

## #58 The LA Teachers Strike and the Future of Education Reform

**Jennifer Berkshire:** Welcome to Have You Heard? I'm Jennifer Berkshire. And Jack, periodically we do an episode where you and I dig beyond the headlines. We do this when we think we have unique insights and when, uh, an interview doesn't quite pan out, you know who you are.

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

**Berkshire:** And Jack, periodically we do an episode where you and I dig beyond the headlines. We do this when we think we have unique insights and when an interview doesn't quite pan out. You know who you are!

**Schneider:** Wow. A little public confidential shaming there. Nicely done.

**Berkshire:** Well, our topic is the recent strike by 30,000 LA Teachers, which you have no doubt heard a lot about. And just in case you somehow missed it. Here's a little audio refresher.

[Audio clip]

**Berkshire:** Obviously the strike got a ton of coverage including from writers and commentators who don't typically cover education, but there were still some issues that didn't get enough attention and that is where we come in.

Jack, one of the really fascinating things to sort of take in from afar was just how successful the teachers were in telling the story of *why* they were on strike. They told the story really broadly. So typically what happens in a strike is that you hear a lot of very technical and legalistic language about things like salary percentages and benefits and it doesn't really mean a whole lot to the broader public. And that is not what happened here at all.

I teach writing and I often use the metaphor of a camera lens and the teachers in LA zoomed way out and said, you know, 'this is the big picture and the state of our schools and their funding and who does and doesn't attend them.' And that story really resonated with a lot of people and it's ended up forcing a broader debate about how we pay for schools and even whether we still believe in public education are not.

So Jack, I don't know if our listeners are aware, but we happened to have an expert on Los Angeles in our very midst. You happen to be from LA.

**Schneider:** I'm a native Angeleno though I'm not sure that gives me any unique insight here. I did want to add that a part of the effective strategy that was employed by the Los Angeles teachers was that it really was not an argument that can be turned around and presented as

quote unquote adult interests. So, you know, one of the things that the LA teachers were pushing for was a reduction in class size and another was increased mental health services and counseling services for students. And they really effectively positioned those things—large class sizes and the lack of resources for the most vulnerable students—as the result of underfunding and underinvestment in public education in California broadly and in Los Angeles in particular. And that was really effective and was really hard to try to turn around on teachers and say, ‘well, you’re just advocating for yourselves.’

**Berkshire:** Well Jack, as a special treat, I'm going to ask you to climb into the time machine and go back to 1978. That was the year when Californians voted in the infamous proposition 13 and I've even managed to dredge up some audio from back in the day.

[Audio clip]

**Schneider:** So we haven't dusted off the time machine in a while and I'm feeling particularly like Marty McFly right now because I haven't been born yet. It's two years before my birth here in California. So I'm trying not to disturb the space time continuum because it will have very devastating effect for future Jack, but it's 1978 and the quote unquote taxpayer revolt is really beginning to take shape. It's going to happen here in California and a couple of years later it's going to happen in Massachusetts as well, where many of our listeners are and where we record from, in the form of Proposition Two and a Half.

Listeners who are not familiar with how property tax works, the home is valued, let's say at \$100,000, there's a millage rate. Let's say it's two percent and you owe two percent of \$100,000. You owe that every year. Well, in California, in the late 1970s, home prices were going up and up and up as well as the cost of living. And they were Californians who were finding themselves unable to pay their tax bills because they found themselves in suddenly very valuable homes, despite the fact that they didn't have a lot of income coming in, and that was a real problem.

But it was really effectively positioned by anti-tax advocates as a widespread problem that was affecting the entire state and that needed to be dealt with through a constitutional amendment. This happens through a referendum and if I'm back here in 1978, I'm essentially watching the returns come in on this and it is going to become law. The result of all of this is that taxes really only go up on property in California when there's a massive update to the home or when the home is sold. Prop 13 has devastating consequences for property tax revenues in California and roughly a dozen of these bills pass either by referendum or through legislatures across the United States in the late 19 seventies and the early 19 eighties. And are really a part of a broader movement that brings Ronald Reagan into office. And that begins, you know, a real kind of dismantling of what people had known in terms of support for public education, K-12 and higher ed.

**Berkshire:** Well, one of the things that was really interesting was that in the months and weeks leading up to the strike, you heard district folks in LA and people who they are allied with basically saying, you know, 'it's ridiculous to go on strike.' Arne Duncan made this case in an op-ed. This is a state issue, right? This isn't something that the school district has any control over. And I think the teachers very effectively said, you know, 'we've got a funding problem,' and you see now a debate being reopened around proposition 13 in a way that it hasn't been before.

**Schneider:** In a state with massive wealth—so California I think has the fifth largest economy in the world—and in a state where much of that wealth is invested in property, you don't have a lot of income that is derived from that property. So I'm looking at a report here that indicates that about 58 percent of the funding for California K-12 education comes from the state and only 22 percent comes from local property taxes. That is way out of line with national trends where about 45 percent on average comes from local property taxes, so about twice the rate of what we see in California.

So we see a real ability to pay and not a whole lot of investment. And the result is that on lots of measures, California has declined decade by decade and there are Californians who talk about these golden years in the mid 20th century when public education, K-12 and higher education, were well-funded and California really was a model for the rest of the United States.

**Berkshire:** Well, I've got another clip that I'm going to play for you now. This is Alex Caputo-Pearl. He is the president of the United Teachers Los Angeles, and a former social studies teacher at Crenshaw High in South LA. This is from a speech he gave this summer where he talked about LA's new Superintendent, Austin Buetner, and his vision for the city's schools.

**Alex Caputo-Pearl:** It's within this context that we see multimillionaire Superintendent Austin Buetner applying what he knows now. Those are not education principles. He does not know those. He is applying investment banking and private equity principles. He's attempting to, and you can read the business journals and see this term. He's attempting to wind down wind down this public school district.

**Berkshire:** So I wanted to include that clip because it gets at something that didn't get nearly enough attention during the strike. The central tenant of urban education reform is that district like LA are hopelessly broken and really can't be fixed and if you are a leader in one of these districts and Austin Buetner or a school board member, if you still have a school board, your job is basically to oversee the breakup of the school system like we just heard about.

We heard a lot during the strike about how many charter schools LA has. It's got 277 serving more than 150,000 students, but you probably didn't hear that it's the school district itself that authorizes all of those schools. So you have this weird situation where the district is basically draining resources from itself and the kids who still go to neighborhood schools and you can see how when the people who were in charge of everything are committed to scaling up the charter

sector and they're quite explicit in LA about that being their goal. You can see how there's really no incentive to do anything about the things that the teachers were so mad about—too few counselors, or huge class sizes—because those are things that work to nudge people out of the public schools. I want to get your take Jack, but I'm also curious about how you see the connection between the funding issue that you were just talking about and the vision of people like Austin Buetner.

**Schneider:** Proposition 13 was written in a way that makes it really hard to unwind it. So as a result of that, districts that have been facing funding shortfalls and these are particularly districts who have large percentages of more expensive pupils to educate—by that I just mean students who are from historically marginalized communities, who are from low income families, low income neighborhoods, who in order to achieve equal outcomes, need greater investment—these districts, when facing funding shortfalls, have essentially been told there is no more money coming, figure it out.

And one of the strategies that has been a really supported, funded and politically supported by philanthropists and policy elites has been choice. The theory of change here has been that creativity and scrappiness will essentially solve this problem and that if we allow the market to sort things out, we'll find the schools that can make it work.

And LA is really a poster child for this. So funders like Eli Broad have really run roughshod over LAUSD and the present leadership is fully supportive of this theory of change that posits that choice is a kind of solution for the fundamental woes of public education in the city and the state. I think we're beginning to see some very serious push back against that. And I'd like to just go on the record right now on air and say, I think we should do an episode where we investigate the portfolio model in public education, which really is the kind of the distilled vision of choice as a panacea as first articulated back in the late eighties.

**Berkshire:** We started out this episode and I was saying, you know, it's helpful to think about how these stories get told using the metaphor of a camera and whether the lens zooms in up close or pulls back. And one of the things that has emerged so starkly in the course of that strike is how staggeringly unequal Los Angeles is. And you even saw that in, you know, what kind of parents were able to keep their kids home with no problem versus, you know, who had no choice but to send kids to minimally-staffed schools.

And if you think about really the entire trajectory of contemporary education reform, the whole idea has been to focus on what can happen at the school site level. How can we hold the teachers more accountable? How can we, you know, as Arnie Duncan was saying, it doesn't matter how small your class sizes, if the teacher is bad, right. That's sort of classic and yet, you know, what you saw in the course of those six days was that this city is now staggeringly and unsustainably unequal. And those are a lot of 'uns.'

**Schneider:** Yeah. I go back to LA pretty frequently and it, you know, is probably just a product of the fact that I am getting older and possibly getting wiser, at least wising up a bit. And you know, I'm seeing things that have always been there, but just seeing them a bit more clearly. But I think it's also the case that over the years that LA has just become more unequal. And so every time I go back, it's really disturbing. You know, you drive around because of course you don't, you don't walk. Only people who are newly transplanted to LA, they moved to downtown and then they walk around, and they pretend like that's a normal thing to do. But every time I go back to LA, I'm driving around and you just see how clearly demarcated the city is in terms of areas of privilege and areas of poverty.

And that's really reflected in the schools. And it's not just reflected in terms of the sort of the false binary of good school or bad school, but it's really reflected throughout the state in terms of the way that schools are funded. You have, in many cases, the neediest state in the union in terms of students who are from historically marginalized populations who are from non English speaking families, whose parents were not formally educated, who themselves live in low-income communities. In many ways the poorest state in the union and the richest state in the union almost without question side by side, without any real policy strategy for dealing with that.

**Berkshire:** I went to LA in 2015 to talk to people about Eli Broad's plan to shift half the kids in the city into charter schools. And I visited Boyle Heights, which you may know is completely encircled by freeways. And what to me was so fascinating was that those were the freeways that then shuttled people out into the newly built suburbs. One of the really influential homebuilders was a young guy named Eli Broad. When I was there, it was not long after Eli Broad's new art museum had opened. And there were these, you know, vivid red, whatever you call those signs that hang on on light poles. They were everywhere saying things, you know, like 'Art for LA. And you know, they were ads for the Broad Museum at a time where, you know, there was a report that had just come out about how all the schools were cutting art because, they didn't have the funds to support it. And I thought, you know, what an incredible metaphor for this city.

**Schneider:** Well, those students could just sign up for free tickets to the Broad Museum, right? That's their solution.

**Berkshire:** Well, even as that strike in, La was winding down, teachers in other cities including Oakland and Denver, had been threatening their own walkouts, which means that we will no doubt be revisiting this issue in future episodes, which means of course, that will be needing your support. Jack, I believe you have an exciting announcement.

**Schneider:** So, Jennifer, as we're wrapping up this episode, I want remind people that it is 2019 and we have the 2019 Have You Heard challenge going on. Some people have already completed their entries and by that what I mean is that they have engaged with our Twitter handle and shown us proof that they have pestered six friends to listen to the show. As our

regular listeners know, I am big on trying to promote the show without bankrupting our audience. If you can show us that you have made inroads with six friends or strangers with regard to listening to Have You Heard, you'll be entered into a raffle which has some sort of prize associated with it. I can't remember what...

**Berkshire:** Remember, you promised to leave a voicemail message on somebody's outgoing voicemail recording, and I warn people to expect a very loooooong message.

**Schneider:** I am revealing myself, I guess as a big Karl Cassell Fan, and if people don't get that reference, then I invite them to tune into the archives of Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me.

**Berkshire:** And my job, of course, is to try to lure you over the paywall. If you go to Patreon.com and search for Have You Heard you can show us some love with a small monthly donation and you get all kinds of cool stuff like custom reading lists for each episode and a feature that we like to call In the Weeds where we delve more deeply into some issue that you care about. Like today for example, I'm going to be talking to a teacher in Denver where a strike is looming and unlike in LA, the issue at the heart of the Denver walk out is really all about salary, specifically merit pay.

Here's a little taste of my conversation with teacher Haley Breyden.

**Berkshire:** There's been one story after another coming out of Denver that I'm sure DPS leadership would prefer not come out first. There was this story about just how amazingly top heavy with administrators the district is. And then a couple days ago some enterprising parents did some digging and discovered that actually those administrators are being rewarded very handsomely. What's up with all this?

**Hayley Breden:** Yeah. So I think I know that a lot of people who worked at our central office or district level administrators were quite upset about their salaries and bonuses being published online, but just like teachers, they're public employees. And so anyone who wants the information can ask for it. It's not secret information. I'm not sure why they were so upset because their salaries are public information on. The only thing I can think of is, I know you might have seen a few of the bonuses are \$20,000, \$30,000, one was over \$35,000, which is pretty close to what a first year teacher makes here.

**Berkshire:** If you want to hear the rest of my conversation with Denver teacher Haley Breyden, just go to Patreon.com and search for Have You Heard. Otherwise Jack and I will be back with another episode before you know it and I'm going to send you off with a little something that I think captures the spirit of our present moment.

[Audio clip]

