaching is only ever part of who they are. It's such a refreshing alternative to the pop culture portrayals that we're used to. And I think it's a real testament to your skill as a writer that you managed to complicate even characters that the reader may think she already knows.

And I'm thinking of course about Kaytee Mahoney, an eager corps member of a Teach for America-like program.

**Elden:** One of the major themes with all the characters is there's these stories that are told about teaching. So in Kaytee's case—you were asking about Kaytee—she's kind of this teacher movie character, that, you know, well-meaning white lady who's going to work harder than everybody else and save the kids because she believes in them more. And then you kind of see, well, you know, how does this Hollywood version of the story play out when it's an actual person, you know, having computer glitches when they're trying to show their kids Martin Luther King videos? I mean, it just gets so much more nuanced than that. I think in general, teachers have told me how frustrated they are with the different kind of yes or no questions they get asked about teaching where it's really not a yes or no answer.

So for example, you know, do we care more about student's rights or teacher's rights? I mean, the average teacher doesn't even know how to begin to answer that question in a way that's going to fit in the timeframe they're usually given to answer it.

**Berkshire:** What makes Adequate Yearly Progress so compelling is the collision between the complex ecosystem of this school. In the comic simplistic solutions for school improvement that are being foisted upon it, it makes for a hilarious read, but you have a serious point to make as well. There's a scene early in the novel when a consultant firm change advocacy consulting partners comes to meet with the principal Dr Barrios to sell him on something that's finally going to fix his school research based best practices that work. Here's a clip of that chapter.

**Elden:** Darren Grant of Transformational Change Advocacy Consulting Partners was still talking. Dr. Barrios nodded, his gaze drifting to the hikers backpack that sat next to the consultant's chair. A metal water bottle dangled from the side as if Darren planned to hike somewhere in his suit directly after the meeting.

To be fair, Dr. Barrios was trying to like Darren Grant. This had taken less effort earlier in the meeting when the younger man had seemed so earnest that Dr. Barrios almost chimed in with his own related stories. But it had quickly become clear that Darren Grant's story was not an invitation to share. Rather, it was the personal hardship segment of a tightly engineered narrative that continued with Darren Grant's acceptance into and graduation with accolades from Cornell, which, sure it wasn't Harvard, but it was solid Ivy League, right up there with Princeton or Yale, even better than those schools by most measures according to Darren Grant.

They were now in the Darren Grant's resume section of the narrative, which included two years of leading from the classroom before moving on to Transformational Change Advocacy Consulting Partners.

**Berkshire:** Roxanna, much of the humor in the book comes from just this sort of edu jargon: the Believer's Zone, disruptive change, Research Based Best Practices That Work™. But you're using the humor to make a very serious point about education policy.

**Elden:** I wanted to tell a more complete story about what it means to be a teacher and that had to be told through multiple perspective and it had to incorporate the stories and the jargon that's flying around as you're trying to teach. So some of the school reform language, for example, has a very positive sound to it. Even take, let's say, No Child Left Behind. I mean, what's the opposite? Some children left behind? So, I mean, it's very hard to argue with, and it's also very hard to argue with the idea that you should believe in children. I don't think any teacher actually wants to argue with that, but it gets a lot more complicated when people who are experienced and often trained to frame things for the media, say something like 'the amount that children achieve directly correlates with how much their teachers believe in them.' And there are all kinds of implications for that when you're actually teaching in a classroom. And it's very hard for teachers, I think, to join the conversation and get that across.

**Berkshire:** I'm talking to Roxanna Elden about her new novel, Adequate Yearly Progress, which I'm encouraging everyone to read. Roxanna, I want to ask you about Principal Barrios. He's a deeply sympathetic character in a lot of ways, but he's also the very opposite of disruptive change in action. In other words, according to the terms of the debate that the novel skewers Barrios is part of the problem.

**Elden:** So the principal in many ways almost represents the status quo. And if you listen to any school reform rhetoric or really anyone with a new idea, the first thing they do is say the status quo is unacceptable. If you're willing to accept the status quo, you are—fill in the blank, often you would fill in the blank with something that means you're racist—and it's just accepted that the way we do things now is unacceptable. And you're supposed to take that as a given and then figure out how to make things better.

However, I think especially in our current political situation, we're definitely seeing what happens when you make a drastic change without thinking about any of the consequences. And we're also seeing that with some of the, you know, innovative companies that got involved in school reform, like Facebook for example. I think it is okay to point out the side effects of somebody's prescription.

In the case of the principal, he's kind of this guy who has come up through the system. He has a lot of sympathy for his teachers. His goal is in many ways to make the school year as smooth for the teachers as possible. He's certainly not perfect, but he kind of is forced into the situation early in the book where he is cast as the Goliath character in the David and Goliath story and I feel like this is something that can happen to someone who just kind of came up through the system and paid their dues and may not be doing everything perfectly, but definitely is not equipped to be in front of a news camera talking about their educational philosophy.

**Berkshire:** By taking us into the lives and perspectives of the people at Brae Hill High, you end up really shining a light on just how one dimensional so much education storytelling is. You were writing *Adequate Yearly Progress* at a time when the education reform wars were at their most intense. And I was wondering if there were real life stories that inspired you.

**Elden:** Something where I felt really bad for the person on the other end of this, even though they were cast as the villain was, um, years ago, Michelle Rhee, who was a celebrity superintendent, fired a principal on TV. And we really didn't see who the principal was, but his kids knew, right? And his teachers knew and it's hard to know exactly what the situation was. But during that era we were so, as a nation, we were so quick to say 'yes, she's a hero. She fired the bad guy.' And I think as people who work in a school every day and get up at 5:30 in the morning and are buying copy paper out of their own pocket, do see that a little differently and are uncomfortable with just assuming that that's the right way to go about things.

**Berkshire:** You don't shy away from what's gone really wrong at Brae Hill High. In fact, there's a teacher whom seemingly everyone agrees shouldn't be teaching. And yet here he is back for another year. I'm curious about what readers should make of this teacher who seems to be such a dud.

**Elden:** You do have this person who's pretty consistently and really publicly and obviously a bad teacher. I mean there's no way around it. But at the same time you see that it is kind of a difficult decision to fire somebody who maybe has some health problems and is pretty close to retirement and you know that they're not going to be able to find another job. And so I think that there's a valid question of where are you going to draw that line and what do you do to make sure that workplaces don't become discriminating environments where they only want to hire 22 year olds who are willing to work nights and weekends. And so the scene with that teacher tries to give a little bit of both sides of that issue.

**Berkshire:** There's no real transformation at Brae Hill high over the course of the year that we spend there. And yet for the people who work there, this is a time of tremendous flux and change, including for young Kaytee Mahoney, who is in her second year of a Teach for America-like program called Teach Corps. We're going to hear one last clip from *Adequate Yearly Progress* that capture some of Kaytee's awakening in progress.

**Elden:** It was all so well planned, unlike the materials from district-led workshops the Teach Corps folder had no missing or miss-stapled pages, no obvious spelling mistakes in the handouts. Nothing to distract Kaytee as she took notes, growing more optimistic as she wrote, this was what she had been missing. This sense of being part of a movement full of people, so right that they needed their own set of protocols, their own words, almost their own language to express how right they were. The sense of shared rightness, comforted her, carrying her along like a gentle stream.

It was almost time for lunch when the facilitator closed her notebook, reminding them again that she was just the facilitator, not the author, the expert. “We’re all here to be thought partners for one another,” she told the group. “So now I’d like to invite you to share out specific classroom challenges you’d like to deep dive into with the help of the thought partners in this room.” Kaytee drew a breath. The thought partners in the room sipped water, flipped through their stacks of student work, said nothing. “My class is actually going very well,” volunteered Jordan. “Mine too,” said the girl next to Jordan. “In fact, I pretty much already do all of this stuff. We’ve discussed.” She closed the folder in front of her gently as if to illustrate just how little she needed the information inside. An edge had crept into the air. The thought partners eyed another like gladiators entering an arena.

“I’m having a problem,” Kaytee heard herself say. “I mean a challenge.” She felt the eyes in the room snap toward her.

**Berkshire:** Kaytee, spelled KAYTEE, was actually one of my favorite characters. Now you started your teaching career through Teach for America. Is there a little bit of Roxanna Elden in the character of Kaytee Mahoney?

**Elden:** I’d say that there’s some of me in every character. The way that I’ve described it, sometimes it was putting like putting different sunglasses on as I’m thinking about different experiences and then filtering it through how that character would react. But at the same time, there are parts of me distributed through each of the characters and also parts of many other people I know and just some totally made up fictional attributes.

**Berkshire:** I so appreciated that you resisted the urge to make Kaytee one dimensional and in some ways that makes your critique of the policy solutions that she brings with her to Brae Hill High much harder to dismiss.

**Elden:** One of the things that you can especially see in Kaytee, but in a way is true of all of the characters, is that the closer you get to the purest form of your own ideals, the more you start to see the cracks along the seams. So Kaytee especially is on a diet. She’s a character who happens to be on a diet trying to lose weight in the book, but she’s also kind of on a mental diet. So she really is not going to allow herself to think thoughts about teaching that go against what she feels is her value system about teaching. And that ends up taking a tremendous amount of willpower to just kind of constantly redirect her thoughts. So she’s up against that. And then she’s also up against the fact that the purest form of her ideals is very hard to maintain.

**Berkshire:** There’s obviously a lot and it’s wrong with Brae Hill High. And I’m curious about what, if anything, you Roxanna Elden would change about this school?

**Elden:** That is a good question and I’m not sure that there is a lot of that in the book. And the reason that I would say there’s not is because if I had any agenda in writing the book, it’s almost like I want everyone else who’s trying to create solutions for schools to read this book first and

see all these moving parts and how they fit together and then think about their solution in that context. I feel like a lot of the people who have gotten involved with good intentions in trying to fix education are basically just choosing between two competing sound bites rather than really having knowledge of what's going on in schools.

And that can be a big problem because you have no idea how those dominoes hit each other at the school level so that that's more. I wanted to capture the dominoes knocking against each other at the school level, and then I'm not sure I do have a big fixed for education. So I mean there are things I think are good, there are things I think are bad, and there are things that I think have consequences but would probably be worth it. And there are things that I think sound good but are not worth the consequences.

**Berkshire:** Well, thank you Roxanna Elden, for writing such a wonderful novel and for sharing it with us on Have You Heard. The name of the novel is Adequate Yearly Progress and I cannot recommend it highly enough. Order it as soon as this podcast is over. Speaking of which I'll be right back to wrap things up and a certain cohost will be rejoining me.

[Music]

**Berkshire:** So Jack, there were a couple of times during that interview, which I obviously went off and did my own.

**Schneider:** I wish that our listeners could see the look on your face as you throw that audible elbow at me. Yeah. Great. Yes, you did that. Thank you, Jennifer.

**Berkshire:** Well, my point was that as you were listening to it just now, there were a few times where you just cracked up and it really was, I thought, kind of a visible demonstration of how silly the discourse of school reform often is.

**Schneider:** I was really struck while reading this at the way that just slightly changing some of the naming conventions that we have all become so used to leads to a new way of seeing. You know, I referenced at the beginning of the show, David Foster Wallace, and I'm thinking of, you know, the famous graduation speech he gave where he was talking about the challenge of living as being one where we're trying to recognize the water that we're swimming in. And oftentimes art gives us the ability to see that. And I think this book is no different where renaming something—I'm cracking up even trying to read this—the Office for Oversight of Binders and Evidence of Implementation is like, oh my gosh, that is not what anything would be called, but it's pretty close, right? Or Global Schoolhouse Technology. Thinking through how much we accept things that are really sort of ludicrous, both from the bureaucratic standpoint in terms of data binders and, you know, mid-year assessment data chats as they are referenced in here, and so-called best practices which we see all the time and hear about all the time and often don't question because they are so prevalent. And when you rename them the “bell ringer

activity” it's just sort of laugh out loud funny. And why is that? Because it's like, oh my God, I see my reality in a different way right now. And it is absurd.

**Berkshire:** And what I love about the way that Roxanna Elden does that is, you know, she's not just tweaking the names of things to get a laugh but to make a serious point. And so we have that great scene that she read a little bit from where the guy comes in and he's basically selling Research Based Best Practices TM, right? When you think about the way that that is used in the real world as a conversation stopper, right?

**Schneider:** Absolutely. Well, and the fact that, you know, again, trying to see the water, we swim in. The fact that we feel comfortable with third party for-profit companies coming in and telling educators what to do despite the fact that they often have no real educating experience beyond what they have seen, well, advising clients. You know, when we step back and we see what is going on, that has been going on for so long, that it has become well accepted. There's a lot of it that I think we'll look back on, that future historians at least, will look back on and be able to tell a story that is I think a little bit less funny but as equally dark.

**Berkshire:** Well Jack, I am so glad that we got to do something completely different this time around and feature a way of talking about school reform that's both hilarious but also really pointed.

**Schneider:** I feel like we really tapped into your skillset with this episode.

**Berkshire:** It really did tap into my skill set. Speaking of my skill set, I think this is the time of the episode where I try to rally up people to follow us Into the Weeds. As regular listeners know, we rely on your support to keep the podcast going and to pay our excellent producer. If you go to [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) and search for Have You Heard you'll find out everything about how to support us and you have all kinds of cool extras—like a reading list that Jack helps to come up with every episode. And the highlight is obviously when you get to hear Jack and I venture Into the Weeds and discuss some topic that's really fascinating.

**Schneider:** Yeah. I think you had everybody until “really fascinating.” For those of you who would like to show your love for the podcast in a way that is less dependent on the capitalist economy, feel free to share the podcast with friends and family to go on and give us a rating preferably a five star rating, wherever you get your podcasts or do engage with our twitter handle: [@haveyouheardpod](https://twitter.com/haveyouheardpod).

**Berkshire:** Now Jack doesn't actually know the topic of this episode's In the Weeds. I'm springing it on him. I'm still punishing him for making us spend all that time talking about data the last time.

**Schneider:** I feel like people would pay for the Patreon subscription if they could see the gleeful look on your face right now, like if we had videos of this that you would bring people over the paywall.

**Berkshire:** “Now with a video stream.” So Jack, our topic this time around is actually a little bit of a teaser for a future episode. I'm going to try to get you to think about an important education story that has been missed in the past year and one that you think is maybe going to be big in the months ahead because I know what I'm going to say and I'm going to sound really smart.

**Schneider:** But of course everybody will know that I only had five minutes to think about it, so this is like classic low expectations. I feel like I'm going to do well in that environment.

**Berkshire:** So if you're a Patreon subscriber, follow us into The Weeds. Or become a Patreon subscriber if you'd like to come into The Weeds. Otherwise, we'll see you next time. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

**Schneider:** and I'm Jack Schneider.

**Berkshire:** This is Have You Heard.