

#78 Flip the Board: Denver and the Politics of School Reform

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

Jack Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire And Jack, people often wonder how is it that we come up with such great topics for this show week after week. Do you know how we do it?

Schneider I know how we do it. Yeah, right. I don't want to say it out loud.

Berkshire Well, whatever you're thinking is wrong because sometimes we hear from listeners and they suggest topics and then I take them up on it and tell you that that's what we're doing the episode on.

Schneider Yeah. What I was going to say, it was basically you tell me what we're doing this week and every once in a while I've got an idea, but mostly you, you run the show there.

Berkshire Well, a few weeks ago I got an email from a parent in Denver, his name is Paul Vranas and he wrote to me and he said, you know, there's a big story in Denver. The school board just flipped and I think you should take a look at it. Now this is something I've been interested in for a long time. But what piqued my curiosity about this email was that unlike me, Paul Vranas just started following this story and he hasn't lived in Denver long. It's only recently that he started looking into schools there and right away he decided that maybe there was something up in Denver that didn't make sense to him. And it got me thinking, you know, the frame of the Denver story has basically been "union-backed school board candidates won," and yes, that seems to have definitely been part of it, but the fact that parents like Paul are also part of that effort made me think that there's a story in Denver that hasn't gotten the attention it deserves.

Schneider Yeah. Denver about 10 years ago was a reform darling because of the ProComp system that was introduced there. That's the teacher compensation system that in many ways got at the idea of merit pay that reformers had been trying to enact for decades in public education. It was negotiated with the unions, and so it wasn't a straight merit pay system, but it was certainly quite different from the traditional step and lane approach to teacher pay. And then Denver kind of faded a bit from the national radar until it introduced its portfolio system, which advocates of that approach in which charters, innovation schools, traditional public schools and so on are essentially loosely managed by some central governing body and allowed to essentially pursue their own various models under a kind of performance management system. That brought Denver back into the spotlight. And this recent school board election has once more given us a new reason to look at Denver.

Berkshire So Denver made it back into the news last year when teachers there walked off the job, they went on strike and we heard them talking in great detail about what they didn't like about the compensation system, about things like teacher turnover. So Jack, what do you, how do you see all of that playing out?

Schneider Well, one thing that I think is really important to think about here is the radical decentralization of the American public education system. We often talk about it like it is a system when in fact we've got 98,000 public schools out there in 13,000 school districts. And so if one district is doing something that teachers don't like, there are 12,999 other districts that they could potentially go work in.

In Denver, one of the big problems was that even though the union originally had supported ProComp, that after their experience with it many teachers felt like they really didn't like the way their salaries fluctuated based on sometimes unpredictable outcomes, like whether their schools had been quote unquote top performing schools or quote unquote high growth schools. There were some things that they were able to control, like whether or not they worked in a school serving historically marginalized students where they would receive bonuses in order to stay in those schools.

And there seemed to be less resistance among teachers to those bonuses. And those are actually some of the bonuses that have been preserved in ProComp. But really teachers generally over time have preferred stability in their pay. It's a profession that people don't go into in order to make a lot of money. And so teachers often are thinking about salary and benefits in a radically different way than many of the people who are designing these systems. So teachers are often thinking about things like how stable is this going to be? How supported am I going to be? How many resources am I going to have access to in terms of educating kids and how is this going to enable me to live out whatever my mission is as an educator? And those often aren't the things that people are thinking about when they're designing incentive systems because these systems often come out of the corporate world where people are primarily motivated by financial interests.

Berkshire Well, Jack, one of the other questions that we often get from listeners is 'hey Jennifer, how come when you go traveling all around to Denver and Wisconsin and wherever you're headed next...

Schneider You never invite Jack along.

Berkshire Yeah. Why doesn't Jack ever come?

Schneider Well, it's because I've got to be the person back here on the ground doing all of the research and the readings so that we can have these conversations, Jennifer.

Berkshire Okay, so Jack is going to be standing by prepared to step in with expertise as called upon. But in the meantime, we're headed to Denver.

So first, just a little context for this episode. As you may have heard, Denver recently held a school board election and the results were fairly decisive. There were three open seats and candidates backed by the local teacher's union won each of them. But framing this story as 'union backed candidates defeat reformers' doesn't really capture what just went down in Denver. So I've come here to find out more. Our first stop is a school on Denver's Northeast side. There's a community meeting here to discuss the future of the Denver Discovery School, a school that in its relatively brief existence has seen plenty of turmoil. Hasira Ashemu, who goes by the name Soul, heads up a community group called Our Voice, Our Schools, and has been leading an effort to keep the school alive.

Hasira "Soul" Ashemu This school is opened in a area called Stapleton. Stapleton is one of the wealthiest communities in Denver. This school was opened as an expeditionary learning school for wealthy white families. The principal overspent her budget. She, they were forced in order to recover that budget by letting in students from Park Hill, which is a predominantly black and Brown neighborhood, poor black and Brown neighborhood.

Berkshire And as the demographics of the school changed, so did everything else. How the students were taught, how they were disciplined. And even the very purpose of the school.

Soul When that happened, you suddenly had a chaos. What was opened as an expeditionary school where creative learning was taking place and innovative learning was taking place now became a backpacks-full-of-cash school where they were just trying to put kids in seats. Instead of counselors they put cops, two police officers in here. This school had the highest white flight in the district, what they call in-district transfers. We had over 50. That happened within I think a three month span.

So there was white flight that happened out of the building. And you had moved from expeditionary to punitive behaviors taking place inside of the building. And you heard one of the students talk about his seventh and his eighth grade year were markedly different from what his sixth grade was. It was chaos that was taking place. We had five different principals within a two and a half year span.

Berkshire Fast forward to last spring and the school district announced plans to shut the school down, but Soul and others in the community fought back.

Soul We were called into a meeting in March of last year and they said, listen, we're going to close down this school. We're looking to close it down. And Our Voice, Our Schools along with other community stakeholders said, no, that's not what you're going to do. What you're going to do is, this is an opportunity for the district to show equity. Meaning that if you kept this school open when it was predominantly 80 to 85% white students inside of it and was doing

expeditionary learning and taking them on camping trips and having all of these great things, you are going to offer those same opportunities to Black and Brown and working class white students as you were offering to the Stapleton kids when they were here

Berkshire At tonight's meeting for parents and local residents, school leaders report on their progress towards making Discovery what they call a loving community school, a community hub where local nonprofits will provide wraparound services to kids and their parents. But their demands for change aren't just about one school. Groups like Our Voice, Our Schools say it's time to rethink Denver's entire approach to school reform, especially the idea that the city's schools should be managed like a portfolio of stocks. And for that to happen the school board had to change or as Soul put it, it was time to "flip the board."

Soul We had a school board previously for the last 15 years here in Denver that personifies that particular model and they enacted that particular model with various policies, one being a portfolio model of education where you have some charters, you have some innovations, you have some traditional schools and what you then do is you put these schools in competition with one another as a free market, you know, a type of system around education and that is a failed model.

And the connection between Flip the Board and what we're doing here is that we finally have people who understand that education is a civil and human right. It's not something to be bought and sold on Wall Street.

Berkshire In the Black community Flip the Board became the rallying cry against a whole host of policies that are increasingly controversial, like school closures and strict discipline for Black and Brown students. For Denver's public school teachers, it came to embody resistance to things like merit pay and the intense emphasis on standardized testing. Haley Breden teaches high school social studies at South High School. She's been teaching in Denver for 10 years, which is when the city's education reform experiment was really just starting to pick up steam.

Hayley Breden Within the first few years [there were] a whole bunch of different reforms, like more and more charter schools, the idea of an innovation school, more privatization, the idea of merit pay is something that started around the same time when I started working here. And I think the like over that decade, a lot of the, not necessarily burnout but demoralization and frustration for teachers and educators in DPS seemed to grow quite a bit.

And so I think one thing that these reforms and also the strike kind of helped to catalyze is to raise people's awareness of the role that the school board does have in our daily lives as professionals here but also for community members. It seems like even in the past few years, parents, students, community members have become a lot more involved and aware of the role of the school board in their kids' education. So I wish that that was the case for the entire past decade, but I think particularly the last few years, people in all different demographics within Denver, all different stakeholder groups within Denver, have become a lot more involved

because they're seeing the good that a school board can do, but also the harm that a school board can do.

Berkshire You probably caught Haley's reference to a strike. Teachers in Denver walked off the job last February to protest low pay and a complex merit pay system among other things. The strike lasted three days and ended with a significant pay hike for teachers. Tiffany Choi is the brand new president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association. She's in her sixth year teaching French at East High School. Choi says that the strikes spurred a larger conversation about what's gone wrong in Denver and what to do about it. And it convinced young teachers who were new to the whole idea of a union that they had the power to push for bigger changes in the city.

Tiffany Choi Oh, you know, we can make a difference! We can effect the changes in our own district. And so we have all these new excited leaders in buildings. And so we utilized that during, during the board race. Like now, you know, it's not just about salaries and that's something we said during the strike, right? It's not just about our salaries, it's about working conditions. It's about turnover rates in our hard-to-serve schools. Like all those sorts of things. And so like, this is a chance for teachers to show that it's not just about that. And we need, in order to make the changes that we want to see, we do need a different school board. One that's actually gonna listen not only to teachers but to the community.

So I think that was the big message. It's like for so many years we've had so much money coming from out of state, mostly from Democrats for Education Reform, you know, like \$300,000 for one school board race, insane amounts of money. So those candidates are now accountable to those outside groups. Right? They're not accountable to the actual community. And so that's why we got the decisions in the past where, you know, we saw teachers weren't valued, community schools weren't valued and we were moving towards more of a privatization model.

Berkshire I mentioned at the very top of the episode that the idea for focusing on Denver came from a parent while we're going to meet him now, his name is Paul [inaudible] and he's a tech guy. He uses all kinds of tech terms when he talks like agile and waterfall and iterate. But his tech problem solving skills proved to be no match for navigating Denver's complicated school choice system.

Paul Vranas Yeah. As it turns out, it's the challenge with I think tech - and I've been involved in a lot of implementations of technology that had been successful and a lot that haven't - is the idea of what is the end goal and what's the definition of success? And I've found that in today's world of education, at least here locally in Denver, we don't have a very good definition of that. And so you can't build a system that doesn't have an endpoint that is logical or makes sense with even the best technology in the world.

Berkshire Denver has a school performance framework that rates local schools with a heavy emphasis on test scores. According to this measure. Paul's neighborhood school is one to steer clear of

Vranas In talking to neighbors here very few of them actually send their kids to this school. There's a highly religious sort of subgroup here in this neighborhood that sends their kids to private schools. So as a result, on any block, you have kids that are going to all different schools. There's a lack of cohesive understanding of and support for the school. And as a result, the school is, is serving a very, very diverse population and the school really hasn't been able to, to find its footing.

We're going to be a magnet. It could have a magnet program for highly gifted and talented kids. They tried that two years ago and [due to] lack of interest that fell apart. So this year they're going to try and increase the number of classes starting with kindergarten to try and fill seats. But it's a school that's had a lot of turnover from a teacher perspective. A lot of my neighbors aren't sending their kids to my school, so it's something that is concerning and challenging to understand why and the impact of what's going on at that school.

Berkshire Paul says that the questions he and his wife are wrestling with where to send their little boy to school and what defines a good school anyway are in the minds of a lot of the parents he meets these days.

Vranas They're filled with anxiety. They're at every birthday party that we go to. They're at school tours, they're on Facebook. They're asking 'what school is your kid going to go to?' There's a beautiful private school here that is that on face value... I looked at it and said, that would be a wonderful thing. And a lot of our friends are sending their kids to that school. They had mixed age classroom. They focus on the whole child development. What are their test scores? They don't really care. And as a result they can focus on the important things.

So there's a lot of struggle. There's a lot of anxiety and it's like we're, we're a bunch of white, you know, economically advantaged people. Can you imagine what those who don't have these resources are dealing with? It's a lot of people that are trying to skirt around the issue as far as, well, what makes a good school a good school? And interestingly enough, the majority of the schools that the white people that I've surrounded myself with are sending their kids to schools that are predominantly white and have students and families that are economically advantaged.

Berkshire Paul's search for answers about what was going on with Denver schools, led him to a Facebook page run by a retired teacher and the page was called, what else? Flip the Board.

Vranas As someone that's going to be probably the biggest consumer of education cause we're just entering the system with the kindergarten next year, it's, you just get to a point where you say this is nonsense, what is going on here? And then you start peeling back the onion and there's more nonsense. And then you start seeing, you know, editorials in the Wall Street

Journal about the Denver experiment and you start thinking, 'Oh, if Wall Street's worried then maybe we're doing something, then maybe we're onto something here!

And then you start seeing all this out-of-state money pouring into these races and you're thinking, a million and a half dollars is raised for a volunteer position on a school board? What's going on? Who really cares about these kids? And what is the definition of success? And it's gotten too complicated. It's gotten too uneven and unequal and, and it's caused anxiety up to the white privileged folks. That's where people are starting to get pissed.

Berkshire Okay, so we will be returning to Denver in just a minute. But first I want to bring Jack in. Jack, you've heard several of the people I interviewed refer to Denver's School Performance Framework. They call it the SPF, which always makes me think of suntan lotion. They refer to the color of schools. You'll hear people referring ominously to red schools. So can you just break down for us what is the Denver school performance framework?

Schneider Yeah, absolutely. So there are ostensibly six different things that the SPF measures and I say ostensibly because actually it's far fewer than that. So if you go to the DPS K-12 dot org website and you dive in and find what is the SPF measure, they give you the measure indicators and they're framed as a number of questions. So how much are students growing academically each year? That's a test score. Are students at your school performing at grade level? That's a test score. How satisfied our students and families with our school? That's a survey and not a bad one, but it's framed in a pretty weird way, I would argue. How well prepared are students for college and career? You might think that that's a test score, but that's actually mostly graduation rates. How much is our school improving in preparing students for college and career? That's also graduation rates. And how well is our school closing academic achievement gaps for underserved students? And that is a test score.

So what we see here is that even though there is a nod towards a number of different kinds of facets of school quality, really what we're measuring is standardized test scores and graduation rates. And then there's a satisfaction survey thrown in there. Surveys of course can be very powerful tools in terms of trying to measure multiple dimensions of school quality, asking students, for instance, how engaged they are in school. I think that's a really important piece of trying to figure out what the quality of the school is, but that's, at least as it's framed here, not the main piece. It's really a sort of market oriented satisfaction survey.

Berkshire Jack: that was a very thorough answer. Thank you.

Okay. Back to Denver. So it's important to note that by many of the measures that Jack was just talking about, Denver's education reform experiment has been a success. Test scores are up, so are graduation rates, and more students are attending quote unquote good schools. But when you talk to people in Denver about the legacy of school reform, you also hear about what's been lost. The same names surface over and over again: Manual, Montebello, Gilpin. These are schools, all located in Black and Brown parts of the city that the school board voted to close.

Jacky Falcone teaches English at South high school. Her kids attended Gilpin, a Montessori school in her neighborhood that was closed due to low test scores. It's a decision that remains controversial four years later.

Jacky Falcone When they closed it, they put another school in there where all the kids who live in the neighborhood can't access it anymore because it's a charter school and they have certain rules about attending that school. It's a language school, so none of the kids can access it anymore. And so when they're showing Denver as this model, they're not looking at stories like that that actually see what happened. So when it closed, I had to take my daughter, drive her to another school that wasn't our neighborhood school and it was, it was a pain. It was very difficult to do that. And she had to go to a new school for fifth grade, meet people that she didn't know, this wasn't her neighborhood. And it was actually a lot of kids that were coming outside their neighborhood from that school.

So there was nothing, like, she didn't have people to come back to her neighborhood and see the kids that she was actually going to school with and it was difficult driving back and forth and getting her there. And so they don't see that side. They don't see what it does to parents. They don't see it, what it does to the kids. They don't see what it does to the community. Especially when we keep losing these neighborhood schools in the guise of 'oh, this is going to be good for you.' That was not good for anybody who went to Gilpin Montessori. We all had to struggle and find a new school and almost every parent has had to drive their [kids] out of the neighborhood.

Berkshire Before Jackie came to South high school, she taught at Manual High on Denver's Northeast side, another controversial school closure.

Falcone I worked at Manual in 2006 when it closed and that was the first thing Michael Bennett did. Manual was one of the first schools that were closed and [he said] this is what's going to be good for kids and they didn't have a place for them to go. They were going to send them to West and West was another low performing school. So this is supposed to be equity? Why are you going to send them to another red school? How so?

It didn't make any sense when they did that. A lot of them ended up coming here to South and I came here with [them to] South and we had maybe at least 300 kids at that time. And by the end of the year, I remember one of the students walked up to me and said, 'Miss, where did everybody go? Nobody's here from Manual anymore.' And I said, I have no idea. So if you're talking about racial justice justice, how is that? How do they show that? How do they prove that? And they lost track of most of those kids. And I've encountered kids time and time again and I ask always ask, 'where are you?' 'Where did you go?' 'What happened to you?' And they, a lot of them tell me they dropped out.

Berkshire Advocates of Denver's reform policies - closing low performing schools, opening charter schools and merit pay for teachers - make their case for staying the course with appeals

to equity and racial justice. But Falcone and her colleagues say that the costs of reform have fallen too heavily on the same students that the experiment was supposed to help. Maura Casados Cassidy teaches English at South, which students choose to go to from all over the city.

Maura Casados Cassidy There's not enough conversation around how the expansion of school choice and the attack on neighborhood schools negatively affects students and specifically certain groups of students. I think we see all the time that our students are traveling an hour or more on public transit. There's really no busing in Denver anymore except for students with special needs. So, you know, kids are choosing to go to schools because they need services, for example, like English language learner services. They need a certain environment and they think that they want a football team. They want the opportunity to play in an orchestra, to do the things that you can do at a comprehensive school. And now in order to do that in a lot of parts of Denver, you have to travel like an extreme distance away from your neighborhood.

And I think we see as teachers the way that harms students. They come to school tired, they have a hard time doing homework and a lot of the times the burden is, you know, double on those students who are already experiencing special oppression, right? Who are already poor, who already have to work to support their families. And then on top of that they are traveling across the city on buses and trains and losing hours and hours of their day just to go to a school that provides them the services that they should get anywhere in the city.

Berkshire By now you should have a sense of where the push to “flip the board” came from. But we're still not done! Because even though this was the most local of elections, a school board, what happened in Denver also reflects the broader political currents that are swirling all around these days. Take the teachers who went on strike last year. In the era of Red for Ed, they're drawing inspiration from colleagues in places like Chicago and LA who have a big vision of what a union should do. Tiffany Choi says that for the Denver Classroom Teachers Association that's meant lots of behind the scenes organizing and starting to build relationships with community groups that the union hasn't had before.

Choi And it culminated in a community assembly in far Northeast Denver on the old Montbello High School campus, which was the school, the traditional school, that closed down in 2010. And so through those conversations, a lot of issues came up. One, which was the one we were focusing on was what's the teacher turnover rate, right? It's like we have 50% turnover rate every year, meaning our, you know, in four years you have a completely new staff essentially. And this is, this is not good for stability, which is what a lot of students need. And they need to build relationships with their teachers, right? That's the only way that you can really make the most impact with students is if you have a relationship with them.

So it was really harmful for that community, especially the Northeast. And that is where a lot of our Black families live. So they were, after this - basically we call it an experiment, right? - the reform experiment happened mostly to that community, because I think people felt like they didn't have a voice to make it, to make it stop. So they, you know, in the central part of Denver,

we have a lot of wealthy and mostly white neighborhoods. None of those schools have been closed down or co located or, you know, so this was really happening and sort of the edges of the city.

Berkshire That also means acknowledging where the union has fallen short.

Choi This part of the city has been neglected, you know, or at least they feel like it's been neglected by both the city and by the school district. And I would also argue the union itself, right? Like what has the union done to, to stand up for those schools. And so I think it was sort of like a call to action of like, okay, this is the moment where we can also stand up for that community.

Berkshire There's still one part of the flip the board story that we haven't gotten to yet. And that's the role that former Denver students are playing and trying to change the trajectory of their city. Tay Anderson is one of them. He's just 21 years old, an educator and a new member of the Denver school board. He describes himself as having lived through the failed policies of the Denver public schools and his call for transformative change resonated with voters. He ran in 2017 and lost and this time around he won a three-way city-wide race with 50% of the vote. Here's a bit of a campaign ad that he ran.

Tay Anderson "Focusing on outcomes instead of causes... You can't fix problems that way. If we focus on student engagement, absenteeism will naturally decrease. If we focus on improving student mental health grades and test scores will follow. If you make sure every community has a good school and every school has a supportive community and then we won't have to worry about a complicated choice system where some students are stuck at schools that nobody wants to choose. I know that sometimes it feels like everything is hopeless and the problems in our education system are just too big and complicated. But trust me, if we invest in what really matters to students, they will change their own outcomes. I know I did."

Berkshire Zach Chehko is a 20 year old graduate from Denver's East high school. Two years ago he ran Dr. Carrie Olson's successful campaign for Denver school board. This year he ran the campaign of progressive candidate Dr. Radhika Nath. She lost in the general election, but Chehko says that the experience of talking to voters about education filled him with optimism about the future.

Zach Chehko It really left me feeling optimistic about the future of education politics here in Denver. Really you saw very few people who support the idea of reform. They almost seemed non-existent to me. You'd tell people 'education is at risk of being privatized and we need you to support public schools' and almost everyone is on board and that includes Republicans. So that left me feeling very hopeful. One of my favorite parts of campaigning for sure was door to door.

Berkshire Just like the teacher's union is being reshaped by Red for Ed, Chehko represents another key social force right now. He's part of the influx of young progressive activists who are

remaking the Democratic party. Don't call him a Bernie bro. He prefers Bernard brother and he sees defending public education as a central part of a broader fight for social and economic justice.

Zach I honestly think it's pretty simple. Public education is one of the last public goods that we have in our society today. It's a cornerstone of our democracy. And if we do not fight as hard as we can to defend what we have right now, we're going to end up with a public education system that looks like a reflection of what we have in healthcare. And that is not where we want to go. That's not what's going to make our society better, what's going to make our people happier or more well rounded. It's going to really raise a generation of depressed people who don't know what to do with themselves. And so I think that fighting for a strong education system is, it makes perfect sense to be there once you understand why. Uh, yeah.

Berkshire Then there's former Denver student Vanessa Quintana. She's now a grad student in public policy at UC Berkeley, but she was a freshman at Manual High School when it closed in 2006. By the time she finished high school, Vanessa had gone through two school closures and a major school restructuring. She dropped out of school twice and three of her siblings didn't graduate at all. She spent the last two years on a mission to flip the board. And here's where our story gets even more complicated. For activists like Vanessa, the goal of flipping the board meant electing radical candidates who could deliver what she calls education liberation. After the election, Vanessa wrote a powerful blog post called "Flipping the Script of the Same Book." To sum it up, even though lots of people and organizations in Denver rallied behind the slogan, "flip the board," it turns out that they didn't all agree on what that meant.

Vanessa Quintana Well I don't think the board was flipped. I think just the page flipped in the same book - incremental progress. And what's at stake are students who parallel my story. Students like my nieces and nephews. They deserve better. They deserve better than incremental change.

Berkshire Thanks to everyone in Denver who assisted me with this episode. And a big shout out to Chalkbeat's Melanie Asmar for her stellar reporting on Denver education politics, which I drew on extensively. By the way, we're hoping to do lots more traveling in 2020, taking Have You Heard on the road to states where education is a big story that the media keeps missing. Georgia, Michigan, Wisconsin, maybe your state. Of course we can't do any of this without your help. To find out more about how you can support the show and our ambitious 2020 travel agenda go to Haveyouheardblog.com/support. And Jack and I will be right back.

[Music]

Berkshire So Jack, you heard one of the people I interviewed in Denver talking about that Wall Street Journal editorial and I actually heard a couple people mention it and it got me thinking, you know, for somebody like me who's been obsessed with this stuff forever, I, I'm not surprised that the Wall Street Journal would run an editorial on the eve of a school board election. You

know, like that's exactly what I expect to see. But if you're somebody who's just gotten, has just sort of woken up to what's going on in your city, this seems really weird, right?

Schneider Well, especially the reference to an iron rice bowl, which I would imagine is not something that most people run into in their daily reading.

Berkshire I can imagine eyebrows lifting up all over the listening universe. So what Jack is referring to is that the Wall Street Journal piece has a reference basically to the fact that the only groups opposed to Denver style reform are unions and administrators who don't like the fact that the reforms threaten their quote unquote iron rice bowls. Now, Jack, what does that mean?

Schneider It's a phrase borrowed from China, which is a strange move and essentially means a job for life. But again, I think that it's pretty insulting and possibly culturally insensitive way to critique teachers here.

Berkshire Well, so what really stood out to me is just how much the world has changed in recent years. The first time I ever came across that expression was maybe like three years ago. It was in the New York Post, which is another publication that loves to rail against teachers. And we were...we were coming off that sort of peak reform period characterized by Waiting for Superman where you really could say almost anything about teachers and it was just fine. But you know, we're not in the same world and, you know, when teachers in Denver and all these other cities have walked out and really shone a spotlight on the, you know, what gaping inequality means in their classrooms, painting them as some, you know, sort of lazy entitled, overfed class doesn't play quite the same way.

Schneider Yeah. Here's a case of a pendulum swinging way too far in one direction where, you know, I think any experienced educator will say that his or her colleagues are not uniformly amazing, that lots of them are, most of them are pretty solid professionals. And there are some teachers who I think experienced teachers would like to send for a professional development workshop. But the rhetoric about lazy teachers collecting paychecks, doing the dance of the lemons and and being impervious to dismissal is just not in line with reality.

And what we have seen is the pendulum swing back in the other direction where people are saying, wait a minute. What are teachers trying to do in the classroom? And what are the resources they have to work with and teachers to their credit in terms of the work that they have done in bargaining for the common good, which we've talked about in the last few episodes? They've really made a powerful case that if you want them to do their jobs, then they need adequate resources to do it.

Berkshire Can we ask your colleagues what they think about you?

Schneider Uh, only if you preface it by saying that, uh, that we are doing an episode about how maligned teachers are and how unfair that is. As long as we've primed As long as we've primed them with that. Go ahead and ask away.

Berkshire Well, Jack, I brought back for you from Denver a little surprise and I purposely did not tell you about this before because you know how I worry about head swelling.

Schneider I'm guessing that it's a tiny pair of skis that I can pretend to be in the Rocky mountains with.

Berkshire That's your Christmas gift. So as we heard about extensively in the course of this episode, people, parents, teachers, activists are very frustrated with the constraints of the school performance framework. And so Denver school leaders, the new board members are, are now thinking about how they might adjust that. And I have it on the highest authority that there are some people who have caught wind of your writing and a certain podcast and are interested in perhaps a better measure.

Schneider Well, I will admit that I have been to the Mile High City and that if they wanted me back, that it is the right time of year to invite people to Denver. You know, I'm thinking that December, January and February are particularly good months.

Berkshire Well, Jack, you know with me, if I do one nice thing, it's going to be followed up with something that's not as nice.

Schneider I feel like we should rename In the Weeds to Jennifer Plays Tricks.

Berkshire And Jack and I have a good one for today. How are your calculus skills?

Schneider Rusty? But uh, my mathematical reasoning skills according to the College Board are very strong.

Berkshire Well that's good because I have actually recruited a personalized assistant for you.

Schneider Oh! It's got a name. It's not Alexa. It's not Siri. What is her name???

Berkshire Her name would be Aida.

Schneider Yes, yes.

Berkshire In the Weeds we're going to be talking about Pearson's new, AI personalized calculus assistant called Aida and I've actually brought a visual aid for Jack that's going to thrill him. And if you're interested in hearing us talk all about this, all you have to do is go to Patreon.com/haveyouheardpod and you'll find all the ways that you can support us. It only

takes a few dollars a month and you get cool extras like a reading list. And you get to come Into the Weeds with us.

Schneider And if you're doing an ethical calculus right now and thinking about where you should direct your funds and you're thinking, well, there are needy kids in the world and the planet is melting and you don't think that Have You Heard is the right place to spend your dollars and cents, we hear you. There are other ways to support the show. The best we think is simply to share it with your friends. Tell people that you're listening to the show. Share a favorite episode with them. You can also go on wherever you get your podcasts and give us a rating. It helps people find the show and go ahead and tweet about us and feel free to tag the podcast handle when you do @HaveYouHeardpod.

Berkshire: Jack, you get better at undercutting my fundraising pitch every episode.

Schneider It's funny cause I was just listening to this great interview with Ira Glass that Alex Blumberg did and it turns out that This American Life originally got on so many NPR stations because Ira did such great pledge drive segments and they wanted access to the pledge drive segments. And IRA said, well, you've got to take the show if you want the segments. So I promise that for the next two episodes, I will not do that. I will just shill away for Patreon.

Berkshire Just in time for our holiday fundraiser! Until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire This is Have You Heard.