

#80 The Rural Schools Conundrum

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

Jack Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire And Jack, several years ago, there was a very long essay in the *Atlantic* magazine by a gentleman named James Fallows. He had been traveling all over the country and in our, you know, our time of mounting despair, he shared an anecdote about how as he would go into these small towns, it really didn't matter where they were. People could not wait to show off their local school. And I thought, you know what? That is really, not only is that just like a heartwarming story, but I find that also to be the case.

Schneider Yeah. And interestingly, historically, that has been the case that Americans for the past couple hundred years have been very proud of their local schools. And in fact, it's one reason why we have this kind of strange system in the U S where the federal government certainly has some powers in education and has gained more powers for itself by using finances as a way of ensuring state and local compliance with the federal laws. But we also have very strong local control in the U S and this is a product of the fact that schools originally were locally controlled and people were very strongly interested in governing their own schools, were very proud of their own schools and have remained fiercely attached to public education in their communities and maintain a desire to govern those schools through local education agencies through school boards, and through just local involvement in the life of a school, which often extends well beyond the formal curriculum.

Berkshire Well, today we are headed to rural Wisconsin to talk to many, many different people about the state of their schools. And as regular listeners know, I often hit the road, microphone in my backpack ready to go, and I'm rarely joined on the road by my podcast cohost Jack Schneider. Alas, this episode is no exception.

Schneider You know, one of the things that I imagine we'll talk about in this episode is rural resentment as a trope. And I think that you are already foreshadowing some of that resentment, Jennifer. And so thank you for segueing into that for us. You know, I think that doing this kind of work offers us an opportunity to dig in a little bit more to what you have described as a kind of lazy liberal trope about rural resentment when in fact what we've seen is that the kinds of feelings expressed by rural people about public expenditures, about national politics, about state level politics are often quite complicated and looking at public education and their defense of the schools I think is a way of complicating that narrative.

Berkshire Well, Jack, I think you're going to be very interested in this episode, so I'm going to suggest that you sit back, take it in, and then we'll meet up again and you can give me your full review.

Schneider Let me just slip into this Badgers jersey here and I will put my cheese hat on. No, cheese head. It's not a hat. It's an entire head. And okay, I'm ready to go.

[Music]

Berkshire We're headed to Wisconsin to try to get to the bottom of what seems like a political contradiction. In a state that has become synonymous with quote unquote rural resentment, rural residents have been voting to increase their own taxes to pay for local schools. I wanted to know more. And just a note about this episode. If you happen to have a map of Wisconsin hanging around now would be a good time to bring it out because we're going to be visiting some parts of the state that are, well, less populated. The first stop on our trek: remote Florence County.

Ben Niehaus Florence County is located in far northeastern Wisconsin. The county border is the state border between the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Wisconsin. So we are actually about 100 miles almost due north of Green Bay, Wisconsin. You know, Lambeau Field, the Green Bay Packers. You know, when you look at our areas of Milwaukee and Madison, you know, we're basically about 200 miles due north of Milwaukee, about the same distance north and just a little bit east of Madison. But yeah, we are, we literally sit on the Upper Peninsula, Michigan border, between them and Wisconsin.

Berkshire That's Ben Niehaus. He's the superintendent of the Florence County schools. This is the poorest, least populated part of Wisconsin. And it's also where voters delivered the biggest margins for Donald Trump. Back in 2016 more than 70% of voters here went for Trump. And a lot of those voters also said yes to raising their local property taxes in order to fund improvements to school buildings in Florence.

Niehaus The County did support and make an informed decision. Now, of course it wasn't a hundred percent, but it did pass with the largest percentage of any referendum in Florence County's history. And it was the largest capital project ever supported by taxpayers.

Berkshire Voters here said yes to investing \$14.5 million in the local schools. That money was for a structural redesign of the middle and high school, renovation to the art room and an upgrade to the fabrication laboratory or fab lab, as they call it. That's where students and community members can go to get creative with things like 3d printers and design software. And when I ask Niehaus why he thinks voters in this conservative county were willing to hike their own taxes for improvements like these, he told me that it comes down to the future. Florence County is heavily dependent on tourism, but it's strong local schools that really hold the county together.

Niehaus You don't have schools, you don't have school communities. You don't have school communities, you don't have a lot of resources and services that you need for that tourist industry. Who are your emergency medical responders? Who are your protective services? Who

are your restaurants? Where are they? If we lose that sense of school community, it's going to adversely impact those communities and Wisconsin's tourism industry. So it's all interconnected. So I think that's why, yeah, we can agree to disagree and we know there's not unlimited funds but there's areas where we need to come together and have some real discussions as to what's going to keep our rural schools going and growing.

Berkshire Florence County may be uniquely remote in Wisconsin, but that political dynamic of conservative voters raising their own taxes to pay for schools is not. Next, we're headed to the Goodman Armstrong Creek school district. It's about a half hour south of Florence. It straddles two counties, both of which went for Trump in 2016 and voted to reelect Scott Walker in 2018. Alison Space is the administrator for the district where 110 students go to school.

Alison Space Within the township where the school resides, it's a mill town. So our big business there would be a mill and then most people drive 20 to 25 minutes to Michigan actually to work.

Berkshire Voters here were being asked to pay more just to keep the schools open. It's called an operating referendum and in November 2018 voters said, 'no thank you.' So in April the district made another attempt and this time pulled out all the stops to show residents why their local schools matter.

Space We had a grassroots effort of community members that started to use social media and really talk about what's going to happen to our town if the school goes. And when we did that, we decided to gather like a trade show in our gymnasium. And so all of the businesses and the economic development groups pulled together. We brought all of our businesses together in one evening and instead of the platform being me and the board, the platform became the community. And I think that people came in and they walked around, they gathered information, they talked to all of the people in the community about how it was going to impact everyone. And then they went to the voting booth the next week and I really believe that it became a community effort and they saw the value in the school and they saw the impact of what would happen in a rural town if the school disappeared.

Berkshire That referendum passed by a two thirds majority and that's pretty much the norm in Wisconsin these days. School districts routinely asked local voters to increase their property taxes to improve the schools or just keep them open and something like 80% of the time voters say yes. Which leads us to the central question of this episode. Why? Let's start with the easiest part of this question to answer: the source of the money woes plaguing so many of Wisconsin school districts.

Jill Gaskell I'm Jill Gaskell. I'm on the school board at Pecatonica Area High School in Blanchardville, Wisconsin. It's called Pecatonica because we have two communities, Hollandale and Blanchardville, and they're connected by the Pecatonica River.

Berkshire Pecatonica's student body is also shrinking, in part because local farms are shutting down. Wisconsin's school funding model is based on the idea that when students leave a school district, the money follows them. So a drop in student numbers, it means less to spend on the students who remain.

Gaskell Pecatonica has lost something like a hundred or 120 kids over the last decade. And so our school funding is going, is decreasing. This year we lost about 10 kids. We went down about 10 kids, you know, and there's, we had families move in. We had families move out. But the net result was we were 10 kids lower. So we lost state aid.

Berkshire In other parts of the state it's the collapse of manufacturing that's driving the decline of student enrollment. But whatever the specific reason the math for rural school districts is brutal. Lance Bagstad is the superintendent of schools in Arcadia. If you're following along with your trusty map, Arcadia is in between La Crosse and Eau Claire in the part of the state known as the Trempealeau Valley.

Lance Bagstad You know, there's statistics out there right now which scare the heck out of those of us that are trying to lead a rural public schools in a direction that's needed for our kids. That by the year 2045, 90 to 95% of the population in the United States will be suburban and urban. But when you start doing that math, that doesn't bode well for rural communities. So if that's the case, we've really got to make sure we are doing all the right things we can for the community members we'd have as well as the kids that we have.

Berkshire But rural districts are also grappling with Wisconsin shrinking commitment to funding public education, even as the cost of educating kids keeps rising. Here's Ben Niehaus, the superintendent of schools in Florence County.

Niehaus Our enrollment is nearly identical to what it was today as it was in 2014. The consumer price index, the inflation during that time was a 7.6% increase. We've kept our expenditures growing at 6.6% a full percentage below that. Yet the combination of both our state and federal revenues has not even increased by 3.2% so the difference there between what that gap is is all going on our local taxpayers, which are very blue collar, hardworking families. But the stats will show it that our income levels are below the state average. So we continue to see less and less in state support. And our board is challenged in not only maintaining, but trying to grow educational opportunities. We have to rely on our taxpayers.

Berkshire Okay. So I think you probably get the part about why rural school districts are turning to local taxpayers for help. As for why they're saying yes, well, just about everyone I talked to had a similar response. Education matters to rural voters because their schools are the very center of their communities. And that's true whether you're up in Florence or in Southwestern Wisconsin like Pecatonica's Jill Gaskell.

Gaskell The concerts, the football games, the basketball games. That's what people do on a Friday night. Let's, let's go to the game, you know, or there's a concert happening. Let's go to the school and see that. It's weird. The prom has a grand march and the entire town shows up for it. And it's like, why would you go to a grand march if you don't have a kid in it? But they do. It's a huge social aspect of the town.

Berkshire In the Trempealeau Valley where two communities approved referenda last year, Lance Bagstad says that voters have been willing to step up because they care about education.

Bagstad You know, I think our communities in Trempealeau County are very, very proud of their schools. I think they're very proud of the opportunity that the schools gives their kids, whether that be the academic side of things or the athletic or extracurricular side. So, you know, the communities are very supportive of their local schools. And you know, I think, I think the piece that they see as necessary is if we want to have a quality education for our kids, we need to be cognizant of funding that as well.

Berkshire Now if you're a regular listener to this show, you may remember an episode we did back in 2018. I traveled to Wisconsin to learn about the legacy of Republican governor Scott Walker. And well, it wasn't pretty. During the Walker years Wisconsin made deep cuts to school spending and dramatically expanded private school vouchers. That's met real fiscal hardship for the districts we've been hearing about in this episode. And here's where things get messy or at least confusing the voters who've been approving hikes to their property taxes to pay for local schools. Well, a lot of them also voted for the politicians who enacted the cuts to school funding that have taken such a toll on rural schools. Kim Kaukl is the executive director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance.

Kim Kaukl I think what you see happening out in our rural areas, they don't see that connection in their mind. Even though we try to explain to them, you know, by who you're voting in and the policies that they're making often times causes you to have to go to referendum because they're not providing what's needed.

Berkshire Julie Underwood is on the faculty at the University of Wisconsin schools of law and education and she has been thinking a lot about this divide between what voters seem to want for their schools and the state level policies that they're actually getting. She spent much of the last year listening to testimony about Wisconsin school funding woes as part of a bipartisan Blue Ribbon commission.

Julie Underwood It was amazing. It underscored a lot of what I thought I already knew about these problems being statewide, not just limited to urban districts or not just limited to low socioeconomic kind of areas, but really statewide problems of that funding being a pinch of declining enrollment of funding, the lack of funding directed toward low income students, lack of

funds for mental health issues. Those, we heard those things over and over and over and over again.

Berkshire And all of that testimony convinced Underwood that the root of the disconnect between voters and education policy? Well, it's actually pretty simple.

Underwood We have to believe that local people don't know how their elected officials are voting.

Berkshire If that argument seems hard to believe, well, consider this. It turns out to be surprisingly difficult for Wisconsinites to figure out how their representatives have actually been voting on key education issues.

Heather DuBois Bourenane The challenge for a lot of people who are working on the ground in their local communities, trying to connect the dots between what state votes mean to local kids in schools, is that they can't hold their lawmakers accountable for the way they vote here. That's in large part because education votes and budget votes are bundled together in these larger packets, packages that include all the things, right? The state budget is massive and it includes all of the programming and so this is where they have passed every bit of voucher legislation in our state and all kinds of policy that doesn't have a positive impact on kids or schools at all. That's a way that our legislators are able to get away with not having to say they voted yes or no on an education item.

Berkshire Regular listeners may recognize that voice. That's Heather DuBois Bourenane and on my tour guide on our last visit to Wisconsin. She runs the Wisconsin Public Education Network and her group recently rolled out what they hope will be a fix for this sort of legislative inscrutability she just described: an education policy report card for legislators. It's modeled on the school report cards that Wisconsin introduced under Scott Walker.

DuBois Bourenane We've produced a set of legislative report cards that help us shine a light on the way our legislators have voted in the most recent budget. They take a single snapshot, just like the school report cards take a single snapshot of a child's performance on one day at school on a standardized test, of a legislators vote on that budget and they let communities and voters and taxpayers know how that person voted on K-12 funding, on vouchers and privatization, on special education aid on mental health aid, and we look at how all of our legislatures, all of our legislators stack up overall.

Berkshire Heather is convinced that just getting information into people's hands could go a long way towards changing the conversation about education priorities in Wisconsin.

DuBois Bourenane I think people are really hungry for a document, sort of like a graphic or a picture or something that they can hold in their hands and say, 'why did you do this to me? How could you vote for a budget that sold our kids so short?'

Berkshire If that sounds overly optimistic, well, consider what happened in Goodman Armstrong Creek after voters their rejected an operating referendum in 2018. The district tried again and this time, school officials like Alison Space made sure that local residents got to see the same bleak math that she knows so well.

Space Just educating, no matter what, getting the information to the people so that they have to think about that a little bit. And I would say that there were one or two people that were very surprised at that information when we put the hard numbers in front of them and we showed that continual drop in a graph and, and just said, 'look, I can't control this. This isn't about school spending. This is about schools, you know, not receiving the money on that end of it.' So I think that was very helpful. And I think that they did spread that word. And I think that if they wanted to talk about it, they could at least say there's nothing the school can do about losing aid. I mean they're, you know, that they have no control over that.

Berkshire Of course, informing citizens is one thing, influencing legislators is another. Rob Asen is a professor of rhetoric, politics and culture at the University of Wisconsin. He and researcher Kelly Nelson have been crisscrossing the state listening in on how Wisconsinites talk about public education, and again and again, they heard local voters trying to make sense of why their elected representatives so often support policies that are harmful to the schools in their own districts.

Robert Asen The folks we spoke with really struggled to make sense of this. Why is it that legislators would support policies that adversely impacted the schools in their communities? And, you know, folks talked about legislators who followed the party line, who may have been elected on topics that had nothing to do with education policy, and so they were content to let their colleagues kind of set the tone. But there was also a lot of confusion and frustration and I think that, and gerrymandering of course, in Wisconsin came up regularly in the interviews that legislators are protected so that they don't have to face the consequences of their decisions.

Berkshire And the more Asen and Nelson listened, the more convinced they became that the disconnect between local communities and legislators over public education goes beyond particular policies. They have fundamentally different visions of what matters when it comes to their local schools.

Asen What we see at the national and state levels is an approach to public education as a narrow, really kind of instrumental thing. It's job readiness. It can be measured very clearly through reading and math scores. And so it's the scope of what public schools and private schools for that matter do is fairly limited. Whereas what people talk about in the interviews is, are not only those things. I mean they're obviously concerned that children are prepared for future careers, but they talk about so much more, both what happens inside the classroom and outside of the classroom.

Berkshire Now way back at the start of this episode, I mentioned that I came to Wisconsin to try to make sense of what seems like a contradiction. In a state that really put the concept of rural resentment on the map, you have all these rural communities voting again and again to hike their own taxes to pay for local schools. Well, one argument I heard more than once is that the key word here is local. These communities may be willing to pay more to educate their own kids. It's other people's kids they have a problem with. Kim Kaukl of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance says that he hears some version of this argument all the time.

Kim Kaukl But in response, many of those rural folks who say, I'd rather do a referendum and tax myself and keep my tax dollars here instead of, you know, sending it to the state for disbursement. So it's a, it's kind of a twisted look at it, but I get it somewhat. But it's almost like you're double taxing yourself too.

Berkshire But then I came across a story that made me question how deep the our kids, other people's kids dynamic really runs. Remember Lance Bagstad, the superintendent of the Arcadia schools in the Trempeleau Valley? Well, there was a key detail about his school district that I've been holding out on you.

Bagstad We are actually pretty unique for a small rural school in Wisconsin in that we are a bit over 70% Latino student population. Probably the nearest demographic like that to us would be Abbotsford, which is about an hour and a half, two hours Northeast. They have around 50% Latino population. But there's been a large influx of Latino families over the last several years because of employment opportunities. In Arcadia alone, we have the world headquarters, the corporate headquarters for Ashley Furniture Industries. We have a very sizable Pilgrim's Pride processing plant as well as Nelson Global.

Berkshire Voters in Arcadia recently approved a tax hike to pay for a new community center that will be attached to the middle and high school. And how's the public library? This, by the way, is a city that overwhelmingly went for Trump in 2016 and for Scott Walker in 2018 and a couple of years ago, ice agents showed up in Arcadia and conducted mass arrests.

Bagstad I'm not going to lie. I think it's created, you know, some issues in the community as the demographic has changed. But I would say that, you know, I often say when I walk through the halls of our school buildings, what I see is kindergarten through 12th grade kids being kids. You know, the kids don't see each other as, as Caucasian or Latino. They see each other as kids and they interact as kids. They compete on sports teams as kids. They participate in our musical as kids. They spend time in band and choir as kids. They don't spend time as people from different demographics.

Berkshire And it turns out that when it comes to how they look at public education, what Arcadia's newest arrivals want is pretty much the same as people who've called the city home for generations.

Bagstad Many of our kids are, they either immigrated to the United States with their families or their families, their moms and dads are first-generation here. You know, their kids are looking for an opportunity to change the trajectory of their own lives and want to be participants in our schools and do a good job with their education because they see education as an opportunity to their future.

Berkshire Thanks to everyone in Wisconsin who assisted me with this episode and patiently answered my questions about geography and Jack and I'll be right back to wrap things up.

[Music]

Berkshire So Jack, weren't you just the teeniest bit jealous that you didn't get to accompany me and traipse around rural Wisconsin?

Schneider If our listeners could see me wearing my Green Bay Packers foam finger and my Wisconsin Badgers jersey right now, I think they would know just how sad I was. So the thing that I was actually really sad to miss out on was the conversation with Rob Asen because I was really interested to listen to him talk about the kinds of feelings that rural people have about the purpose of school. That reminds me a lot actually about the purposes that urban people see schools playing in their communities and the extent to which policy over the past couple of decades, at least the kind of high profile policy that has most drastically shaped the schools—the way that policy has failed to align with these broad visions of public education. And I think one thing that's really interesting here when we're talking about rural schools is that not only have leading policy efforts failed to recognize the many things that rural communities want their schools to do, but there's also this ironic fact that the reforms that have been so resisted, in urban communities, by educators and sometimes community members.

So I'm thinking of reforms like value added measures of teachers for instance, or efforts to close low performing schools that those reform efforts have focused on urban schools. And they really couldn't focus on rural schools because, gosh, there just isn't the population density to close a school in a rural community where people are already often commuting a long way to get their kids to school or sending kids on a long bus ride. And there often aren't enough teachers to even talk about firing low performing teachers. So even these unpopular reforms really miss, uh, rural communities and, uh, as a result, send a signal to these people that they really aren't on the radar despite the fact that rural schools make up roughly a third of all schools nationwide. And I think that's probably something that would be a surprise to some of our listeners. Um, they have fewer students per school, but even still about a quarter of students nationally are in rural schools. So we're talking about a sizable percentage of both students and schools here.

Berkshire Well Jack, I have great news. As you know, at the end of the year we launched a little fund drive so that I could do more travel and things are going so well that I am pretty sure that I'm going to be able to bring you with me on one of our future trips. So if you, if you have a place that you'd like to go, you just let me know.

Schneider Well, I've heard that the education system in Bermuda is quite interesting, so maybe we should look into that a little bit more closely.

Berkshire As our regular listeners know, we rely on your support through Patreon to keep the podcast going. It's how we pay our excellent producer and how I get to go around to places like rural Wisconsin and Michigan and next I'm off to Georgia. So if you're interested in throwing a little support our way, just go to [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) and search for Have You Heard Pod. That little donation will get you access to the behind the scenes area that we like to call In the Weeds. And Jack, in today's episode of In the Weeds I thought we could dig down into this topic of rural resentment a little more and think about how it relates to one of your favorite topics, which would be the meritocracy.

Schneider That sounds good. And I will issue my reminder to folks that even if they aren't supporting the show monetarily, there are lots of ways that they can support what we do. Perhaps the best is to just go on and give the show a rating. It helps people find it. But we also love hearing when you have shared the show with friends or colleagues, when you engage with the show's Twitter handle [@HaveYouHearPod](https://twitter.com/HaveYouHearPod) or when you send us an email about an idea you've got for a show or just your reactions to something that we've done.

Berkshire And of course, if you are feeling particularly generous, stop by [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) and search for Have You Heard. And until next time I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider You seem so uncertain about that, Jennifer. Were you may be going to be somebody else? Until next time.

Berkshire I'm going to bring out my Wisconsin personality.

Schneider Until next time, folks.