

#57 These Education Stories Didn't Get Enough Attention in 2018 (and will be resurfacing in 2019)

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

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: Jack. I don't know if you remember, but when I lured you here under false pretenses some now 50 podcast episodes ago, one of the arguments I made was that we both kind of agreed that a lot of the conversation around education can be a little, well, dumb.

Schneider: I recall the conversation well, Jennifer, it was a blustery winter's day and you promised smart, nuanced conversation that would require me to only participate for a few episodes and I think our listeners are well aware of the fact that neither of those things has been the case.

Berkshire: Well I thought it would be fun and fitting to start off 2019 with a review and a preview.

Schneider: I see what you did there.

Berkshire: Can you tell I've missed being away from this microphone? I thought it would be fun to touch on some big education stories that we think maybe deserve a little more attention.

Schneider: So this is our looking back at 2018 at the things that got overlooked and looking forward to 2019 and the way in which these things might rear their head.

Berkshire: Well Jack, can I just say you have really improved since those first days when I got you in front of a microphone by pretending that it was only for a few episodes that

Schneider: I wish I could say the same, Jennifer

Berkshire: Well I will all volunteer to go first. Here is our first topic. Roll audio please.

Audio: After the mass shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida earlier this year, President Trump formed a federal school safety commission. Today that commission issued its official report and among its recommendations, the report mostly avoids the issue of gun control, though it does urge schools to consider arming staff. Notably the report reverses Obama-era guidance on civil rights and student discipline. Today at the White House, President Trump praised the commission's work.

Berkshire: That was NPR's Anya Kamenetz describing a big story that broke right before Christmas and surprised pretty much nobody. Now this was a complicated story for all kinds of

reasons, one of which, as you just heard, was that it got lumped into that school shooting in Parkland, Florida, but school discipline is always been complicated. And Jack, one of the things that I've learned from you is that it's really been an explosive issue going way back to the earliest days of teaching as a profession in this country.

Schneider: Yeah, it's interesting actually to track the public perception of a school discipline over the years. Phi Delta Kappan has been surveying this for a half century and you know, parents are perpetually concerned about discipline and discipline as a result remains a kind of a touchstone issue that recurs year after year after year. I think what makes this case different is that it was explicitly an attempt to address the fact that Hispanic and African American students, particularly boys, were being disciplined at rates far higher than their white peers, and it was being treated as a civil rights issue. And that, that was the piece that was new from the Obama era guidance from, I believe it was 2014. And when DeVos rolled that back, she wasn't just rolling back these discipline guidelines, right? It really was a part of a larger movement to scale back any federal guidelines in K-12 education, which we've also seen in higher ed, right?, with the rolling back of the guidelines around sexual assault on campus in higher education. This is really stage setting for peeling back the federal role in both K-12 and higher education.

Berkshire: Well, I think what's so interesting about this case is that, you know, you have what you were just talking about, Jack, where the Obama folks look and see that kids of color are being suspended at higher rates for the same infractions, right? And so, you know, they attempt to do something about this. And then what you see in the DeVos response is that these old, often discredited ideas come back.

And so they put out a big report about school safety. A lot of it's about Parkland. A lot of their recommendations are really noncontroversial. And then right smack in the middle of it is this stuff about school discipline reform. And there, you know, in the footnotes is a reference to the idea that kids of color are suspended at higher rates because they're just bad, and they're bad because of the breakdown of the Black family. The Manhattan Institute has been flogging this argument for decades and they've actually been wandering around in the wilderness a bit because you know, crime rates in urban areas have fallen and fallen and fallen. Then you think, well, how can they keep making the same argument about the breakdown of the Black family? And here they are again.

Schneider: So Jennifer, this is not usually a role that I play, but I dipped into the media archives and I have prepared some clips for you and I'm hoping that you can pick up on a common theme here, which I am setting us up for story number two of 2018.

[Audio clips]

Berkshire: Well Jack, first of all, I am very impressed by your multimedia skills. Well done sir! And I think I have the answer. All the clips that you played all feature people who have left the

Trump Administration. Whereas Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of Education is still with us. Am I correct?

Schneider: Hang on—I'm going to go over to the closet and pull out the gigantic stuffed animal that you have won. Yeah, that's the story, right? It's the dog that didn't bark in 2018. I think that a lot of people expected that Betsy DeVos would be a kind of flash in the pan at the Department of Education and as people are learning, your theory that Betsy DeVos is pretty savvy and a lot smarter than she's being given credit for, although, you know, smart in a very particular way, I would add, is turning out to be, I think. True that she has lasted because she has played her cards right. She has stuck to her ideological guns. She has pursued her agenda in a way that has certainly been covered but hasn't sparked the same kind of outrage that activities at the EPA or the Department of the interior, for instance, sparked.

Berkshire: If you're keeping track on your play-at-home game card, go ahead and put a little mark next to Jennifer's name for being right about a prediction...

Schneider: We may come back to a different one, though.

Berkshire: One of the takes we actually heard a lot last year was that DeVos was having no luck enacting her agenda. And this kind of drives me crazy because people would tend to focus very narrowly on, say, the federal budget and the fact that she couldn't get an appropriation for a school choice program in there. But if you look at what's happening at the state level, her agenda is really motoring along quite nicely. And I'm thinking, you know, Illinois for example, which now has an enormous new tax credit scholarship program that pays for kids to attend private religious schools.

Or, you know, think about what we were just talking about. How she's rolled back, not just guidance on school discipline, but really across K-12 and higher ed. And when you look at what she's managed to do, there's a common theme. When the discipline decision came out, she talked about how we need to stop focusing on statistics and start focusing on individual kids. And it sounds so crazy, but it really encapsulates her worldview that any measure that attempts to do something about some structural inequity is what she's trying to get rid of. And when you insist on focusing on the world in terms of individuals, you can't have things like say class action lawsuits.

Schneider: If you get rid of federal oversight, which actually is a very much about statistics and you then just devolve all power to the state or even the local level that then creates tremendous opportunities for these efforts that have been long underway, spearheaded by conservative groups and particularly the American Legislative Exchange Council. And if the federal government is powerless, right?, if the federal government has been neutered in terms of even identifying these problems as problems within the game is over.

Berkshire: I've got a clip that I want to play for you now, Jack. And it has to do with who did and didn't vote for now President Trump in the last election and then carried over into 2018. I want you to take a listen to this clip and see if you can figure out what it might have to do with education reform.

[Audio clip]

Schneider: I think, Jennifer, that what you're driving at there is something that we discussed when we went into the Weeds last episode for our Patreon subscribers and that is the sort of interesting position that the Republican Party has ended up painting itself in where it is the anti-college party. Am I on the right track here?

Berkshire: You are on exactly the right track Jack! And to me what's so interesting about this, and I really haven't seen anyone address what this is going to mean for the education reform agenda, that you've had several writers point out that basically college has become the new culture war for Republicans. Even the argument that students should have more options available to them than just a college track has become very freighted with political baggage. You hear people saying in places like Ohio that, you know, 'why are kids being pushed into a future that's basically just going to subject them to liberal indoctrination?'

Schneider: And one of the things that's interesting to me here is the kind of strange bedfellows that we see in a working class. Voters who don't feel that, uh, this sort of elitist college for all agenda, which, you know, they have been led to believe inflates state expenditures and does not benefit them in any tangible way, that they are in support of some of the same policies that an affluent class within the Republican Party also supports because they similarly do not support college for those young people even while they absolutely would channel their resources into education for their own children.

And so you have two very different kinds of perspectives on higher education here. One which is much more about sorting and tracking and, you know, the efficient allocation of resources—the kinds of arguments that we heard from the administrative progressives in the early 20th century who created vocational tracking in schools. You hear that right alongside the same kinds of arguments that you heard in the Populist Era in the eighties and nineties from agrarian folk and from urban laborers who were saying that the country was being run by elites who were out of touch with the common people and the fact that those two arguments are basically pushing for the same agenda is just sort of head spinning for me.

Berkshire: I think what's going to be really interesting is that, you know, we're so used to hearing college and career ready, college and career ready and that that really has been the, you know, going back decades that's anchored the bipartisan education reform agenda and what happens when one of those parties starts to sound like Scott Walker did in Wisconsin, where you gen up the base in order to justify massive cuts to, to spending on higher education.

Right? Because I'm rural folks do not want their tax money going to support the likes of you. Jack Schneider, the elitist.

Schneider: Hey, I'm putting on my tweed coat. Let me fetch my pipe here. Okay, go on. You were saying, Jennifer.

Berkshire: I think our listeners get the point.

Schneider: All right Jennifer, so I've got a clip for you and don't accuse me of being lazy in terms of going to find audio for this. Listen to it first and then you'll see that there's a connection, I think a smart connection to a news story from late in 2018 and something else.

[Audio clip]

Berkshire: Well, I certainly recognize that voice. That's Derek Black, law professor. We had him on for, was that episode 41?

Schneider: You are correct. Jennifer. You are astonishing in your recall of our episodes. It's like you do nothing but sit around and listen to old episodes of the podcast in your spare time.

Berkshire: That is not entirely inaccurate. Anyway, we had Derek Black on to talk about whether there is in fact a federal right to education and I think that's a question that surfaced again at the end of the year.

Schneider: Yep, it did, in the hangover period between Thanksgiving and Christmas. There were a bunch of stories, including that story we talked about earlier about the roll back of discipline guidelines. There was also the filing in a federal court in Rhode Island of a case, a class action suit, Cook vs. Raimondo. And this is a case that does exactly what Derek Black was talking about in his episode with us which is a new approach to school funding disparities, which have traditionally been dealt with through what is called the adequacy argument. So the traditional approach which we actually saw again in 2018 didn't work in Connecticut where the argument being made was that low-income students in Connecticut were being denied an adequate education on the basis of disparities in funding between high income and low income areas. That was overturned by the Connecticut Supreme Court.

This is a different approach, which argues not for funding adequacy but actually is...this is so convoluted. But which actually argues that a baseline of funding is required in order for schools to prepare students so that they can participate equally as citizens. It's what one writer referred to as a kind of "bank shot" argument in favor of equitable school funding but it's one we haven't really seen and I'll be really interested to track it in 2019.

Berkshire: Well I love that argument and that's basically what Derek Black was arguing on our episode, right? That in the earliest days of public education and to be readmitted to the union

after the Civil War that you saw this sort of huge push to get states to set up viable public education systems that really focused on citizenship. And our definition of what schools do has gotten narrower and narrower. Now it is down to a place you may or may not have to go in order to use an algorithm-driven program.

Schneider: And as someone trained as an historian I can't help but use some of the phrases used in state constitutions which enumerate education as a right. And the most common educational objective described in these documents is, and I'm quoting here, "the general diffusion of knowledge." And that is often explained as being essential to—and now I'm quoting again—"the preservation of the rights and liberties of citizens." Lots of those constitutions explicitly state that education has value for its own sake, that it's not defined in a kind of narrow way, and when states do define education as a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself, the most common and that they identify as the end of citizenship.

And then I, again, I couldn't help myself, but I went and dug up an old *New York Times* editorial from 1890, where the editorial board at the time said the reason for the existence of Common Schools is that they are or are supposed to be good for the Commonwealth. "It is asserted and has hitherto been widely believed that they make good citizens. That without them the mass of the community would be less virtuous, less happy, less thrifty. And that in a country where suffrage is, to all intents and purposes, universal public schools or the sweeteners and the salt of morals and the light of legislation and government."

Berkshire: Listeners: if you have one of those play-at home game cards, this is the time to put a check next to Jack's name for using the word "hitherto."

Schneider: So Jennifer, this I think sets you up to have the last word on big stories of 2018 that are setting us up for stories to track in 2019.

Berkshire: Well, I'm actually gonna sneak in two stories.

Schneider: And listeners take out your game cards and this will be the second time you will be checking 'Jennifer does not tell Jack the truth.'

[Audio clip]

Berkshire: That clip I just played was Anna Nelson of the group Neighbors for More Neighbors talking about how Minneapolis just became the first major city in the US to open up city neighborhoods to denser housing. And if this becomes a thing in other cities, it has major implications for education because as you often write about Jack, the quality of our schools is very much bound up with housing and zoning policies. All of the quote unquote good schools happen to be located in communities that are zoned for single family housing, which locks out anybody who can't afford to buy a house.

Schneider: You know, I think it's really funny that people take for granted the fact that many suburbs, for instance, are zoned almost exclusively for single family homes. That's just become a part of the character and feel of those towns, of those neighborhoods. And there hasn't been a lot of attention, at least, you know, among the members of the lay public devoted to the fact that that's a very intentional move designed to welcome some people and keep other people out. And that as these kinds of rezoning efforts begin to unfold, it will cause people to deal with the fact that there are a lot of strands bound together in their assumptions about the way that particular spaces should be or ought to be—those are the same thing—in the way that particular spaces ought to be in the way they should look.

And so, you know, they will have to answer questions about why they are opposed to, let's say, apartment buildings, and the first move will, I am sure of it, be to make a sort of argument about aesthetics that it's changing the feel of the place. But really, I think what will become clear immediately is the fact that the character and feel of a place is very bound up with privilege, with schools, with resources, with access and that all of these have been bound together for so long that people tend not to see them or think about them. And so I'm excited to watch people have to talk about this really explicitly in 2019 and in the future.

Berkshire: Can I sneak in my last story?

Schneider: What does it matter if I say no? You're going to anyway.

Berkshire: Cut his mic!

So there have been a couple of local stories out of places like Denver and Nashville that cities that had seen a seen student population growth over the decades are now seeing that growth not just stop but start to decline. And the two reasons given are that one, as a result of the Great Recession, the birth rate dipped, and the other is that the cities are really gentrifying. And so in Denver there was this incredible stat, something like 80 percent of people who've moved into the city over in recent years haven't had kids.

And again, talking about housing, all of the new housing that's been built is luxury apartments. And so what that means is that we are going to see cities that have been really at the center of the education reform experiment, where new schools are constantly opening and “poor performing” schools are being closed, those debates are going to get a lot more intense and a lot uglier because all the schools are going to see enrollment drop.

Schneider: There's another interesting thing that is, I think, related to this and that's the fact that over the past decade or two cities have tried to appeal to middle class families, particularly middle class white families, in an effort to get them to stay and enroll their children in the public schools rather than to leave once their children are school age or to enroll their children in private school. That in the mindset of city leaders is preferable to them leaving the tax base entirely. And so it'll be interesting to see the way that districts respond to essentially what are

competing aims here. Right? A competition with suburban school districts and with private schools on the one hand, and on the other hand, this kind of race to the bottom competition that will take place with regard to a low-income students in quote unquote under enrolled schools, schools that are in many cases competing with local charters.

And so, you know, I would expect us to be tracking an increasing bifurcation here in the messaging about schools, right? Schools already are kind of talking out of two sides of their mouths about, you know, 'well, our budget is limited and you know, we have to, to do what we need to do in order to survive in these dire times.' And then on the other hand saying to affluent families, 'you know, we're building the school system of the future. This is going to be the top school in the state.' I'll be interesting to see how they try to reconcile those competing messages and those competing aims.

Berkshire: My guess is lots of 'advertising' will be involved. Well Jack, I feel like our allotted time today has just flown by.

Schneider: Is that because I keep looking at my watch?

Berkshire: I'm guessing that our listeners feel the same way and that they be even more eager than ever to [drum roll sound effect]

Schneider: I actually didn't know where you were going with that. I thought it was going to be sentimental about like, you know, where we did 25 or so episodes last year. Looking forward to the next... You're taking them to the paywall.

Berkshire: That's right. This is my appeal for cold hard cash as our regular listeners know, we support the podcast when we pay our outstanding producer by through your support on Patreon and if you go to Patreon.com and just search for Have You Heard, you'll find us and you'll find a list of various ways and amounts that you can support us with. And our supporters get an opportunity every episode to quote unquote follow us Into the Weeds and that's where we dig a little deeper into some topic. And Jack, if I'm not mistaken, today's topic is personalized learning.

Schneider: That's a favorite of yours. I was just too worn down from this conversation to fight you off on that. But I do want to remind listeners that there are lots of other ways to support the podcast if you choose not to participate in the capitalist rat race. And I would like to issue what I'm thinking of as the 2019 Have You Heard challenge to our most devoted listeners and I know there are at least six of them out there. And so I would like each of them to or each of you rather to identify six people and just tell them how great the podcast is and then hopefully those people will listen in and at some point I'll mention the challenge again and those six will tell another six who will in turn tell another six and our goal that way is to reach enough listeners so that when Jennifer does make her impassioned pleas for you to follow us Into the Weeds and become Patreon subscribers, that the one percenters among you will be so numerous as to make it rain gold on the Have You Heard studio.

Berkshire: On that note, I hope that you enjoyed our preview and review of big education stories. If you're going to follow us into the weeds, stick around. Otherwise we'll see you next time. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider: and I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: This is Have You Heard.