

#76 Party Pivot: Why Democrats Are Rethinking School Choice

Jennifer Berkshire: Welcome to Have You Heard, I'm Jennifer Berkshire and Jack has just entered the podcast studio armed with a very large folio. Jack, is that Elizabeth Warren's education plan?

Jack Schneider: It is. Do you want me to drop it? I like to drop things.

Berkshire: Please don't.

Schneider: I'm not going to drop it.

Berkshire: So I'm curious Jack. Elizabeth Warren finally released her much anticipated education plan. As lots of people reminded us, often, Warren seems to have a plan for everything. She was strangely reticent about sharing her plans for K-12 education. I'm curious about what you made of the plan that she finally revealed.

Schneider: It's really responsive to this political moment. So while I think there are pieces that Warren would have put in there regardless of political context, right? I think that expansion of title one funding investment in early childhood education, these are for progressives kind of no brainers, but there are other pieces in there that are directly responsive to Betsy DeVos' leadership of the US Department of Education for the last few years. And another big piece there is the response to what we've seen arise over the past couple of years and that is a kind of unraveling of the charter school consensus and we're really beginning to see that as a political wedge issue.

Berkshire: And the issue of what to do about charter schools really has the Democrats in knots and you see this in their proposals, right? So that, you know, they're these like sort of loud calls to ban for-profit charter schools. Elizabeth Warren, I thought, you know, sort of smartly, uh, explained that you know, that it's also nonprofit schools that are sort of run as for-profits, very complicated. You know, you have division among key democratic constituencies, but I think for our purposes, Jack as a podcast that likes to take issues out of the news and then drag them back across education history, I think it'll be really interesting to go back to the early days of the charter school consensus and see sort of how that initial coalition came together and where we can predict the troubles that are now dogging the Democrats.

Schneider: It's a deeper kind of conversation that we too rarely have when it comes to charter schools. Uh, the debate over charter schools is too often that, right? It's a debate and it's not even a debate. It's a shouting match. And I think that if we can talk about, you know, the origins of charters, the kinds of interesting and in some ways strange alliances that led to the creation of the promises that were made on behalf of charters, the way that charters are incentivized to engage in particular kinds of practices, the promises that have been fulfilled or not fulfilled over

the years. I think this is what leads us to a more nuanced conversation where instead of saying that we are for or against charters, we can do something that I think is more interesting and say, here's how I think we move forward from this present moment where clearly there are problems. Clearly there are people who are unhappy. Clearly there are loser on both sides of this debate. And how do we try to move forward so that we are serving the needs of every kid? Because ultimately, you know, we've got a rising share of children who are in charter schools. They're clearly serving a kind of role here. We don't want to neglect those kids, but we also need to think seriously about what the impact is on traditional public schools.

Berkshire: This is sounding like a really long episode so I should let our listeners know that. Give them a little behind the scenes glimpse. Um, so Jack actually did the interviewing for this episode on his own. So Jack, why don't you take the lead and tell us who we're going to be hearing from.

Schneider: You know, you could have dropped the phrase "on his own," you know .It was like, "and the training wheels came off and he didn't fall down."

Berkshire: We're all about leadership development at Have You Heard.

Schneider: I spoke with Jon Valant who is a fellow at the Brown Center on Education at the Brookings Institution and we had a pretty wide ranging conversation about charter schools. And the reason I turned to Jon is that he is one of the sanest voices around charter schools who's really hard to pin down. I think that's always a good sign when somebody is so thoughtful about a complex issue that you can't easily place that person in a bucket. And so Jon for me was the go to person for this conversation.

Berkshire: So Jack, we did an episode very early on about the--we called it the DNA of charter schools--and it was this whole idea that you don't really have to scratch the surface very much to find out that behind the selling points that we're so used to, things like autonomy and innovation, there was always this neoliberal--I have to slip that in--this neoliberal vision that was, that was really right there from the beginning. But I think what's so interesting about the conversation that you had with Jon Valant is that you see from the beginning that there are just, there's this impossible constellation of things, many of which are contradictory that people expected charter schools to be able to pull off.

Schneider: I've spoken about this, not just with Jon, but also with leaders in the charter school movement, both at the state level and the national level. And I think universally people now agree that what you referred to as a kind of constellation of motives is something originally was really to the advantage of the movement and is now becoming problematic. And Jon had some interesting thoughts about it.

Jon Valant: I think it's the case that there was no single original vision for charter schools. There were a lot of different visions held by a lot of different people who saw different things in

charter schools. And so some of that came from different sides of the political spectrum. You had conservatives who sort of liked the idea that you would bring market principles into public education. You had liberals who liked the idea that that the sort of opportunity to choose schools would no longer just be something that was afforded to families who could choose where they live or could pay for private school tuition, but also there would be a public school alternative to a local public school. You had a lot of teachers who sort of liked the idea that maybe teachers would have more say over what was happening in classrooms.

And so you start to get these, these different visions of what charters can be and when you start to piece together all of those promises and all of that potential, you get this image of these schools that are supposed to be able to outperform traditional public schools in core academic subjects while at the same time serving as laboratories for innovation that do really different things from traditional public schools. There supposed to create opportunities for the most disadvantaged families while at the same time integrating public schools racially and in lots of other different kinds of ways. And they're going to do all that at lower costs per pupil than what we're used to paying. While they're also empowering teachers. And while they're sort of contributing to the improvement of the public education education system as a whole. And while, I mean, that is a wonderful vision if all of those things could have come to be, but they were never going to all come to be. It was sort of an unrealistic vision. If you put all of those different visions together and it has not happened and it just realistically will not happen.

Berkshire: I think it's so interesting to go back and look at the original political coalition. You often refer to it as strange bedfellows that really brought us charter schools that, you know, you had Republicans at the state level teaming up with Democrats and civil rights groups especially during the Clinton years and that's what we're starting to see unravel. And I think that when you go back and look at that original coalition, you can see the tensions that are now really obvious but maybe weren't so obvious at the time.

Schneider: Absolutely. And I think it's also telling that in many cases the more conservative proponents of charter schools have really stuck around. And where we're really seeing a fraying of the coalition is among civil rights groups. And so the NAACP for instance, has been divided across chapters. And Jon had some insights about this that I think will help us understand it.

Valant: Yeah. So it's a good question about whether it was good politics. I think in part it was necessary politics. So if you look at sort of the early charter school laws, they relied on these coalitions between, um, it could be Republican governors who really sort of bought into this idea of efficiency and that we need sort of markets to push traditional public school systems. But often where charters were going to locate was going to be an urban areas and they weren't going to get very far unless they could also draw in some civil rights leaders and some progressives and some, uh, communities of color to sort of buy into the idea that this is something that we need to do and to get to sort of attract those, those unusual bedfellows that you don't often see in politics.

You can't appeal using a single argument to us, a single principal. They're just, they see things differently. So there was no real way to pull together that that coalition without having this sort of big, broad province, um, which in hindsight fields like it is sort of the, um, it is the problem and the challenge and the weakness at the core of the whole idea is that it feels like there's just a fundamental over promise on what charter schools could deliver. But that was all part of that sort of building a coalition to actually get something done.

Berkshire: The other thing that I think is so interesting is that now decades into this experiment, you see the tensions between these different visions really coming to the fore. And I'm thinking about how, you know, on the one hand, you're going to have enhanced accountability, right? That you don't get to keep your charter if you're not delivering results. You're also going to have free market principles, which we talk about all the time on this show. And I love to make the argument that the market ultimately sort of eats everything else. And then you have the, you know, giving parents expanded choice, but what are you giving them a choice of, right? And so I think in retrospect, it seems impossible that you would have all those things happening at the same time and that it, you know, wouldn't sort of crash.

Schneider: Yeah. And one of the things that you're really pushing on here, Jennifer, is that when you have a number of very high level sort of philosophical propositions behind a policy that it's really going to live through the details. And particularly in the case of a policy proposal like charter schools where there were a number of, some would say conflicting philosophies undergirding the charter school movement or at least, you know, not completely congruent philosophies or policy aims that looking at the details of how the policy structure was built, right. What are the incentives that charter schools are going to be responding to? For instance, you mentioned high stakes testing and, you know, the free market, the realities of the market that ultimately is going to play out over time in a way that we'll prioritize some values and concerns over others. So I put this question to Jon and asked him to talk through what are some of the consequences that we've seen as a result of this.

Valant: So at the foundation of the charter school idea, you have these, these few different principles. You have a principle of autonomy, which is the idea that schools ought to have some flexibility to decide what types of themes and missions they have and how they teach kids and all of those kinds of things. You have accountability. But the idea that in exchange for having this, this autonomy, um, school is also going to be held accountable to make sure they get good outcomes and to families who can decide not to send their kids there. And you have choice. Parents are going to have the opportunity to choose the school they're not assigned based on where they live. And a lot of our experience with charter schools and sort of the way these reforms have succeeded in some places failed and others or done some mix of the two has to do with the way those principals interact in ways that are really complicated and I think messier than we might have realized.

So for example, when you look at autonomy, so autonomy is there to create meaningful choices for parents. It is autonomy that allows schools to do kind of different things and to create a

schools with different themes and all of those kinds of things that makes choice rich and meaningful when you look at accountability and autonomy. So schools sort of technically have lots of room to do lots of different things. But at the end of the day, charter schools are operating in an environment with state testing requirements and a lot of people paying attention to their math scores and their English scores. And so even if they're sort of technically free to pursue whatever interesting a mission they might want and teach them whatever way, at the end of the day, if the accountability pressures are pulling them into a direction to teach a certain type of content in a certain type of way, that's sort of realities of autonomy don't live up to the more abstract promise of it.

And so you have this, this sort of complicated interaction between autonomy, accountability and choice. And you have this sort of complicated stew that is the charter schools are existing in a world with, you know, it was No Child Left Behind, now the Every Student Succeeds Act with the fact that parents may or may not want things that we want them to want when they're choosing schools. And the sort of, the way that these reforms have played out is can largely be explained by the way that those policies and principles are interacting with one another.

Berkshire: As you see these high profile Democrats start to break from what's really been a kind of bipartisan orthodoxy around charter schools for the last few decades. The response from the charter advocacy community is pretty loud and also consistent, right? That they argue that one, um, these schools are really popular with a key democratic constituency that would be African American voters. And so that, you know, to deny that is, that's a problem for Democrats. And the other piece of it is to talk about the fact that in urban areas in particular, these schools are really delivering, right? And so those are pretty much, those are the two responses and I don't feel like the Democrats and Warren and Sanders in particular really have an answer for that.

Schneider: What we've seen from candidates like Sanders and Warren is essentially an attempt to sidestep what you were just talking about, Jennifer, where they're talking about the ecosystem, they're talking about the overall impact. And I think that's actually a pretty smart political move. But that doesn't resolve this core problem, which is that traditional members of your constituency. So you referred to African Americans and also increasingly Latinx populations, urban populations, particularly among those racial subgroups, have expressed higher levels of support for charter schools then let's say middle class white people, particularly middle class white people living in suburbs or small towns or rural areas. So how do you deal with that? You know, I, I think one of the core issues that needs to be talked about more is about all of the things that we may be want for all kids. Uh, because one of the messages that we heard a lot early on with charter schools was that there was going to be a lot of innovation, that all schools would benefit.

And that also every kid being served by a charter school would be getting something that actually fit the unique context, the circumstances. That may be the case. I leave it to parents and community members to decide for themselves. But I think what we have seen is a real

narrowing of aims and the emergence of kind of a one best model, a monoculture is how I often refer to it. And as a result, we've really seen a focus on one kind of conversation, which is the horse race, right? Are charter schools, good or bad. That question is often answered simply by looking at test scores. So I asked this big sort of broad question to Jon asking him to talk through, you know, what are the consequences of all this? And he had some interesting thoughts.

Valant :When we look at those kind of horse race comparisons, 'so how are charters performing relative traditional public schools?' which I should say I don't think should be the sort of main question we look at with charter schools. But if we look at that sort of top line finding there is that on the whole charter schools do about the same as it seems like their students would do if they were to go to the local traditional public school. Um, now if you dig down a little deeper than that, it, it looks like charter schools in urban areas outperformed by a pretty sizable margin, uh, um, schools that their students would have gone to otherwise. But those gains were sort of offset by suburban and rural schools and virtual schools do terribly virtual charter schools do terribly. So, um, why would that be? There are a few different possibilities.

One possibility is that a lot of of the charters that are setting up and kind of the most disadvantaged urban areas are competing against relatively low performing public schools. So it's not too hard to look good by comparison when you're just sort of going up against the lowest performers. Another possibility is that the sort of appropriate function of a lot of those schools that are, that are setting up in areas that have the lowest performing traditional public schools is that they should be just sort of trying to do some of that same things better. You know, like they should be prioritizing core academics because there isn't a good local alternative for core academics. Whereas maybe some of these schools that are getting lower test scores than the local public schools are trying something that's a little bit different and innovative and might not show up in the test score comparisons.

So I think for a lot of reasons, those test score comparisons are not great. I don't think they tell us what they do. I also think that the test score comparisons themselves can be damaging because when that sort of, the way that we think about whether that reform as a whole is, um, succeeding or failing it, it causes us to look at the wrong things and also sets up this antagonism between charter schools and traditional public schools. I don't think it's healthy, uh, but when it comes to sort of looking at those, those comparisons, I think you really have to dig a little bit under the surface because there's, there's a lot there.

Berkshire: So Jack, I actually read both the Warren and the Sanders plans because, well, frankly I have a lot of time on my hands and what really strikes me and know like both of them do, they do a lot of things that I think are positive and, and, and good. But I feel like the, the challenge is that we don't have an answer to the question of, well, what is a progressive vision for public education other than just trying to keep it from being hacked to bits? And that part of it is that just in a lot of ways, the way that our schools are organized is by definition not progressive, right? That if you tie it to property taxes, if you have things like, like, attendance

zones in areas that have been historically red lined, right? Like, well, what do you do about that? But then as soon as you start trying to change that up, it, you know, it gets really tricky.

Schneider: Yeah. I think one of the trickiest places is thinking through these questions of where do kids go to school and how much choice do they have? Because it activates all of these historical challenges that we face, right? What do we want to do about racial integration? What do we want to do about the fact that kids come from neighborhoods with different access to resources? What do we want to do about the fact that we treat schools as if they are these engines of meritocracy that will very fairly sort people for their futures. What do we want to do about issues like this? The rubber really hits the road when we start talking about things like attendance. And I wanted to talk with John a little bit about whether there is some third way at the risk of using that neoliberal phrase

Berkshire: I just made a really unpleasant face.

Schneider: Yeah, you did. Uh, if there's some third way, other than, you know, traditional neighborhood attendance zones or, you know, a sort of market based system of choice. Is there some other way where we can try to manage these dilemmas where we can try to address the needs and concerns that these two different sides have? Because there is an argument to make on both sides. It's not always, I think a particularly productive argument, but certainly there is an argument.

Valant: I think it's important to remember that public schools have this incredibly important and difficult mandate, which is that they have to provide a good accessible education for essentially every student across the country. And my own view is that our school actually do pretty well with this, I think better than a lot of people will give American public schools credit for. But it means that there is risk that comes with the idea that we would have public school systems where individual schools sort of go off on their own and they adopt a theme. Maybe they have an aviation theme in one school, in a fine arts theme in another school. And that can work really well if those schools are set up as alternatives to, uh, sort of good, um, a good stable local public school option for families. But sort of given the reality that a lot of families can't travel too far from home to send their kids to school.

If we do have, if we do have traditional public schools that are sort of all going off in their, their own different directions, there's some risks that a lot of students will just sort of fall through the cracks in a system like that. And so I am of the belief that there is likely a role for these, these alternatives to the traditional public school system that I think should be public schools. So I think there is something appealing about the charter school model that they are public schools that exist, um, not to displace traditional public schools because traditional public schools played two important role for that. But to create options for families who don't think they would be well-served unless they can find an alternative and have that alternative be part of us sort of regulated, looked after public school system.

Berkshire: So obviously one big part of the reason that the Democrats are having this kind of reconsideration is that even in urban areas where charter schools are really successful, we now have a situation where charters are on the verge of supplanting the traditional public school system. You have one city after another where charter schools are taking up to 40% of the student population, 50% new Orleans is now 100%. And so I think this teacher walkouts in places like Denver and LA forced that question that, you know, it's one thing when you're talking about this idealized notion of a school with a lot of autonomy, people trying different things, but it's really a different place now and you know, the relationship is antagonistic. And so it seems to me that that is also affecting the way that we're talking about the politics.

Schneider: Yeah. This is not going away as long as charters and traditional public schools are competing for resources, this fight is not going away. And I think there are some people, uh, who have been advocates of charter schools from the beginning who actually see that as a feature rather than a bug. Um, but there are others of us who stand by watching this and are so frustrated by the fact that, uh, ultimately there are going to be losers here and who are really frustrated by the fact that kids and teachers are going to be affected by those losses. Um, that those are not just fictional or hypothetical losses. Those are people losing their jobs. Those are kids whose neighborhood schools are going out of business. Those are communities that are losing their schools. And I count charter schools in that, right? When a charter school folds, it is no less damaging to the kids, teachers and families who are involved in that community. And so, you know, I think one of the deeper conversations that we need to have about the charter school debate is what do we do about this fight over resources? And is there anything that can be done?

Valant: So one of the big vulnerabilities to traditional public schools on the financial side when it comes to charters is that if charters are sort of suddenly opening and closing nearby, then you can have these real sharp and sudden changes in enrollment. And I think those are actually quite a bit more damaging than the sort of slow growth of charter schools because oftentimes you're getting a sort of slow growth of charter schools but cities, populations are growing too. And so it might be that that growth of charter schools isn't enough to actually drain the public school population. It has in some places it hasn't in others, but it's the instability that, that uh, I think causes a lot of those problems. Um, and so you know, like thinking, thinking more cohesively about how all of these pieces fit together. Like how, what do we need from a charter sector to compliment a traditional public school system in a way that ultimately does really serve all of the kids at that.

If I could sort of go back to the early days of charter schools, that is what I would love to have hardwired into. Just the way we think about these schools is that they are working alongside one another toward the purpose of making sure every student has a good education in the city. I worry that we are sort of too far down the path of, you know, these, these are two sectors at odds that are fighting for every kid and every dollar and to win those horse races. So I'm not sure how we get there now, but I'd say it's a weakness and it's a mistake that we're, we are where we are when it comes to that.

Berkshire: That was Jon Valant. He's a fellow at the Brown center on education policy at the Brookings institution and Jack and I will be right back to talk about where the Democrats go next

[Music]

Berkshire: In addition to being a very smart guest on our podcast, Jon Valant also wrote something recently that I thought was really sharp. He goes through and sort of make sense of Elizabeth Warren's education plan as it fits into this evolution, really what seems like a pretty dramatic pivot, around key education issues including charter schools that we're seeing the Democratic party make. And I wondered if you could just sort of break down his argument for people who haven't read that piece yet.

Schneider: Yeah. For people who haven't read the piece, it's on the Brookings Brown Center blog, and the key argument here that I think we can make even more explicitly is that Betsy DeVos has essentially opened up a wedge that Elizabeth Warren is going to try to drive a policy freight train through.

Berkshire: My favorite topic.

Schneider: And the wedge is education, and that she has essentially polarized people in a really politically useful way. And so Elizabeth Warren, who actually has supported in the past charter schools and high stakes testing has seen this as a political opportunity to make common cause with teachers and with advocates of public education. And to Warren's credit, I think this is what good politicians do, right? They, they both lead and follow. And so Warren has been an outspoken leader in a number of ways and in this case is actually following the lead of advocates of public education and picking up a number of their proposals, including taking a stronger stance against charter schools, in terms of funding for low income schools through expansion of Title One. And the move here is to essentially draw a line in the sand and say that either you are for public education at this kind of inflection point where we really see an erosion of a number of the sort of structures and systems that are fundamental for the operation of the system, at least an outward attack on those things. That you're either going to stand in defense of public education or you are going to be against it. And she has drawn out some policy proposals that would not only shore up public education but would also strengthen it.

Berkshire: So I really liked his piece and I thought his observation about the role that Betsy DeVos has played in all this was really interesting. And basically he's arguing that it's not because DeVos has been effective, right? It's the fact that you have this sort of outspoken, this person who just goes around endlessly talking about how public education is a dead end, right? Like we could not come up with a caricature that would do a better job than Betsy DeVos about making that case.

But one thing that I think he misses, and it's not his fault, all coastal elites miss this, is that the policy landscape at the state level has sharply changed. And that education reform and charter schools and choice are now, in one state after another, really seen as right wing causes. We've covered that a little bit on this show. And so there DeVos has been quite effective. It's her people who were leading the charge, whether it's the guy who's now forcing the governor, the democratic governor of Louisiana into a runoff, whether it's the governor of New Hampshire who is a DeVosian, you know, in one state after another. There is a reason why you see dramatic expansions of vouchers. It's because DeVos and her lobbying group have been laying the groundwork for that for years.

Schneider: Yeah. That's something that you and I actually write about in our forthcoming book. Where I think one of the mistakes a lot of people make is to assume that Betsy DeVos is the movement. And Betsy DeVos is only the most visible figure head in a movement that you're right, is very much a state level movement, in many cases is a local movement and we wouldn't expect this to be driven at the national level. There is no national system of education. She's in many ways signaling to people a kind of vision. And in many ways I think she's been very effective in terms of rallying people around the cause of dismantling public education, energizing them, using the bully pulpit, doing a lot of things that actually good secretaries of education or even good presidents do.

Berkshire: Well, Jack, I thought you did an excellent job interviewing our guest today. So shout out to you for that.

Schneider: That somehow that feels like a backhanded compliment, but I'm going to take it as a forehand.

Berkshire: Well, and I thought since you are really beginning to walk on your own two feet...

Schneider: You're so good to me...

Berkshire: Okay, well why don't you do the honors of leading us to the paywall.

Schneider: Oh my God. So here's the paywall and we're going to keep talking after the show ends.

Berkshire: Everybody just pressed stop.

Schneider: And if you want to hear that then you can pay money to do that.

Berkshire: And what are we going to be talking about Jack and what is that segment called?

Schneider: The segment is called In the Weeds and we're going to be talking, I think, about Elizabeth Warren's plan, which was recently released and also about comparing that with Bernie

Sanders' Thurgood Marshall Plan for Education, comparing the two and talking about where teachers are lining up. And if you do want to throw some change our way and gain access to these kinds of conversations, you can just go to Patreon.com that's patron with an E, inserted in there.

Berkshire: That really obfuscated things, Jack. And how do they find us once they're there?

Schneider: Search for, Have You Heard. And now you get to do my job, Jennifer.

Berkshire: I'm going to do it like Jack. If you're looking for a non capitalistic way to support the show, the best thing you can do is to tell your friends to listen to it. Also, give us a five star review on iTunes because that will help people find the pod. Is that right?

Schneider: It was amazing but there's the Twitter handle and it's not just iTunes because we don't want to act like we're flunkies for Apple. So there's like Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts.

Berkshire: And you can engage with the podcast @HaveYouHeardPod. And often the Twitter handle will engage back with you.

Schneider: Oh, this is, this is good. We should try these role reversals on more often. So sticking with that theme, I'm going to go ahead and sign off. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Berkshire: And I'm going to talk on at some length about how you can't manage problems. You can only manage dilemmas.

Schneider: Oh, that's cute. You must be Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: I'm Jack Schneider. See you next time.