

## #71 The Back to School Episode

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

Jack Schneider: and I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: And Jack, frankly I'm surprised that you even know what to do with that thing that is sitting in front of you.

Schneider: It's a microphone. I haven't forgotten. I've been thinking about it ever since I listened to the two episodes you recorded without me and I came back as fast as possible.

Berkshire: Well, I will be on my best behavior for this episode because one of our listeners actually wrote and said: "When Jack gets back, please go easy on him. His wits will not be sharp."

Schneider: If you could just repeat that a little bit more slowly. I promise to respond.

Berkshire: His...wits...will...not...be...sharp.

Schneider: I agree.

Berkshire: Well, Jack, since I did not do you the courtesy of telling you what this episode is going to be about...

Schneider: I'm so glad you said that. Please continue. I'm really looking forward to hearing what this episode is about.

Berkshire: Well, it came from a teacher who I met up with in Michigan and I'm actually going to let him tell you what the topic is.

Paul Sandy: I'm Paul Sandy and I am a huge fan of the Have You Heard podcast. My idea was that, you know, school can sometimes be a tough, traumatic, toxic place for students and teachers. And what do we do about that? What do we in the trenches do about these big issues and how do we deal with that?

Berkshire: So Jack, do you accept this challenge?

Schneider: I think this is a great challenge and it's one that I've actually been thinking a lot about lately as I was sunning myself at the public pool, piling up summer reading at the public library, taking my daughter to play at the public park—thinking about all of these public institutions that I love and value and at the same time can't stop complaining about. And so I've actually been thinking a lot about all of the ways that we might be able to channel some of our dissatisfaction

with these beloved public institutions in a productive way that does not threaten their existence, but which actually might strengthen them.

Berkshire: So Paul was the one who gave me the idea for the episode and then I started thinking of other teachers who I might interview and I realized that these really are my favorite kind of teachers. They're the ones who are scathing critics of the schools and the systems in which they work and they're doing something interesting and feisty and creative to try to change it. And I realized that those are actually, you know, those really are my favorite sort of people and I did not lack for teachers to talk to.

Schneider: Yeah. Those are my favorite people too, at least when we were talking about how to improve public education because they actually know. So for me this is an important distinction, right? As I'm thinking about 'how do we couch our criticisms?' One of them as I think I alluded to earlier is you know, do you believe in the principles of public education in the first place? If not, we're going to have a very tense discussion rather than a productive one. But second is this piece about, do you actually have a sense of what it would take to improve, maybe not public education in general because context matters so much across our 98,000 public schools, but do you know what would improve your particular school?

So when Reed Hastings weighs in on this question, I am not at all interested in his input. I don't think he knows the first thing about how to improve any one particular school, much less all schools. But when people inside a school—community, teachers, students, administrators, parents, community members, other family members—when they start talking about the things that would actually make their schools stronger and support students in their communities. That's when I'm really interested in listening.

And I think there absolutely is space to think about how can we change schools or free schools up so that the people who really know what is necessary in order for a school to function well, so that they have more power and so that they have more opportunities to make their schools work.

Berkshire: Well, Jack, I really missed you while you were gone and I think that listener...

Schneider: Were you winking as you just said that?

Berkshire: No, that was, I was crossing my fingers. I think that gentleman who wrote in had it all wrong. Your wits seem plenty sharp.

Oh, you're just being sweet. Thank you. Jennifer.

[Music]

Berkshire: I met teacher Paul Sandy a few months back when I was traveling through Michigan. He hasn't been teaching that long, but he's already seen a lot.

Sandy: I see myself as trying to be there for kids and trying to create equitable education as best I can. And it's honestly, as a teacher in 2019, it's very hard to find that experience. You really are fighting against a lot externally. You're fighting a lot, often internally in your building. You're fighting against huge class sizes. You're fighting against low pay. You're fighting against deunionization. You're fighting against lack of class materials. Right? And the worst part is that those effects are worst at the schools that need good teachers the most. And that's extremely cruel and I think that's, you know who I am and I think that's a lot of the members of the PLC as well, is just trying to try to give a good education to everybody.

Berkshire: Now, if you're a teacher listening to this, you no doubt recognize the acronym that Paul just dropped: PLC. That would be the school improvement staple, otherwise known as a professional learning community. Paul is part of one of these with a bunch of Detroit area teachers and it looks a little different from what you may be familiar with.

Sandy: Our main PLC group is where we all just get together about once a month and just talk about what's going on in our schools. We try and help each other with what we're going through in our classrooms, what we're going through with our schools. And it's a great place to just be honest as teachers and, and to... I view it as a sense of like rebellion against just being silent about things that you secretly believe. I think it's a really safe place too for us to discuss, and then, and then like how can we take action, right? Okay, we have these beliefs, but then what do we do about it?

Berkshire: Paul is in Michigan where things have taken a particularly bleak turn for teachers and for public schools in recent years, but we are not going to dwell on that today. What inspired me when I met him was that he and his colleagues were so intent on doing something about it.

Sandy: It's easy to get down on things. It's easy to, it's easy to give up. And I have given up at times. I'm not going to paint myself as some like savior or whatever. I struggle with it. I'm not even gonna gonna hide that. But I think when struggling, it's uh, as Ameerah Saidi, our group's founder always says, like, it's about taking belief to action, right? So, okay, I'm struggling. Here's what I really believe. Maybe there's other people who agree with me and finding those people and now what are we going to do? Right?

It feels really good to take action. Like whether it's an opt out of testing movement, we see the, the ills of standardized testing. Most people I talk to, you agree with that, but most people don't have the political will to do anything about it. Most people agree that high class size or low teacher pay, almost everyone I talk to says teachers should be paid more, but who's gonna actually do something about it?

And it feels really good to be out there doing something about it. And you know, everybody would agree, 'oh, I want my classroom to have this social justice lens,' or 'I want kids to learn about the world and get excited about learning.' But what are you actually doing to do that? And I think, you know, it just, I think this PLC group and meeting these, these like-minded people has really provided a jolt to my education career just because it just reminds you that you're not alone and it creates a new community sort of from the bottom up rather than some corporate ed reform movement telling you how you're supposed to believe and you second guessing your common sense and what you've seen work.

Berkshire: Talking to Paul made me think about how many teachers I've met since I started writing about education, who are doing exactly what he just described. They're taking belief to action, and one of them is in Boston.

Suzie McGlone: Hi, my name is Suzie McGlone. I'm a teacher in the Boston public schools right now. I teach sixth grade humanities, we call it. It's not social studies or history anymore. It's humanities so that we can get the reading and writing in. And I teach at Orchard Gardens School and before that I taught at the Gavin Middle School, which was closed to become a charter, an in-district charter.

Berkshire: The school where Suzie teaches is what's known as a turnaround school. For a while it was an acclaimed turnaround success story. Obama and Arnie Duncan referenced it repeatedly. These days it's turning around again. And this means, of course, that there is a huge emphasis on trying to increase student test scores. But Suzie was not convinced that that was the only thing the parents of her students really cared about. So she got some of them together. She started with a group of Cape Verdean parents and then some African American parents joined in and that was the beginning of Orchard Gardens United.

McGlone: We began to have monthly dinners in my classroom where the students and their siblings and the parents would come to have dinner and we sorta did the same thing like, 'What do you want to see in a school? What's missing? What do you like about the school?'

Berkshire: And what did they say?

McGlone: Well, they said, 'we want an afterschool program.' 'We want someone in the front office who speaks Cape Verdean Creole.' Because at that time there wasn't anyone full time in our office who could speak Cape Verdean Creole. So it was very challenging as you can imagine in a lot of ways to come to a school and not have someone right there who can speak your language.

Berkshire: Things took off from there. And the more that Suzie listened, the more she started to see that the whole way schools think about how to relate to parents needs to shift.

McGlone: The phrase went from parent involvement to parent engagement and I want it to be back to involvement. Like involvement to me, that says you're in the middle of things. Engagement, you're kind of like, you know, kinda touching things and like you're at the Science Museum touching toads or something. But the involvement tells me, parent involvement says to me that you're involved, you're in the middle of it, you're making decisions. Whereas engagement seems like you're just being told things and you're being listened to, but maybe nothing's coming from that listening.

And so I want parent engagement to change back to involvement where they are at the center of decision making. They can, you know, experience the excitement and the joy that comes with building a school in a community in a way that is actually making changes in all parts of lots of people's lives. And I think that we take away that joy of involving and of involvement of students and parents in their own destinies and their own communities. And I would love to find a way to make that really happening for all of the parents in our schools and especially the ones who have seem to have at least access to it. And those would be the ones, of course, you know, a lot of times who aren't as fluent in English but are usually fluent in like two or three other languages.

Berkshire: A lot of the work Susie's been doing with the parents at her school involves storytelling. But while the project started out as a way to give parents more of a voice, Susie says she's also been transformed by it as a teacher.

McGlone: One thing we started doing was we would just pair up and we would tell stories to each other about bullying. And then it became about other things because we began to realize that people bully because of reasons, of things that happened to them. So then we just wanted to get to know each other better. And I remember one particular conversation I had with a grandmother about how she had gone to the hospital when she was pregnant at 16 and the hospital, Brigham and Women's, I think it was, turned her away. So she came back to Orchard Park where she lived at the time and had the baby by herself in her bedroom. And I don't know why, but stories like that really affect me. And I think when we see people as people, deeper and deeper, we interact in a better way and a more resilient way, sometimes in a more meaningful way. And I know this sounds very shallow or very like fluffy, like, well, 'how's that gonna make you bring up test scores?' I don't know. But you know, it made me connect with her in a way that I hadn't before.

Berkshire: I mentioned earlier that Susie teaches at a school where there's a big emphasis on raising student test scores. One thing I wanted to know was whether bringing the voices and stories of parents into her classroom has made it harder for her to work within the culture of her school.

McGlone: Just like getting to know each other better, not just talking about the school, cause we're humans at the end of the day. And when we connect through stories, it makes us have more empathy about each other. And I think when you're bringing in that layer of empathy, that's

something that cannot be seen. Like I said, it's something that you can't make about for my evaluation. But it's something that's changed me as being a teacher where I can't accept certain things going on. And it's made me struggle because it would be easier to accept a sort of system of discipline or a sort of system of testing. But when I know someone and I've heard these stories about where they've come from, I can't unhear that, as people say, and I can't go back and do things in a very basic, acceptable to the ed reform people way.

Berkshire: Now I want to introduce you to Ramon Griffin. He's not a teacher anymore. He's got a fancy title. He's the chief culture officer at the University of Chicago Charter School, a network of three schools in the city. And for the past few years he's been on a mission to figure out how to transform schools away from what he calls punishment factories. And to understand how he arrived at this place, we need to know a little bit more about where Ramon has been.

Ramon Griffin: I am a sociology, a criminal justice major from Dillard University who wanted to become a lawyer. Ended up going to law school for a year, a very reactive profession, wanted to do something more proactive work, worked in juvenile detention, became a juvenile probation officer for a very short time and then went into education. And I was at KIPP in Houston and I started in 2009.

And so I came into a structure immediately into education that was a no excuses structure, right? That was my first introduction to not only charter schools, but also a to a no excuses type of culture. And so what I learned very, very quickly was that if you don't have anything to compare it to, you're thinking that, this is in my mind, it was great. Right? There was a fourth and fifth grade and I believe sixth grade at that time, an all boys school that at that point had great leadership, and I didn't stay there long because I had another opportunity to go to New Orleans,, you know, post-Katrina.

And I was down there as a dean of students and, you know, I can remember it like it was yesterday. And sometimes when I tell this story, people kinda choke up. But you know, I can remember being told that, you know, I was going to be able to get the middle school in order. And so I understood at that point how I was being positioned as a person that was going to come in with law and order and really, you know, put the hammer down, you know, to these young, to these young people.

Berkshire: That experience set Ramon on a course that started with just trying to make sense of the kind of school culture he'd seen first in Houston and then in New Orleans.

Griffin: As I continue to reflect about that experience in New Orleans and what I used to do on a daily basis, you know, whether it was running down the hallway trying to figure out what type of hairstyle you had because if it went against the student code of conduct and I needed to, you know, issue you some type of disciplinary demerit if you will. Or if you used certain language, if you weren't dressed a certain way, if you had a different uniform shirt on under that, I was going

to be able to dole out consequences and teachers were, you know, told to do those same things as well.

And I just didn't really agree with a lot of it. And, you know, again, working with great people in those spaces. But it was just something that wasn't for me after a while because I saw what it was doing to kids and families and most of all, I saw what it was doing to me. This doesn't feel good. It's very simple. This isn't anything complex, this doesn't feel good. And if adults are saying that in that space, what do you think kids are saying? And how do we think that those types of feelings affect their social, academic, but also psychological and emotional trajectories over their lifespans?

Berkshire: These days Ramon is working at a charter network in Chicago that rejects the no excuses approach. And one of the main areas he's focused on is discipline at the schools. In 2015, Illinois passed a law requiring schools to come up with alternatives to discipline that removes kids from the classroom.

Griffin: And so one of the roles with that is to come in and to make sure that we have a culture where we're actually looking to think about what the root of behaviors are instead of the complex symptomatology of issues that we see. And so that's the excessive noncompliance. That's the defiance. That's the bullying. That's the fighting. That's the defiance again. That's the disrespect. Whatever comes off, we have to understand that there's something under that.

And then we also have to understand that we aren't a punishing factory. We are a school of higher learning. We're a school, an institution, if you will, John Dewey, the social center. And so we are here to teach. And so how can we position ourselves as educators and really help young people with understanding some of the things that are happening with them and create interventions that correspond with those behaviors instead of looking at a behavior and saying, 'this is the consequence that goes along with that particular behavior'?

Berkshire: I met Ramon several years ago when he wrote what he called an open letter to teachers and administrators in no excuses charter schools that I ran on my blog. It got a huge response, especially from young teachers who were working at these schools and just wanting to know 'what can I do?' Ramon says something very similar to what we've heard from the other teachers in this episode. Changing the school starts with getting an honest conversation going.

Griffin: Schools aren't calling themselves punishing factories. They know that they have strict behavioral management systems, but if kids are out of class more so than they're in class, it's time to start having some conversations about those things and trying to change or just alter, if you will, people's philosophies around why that is and really just being vulnerable and courageous. You know from this work that you're doing, it only takes one or two, right? It only takes one or two courageous people to say, 'hey, I don't think what we're doing is effective. I don't think that what we're doing, you know, by and with communities of color is doing them justice, is doing them right, is really giving them the tools that they need, particularly for high

school students to be viable citizens, right? when they leave this space. And so what do we need to do?

What do we need to talk about? What are the issues that need to be brought to the table? And who are those persons that also need to be at the table, right? To be able to discuss these things so that we can begin to kind of deconstruct this system that is doing more punishing than it is educating? Right? And so I'll tell you, Jennifer, the work is really tough because after that acknowledgement that what we're doing is not doing right by our young people, then the vulnerability comes with teachers and staff and leaders to say, 'Hey, you know what? We've been doing this wrong, but what are our next steps?'

Berkshire: I'm listening to these teachers just like you are. And I'm kind of in awe at how they identify some huge problem and then come up with feisty ways to make life for their students better. But I don't want to gloss over how hard this is because everyone we've heard from so far has struggled at some point. And they all told me that they've thought about calling it quits. That's why I wanted to include a teacher in this episode who is leaving. This is Ryan Heisinger. He teaches English at a charter school in Newark and he's decided to go back to school

Ryan Heisinger: If everything works out. What I'd like to do is become a licensed social worker and to combine with that in my teaching certification, sort of create a class centered around mental health, maybe call it happiness and incorporate mindfulness and journaling, narrative therapy, group therapy, things of that nature. And I would hope to, you know, make an elective and, and see how it works and make the tweaks necessary and then at some point, possibly scale it up if it's working well.

Berkshire: You may have picked up on the fact that the teachers in this episode have worked at lots of different kinds of schools, Ryan has taught at a district school. He taught at a Kipp school and now he's at an independent charter school and he says none of them really knew how to address what kids in Newark are dealing with.

Heisinger: I've worked at three schools in Newark. My entire teaching career, all six years of it so far has been in Newark. And while each school I've worked at has been very different from the last, each of them have had pretty horrible school cultures and it seems like every school and every school leader has had its own sort of...theory of change or a way that they think that they can fix the culture of a school and none of them ever has worked. And so just from my vantage point in the classroom, I know that kids are struggling with sometimes violence in their neighborhoods, sometimes poverty in their neighborhoods, poverty in their own families and struggles associated with that, be it food security or access to healthcare, whatever it may be.

And they confide these things in me and I know that those things make it very difficult for them to focus and genuinely engage with what I'm teaching in my classroom. The other part of this is, you know, social media, I think, I mean, being a teenager already is so hard. I mean, it was so difficult for me and I was I think a really sensitive kid in high school and I cannot imagine how

much more pressure there is on kids to sort of concoct and curate this, this like alternate personality or this sort of veneer of who they are and have to work to maintain it at all times in the school building. I mean, that is the pressure that I feel, you know, I think that tension in my school is palpable.

Kids are anxious, kids are nervous around each other. Kids are scared about what people are going to say about them and it causes fights. You know, all of that is really detrimental to student health. So I think a combination of all those factors have made it really difficult for kids to learn and I'm just kind of tired of banging my head against the wall over and over again, expecting different results. I mean I try different techniques and tweak curriculum in the classroom, but at the end of the day, I don't think it's getting to the root of the problem. And I think the root of the problem here is my kids are not in, you know, a head space...they don't have the mindset to genuinely engage meaningfully in my class to their full capacity. And so I guess my goal is to try to do something about that.

Berkshire: I met Ryan back in 2013 when he was just starting out as a teacher. He was a TFA corps member at a high school in Newark and we used to spar on Twitter. He challenged me to come to his classroom. I did. And we've been friends ever since. And in that time I've watched him grow as a teacher, but I've also seen him wrestle with the systemic challenges that we've been hearing about throughout this episode.

Heisinger: I kind of feel like I've failed and I, and I don't mean that in a sort of egotistical way. I don't mean it like 'oh, I couldn't go and, you know, like save all of the poor kids from, from this horrible school. So might as well give up and do something else.' I just feel like every year I've, I've read a ton of books and tried to implement new curricular changes in my classroom. I've made tweaks to the way I manage behavior. I've gotten so much better at building relationships with kids and, and despite all of that, it just feels wholly inadequate. I know that there are things that I can do better that this coming year I'm, I'm going to do better in my classroom and I'm sure that I'll continue to improve as a teacher.

But I think at this point I've just accepted that it's just not enough. And so I just want to do something that I feel would have a greater impact. I want to be able to reach kids really where I feel they are, in a way that we are not doing it in any of the schools that I've worked at.

Berkshire: Okay. So this episode was an attempt to meet a challenge laid down by teacher Paul Sandy. Since I happen to be back in Michigan working on yet another episode, I asked Paul to supply a few words of encouragement for all the teachers out there who need some,

Sandy: You know, to any teacher or anybody in education, I think it can sometimes make you feel a little bit insane too, to be dealing with buzzwords. I heard a story of somebody who came into a PD session saying, you know, something about the Cha Cha Cha's of education, and you need to Ch-ch-change your lesson and you need to Ch-ch-check for understanding. And it can make you feel insane as just like a reasonable person that hasn't drank the Koolaid.

And I think most people are on that too, but it's just finding them. And then, okay, we get it, it's bad. What do we do better? Right. And I think, you know, a relationship is part of it with students, but I also think it's gotta be community engagement and teachers utilizing students as well to actively make the world a better place and to actively, you know, together make schools better. Because otherwise we're just going to continue getting top-down dictates from corporate ed reformers and school leaders that are on some kind of weird power trip.

Berkshire: A big thank you to Paul Sandy, Suzie McGlone, Ramon Griffin and Ryan Heitzinger for making this episode happen. And Jack and I will be right back to wrap things up.

[Music]

Berkshire: So Jack, I think what inspired me most about meeting all of those teachers is that they've taught at all these different kinds of schools and they've had experiences that are really frustrating, sometimes crushing, and yet they, you know, they're not giving up. And even Ryan, who we heard from who is leaving is leaving in order to come back and do something that he thinks is really needed.

Schneider: I have been thinking about, you know, the, the sorts of things that these educators were talking about in this episode. And it occurs to me that, you know, one of the deep root causes here is the constant undermining of teacher professionalism that has happened over the past 200 years. Right? So in other fields where somebody is delivering direct service to a client, right?, if we feel comfortable with talking about the relationship between students and teachers that way, um, and has received specialized training in order to do so and has been licensed by the state to do so, and does possess professional knowledge that, you know, we treat that person as a professional. We don't so much with teachers. We don't give them the same kinds of policymaking, authority, professional autonomy, and ability to shape and guide the profession, and map its future, like we do in other professions, right? The law and medicine are common comparisons.

And so the way that this ends up playing out is that teachers are often working within a system that they did not have a hand in designing. It means that they are engaged in a kind of guerrilla architecture, or, you know, guerrilla engineering at their schools where they are sometimes covertly taking apart policies and putting them together in ways that might actually work.

It reminds me of the way that some of the, a massive architectural designs for planned cities like Brasilia were pulled apart by actual humans who had to live in them, because the plans of the architect, Le Corbusier, didn't really function that well because he himself was not actually gonna live in this place. And they ended up being radically altered by the people who had on the ground knowledge.

And it also reminded me of a blog post that Adam Laats recently wrote about the implosion of school reform in Newark... I'll try to quote, but I will more likely paraphrase. He had a great line where he said something like, 'you know, teachers may be a part of the problem because of course in a profession with more than 3 million members, you are not going to have a 100% hit rate for total genius. There are going to be some teachers who are frustrating to their colleagues in terms of, you know, their performance, or, you know, their attitudes or their professional demeanor, whatever. But he said 'you don't have a chance of succeeding unless teachers are included as a part of the solution.' And that's absolutely right.

And that's true of any profession. And so I was thinking about that as we were listening to these teachers and thinking, you know, what are the ways that we could systematically include teacher voices and build career ladders so that more experienced teachers, our best teachers were able to have a heavier hand in shaping policy, at least at the school level, possibly at the district level and maybe at the state level.

Berkshire: Well Jack, during the many, many weeks that you've been gone.

Schneider: Did you say many twice there?

Berkshire: Yeah, because it was that many.

Schneider: It just seemed like that long, Jennifer.

Berkshire: Well I had lots of opportunity to think about what special topic we could talk about in the extended play episode that we call In the Weeds. That's the area that is reserved for our Patreon subscribers. And I have a good one for you, Jack. Are you ready?

Schneider: I am ready. I just, I had forgotten since our last episode that we recorded together about your savvy and nuanced deployment of the, uh, paywall there. Well done.

Berkshire. Yes - savvy and nuanced. Yeah. So I'm going to suggest that we talk about something that I'm thinking about a lot these days, although rarely acknowledge publicly. I often get the feeling that things have gotten so out of control in schools that it might be better, like maybe we *should* just blow the system up.

Schneider: I go away for a few weeks and this is what I come back to? Okay, well we're going to talk you off the ledge. I'm happy to do it.

Berkshire: If you want to listen in on our conversation, all you have to do is go to [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) and become one of our monthly subscribers. A small donation will get you cool extras, like a ticket into the Weeds and a reading list. This reading list is going to be a doozy.

Schneider: And of course if you are a supporter of the show because you just are interested in ideas and change, we do not need your money. What we need is for you to help spread the word. So please share this episode and others with friends and colleagues, and it also helps people find the show when you go on and you give us a rating wherever you got it, Stitcher, iTunes, wherever. Hopefully a good rating. But I think any rating helps. I'm not sure.

Berkshire: Well Jack, as a special welcome home treat, I wanted to share with you a review that we just got a couple of weeks ago. Somebody wrote on Apple, "I always learn so much by listening to Jennifer Berkshire and Jack Schneider as they apply a skeptic's guide to education reform." Did you notice that she put my name first?

Schneider: I didn't notice that, but that's alphabetical order. We can't judge anything by that.

Berkshire: Well Jack, welcome back.

Schneider: Okay. Thank you. Thank you very much. Very, very much.

Berkshire: And until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire and I'm Jack Schneider. This is Have You Heard.