

#83 Don't Mess with Texas' Schools

How Support for Public Education is Upending Politics in the Lone Star State

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

Jack Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire And Jack. I am fresh back from another one of my reporting adventures.

Schneider And I'm trying to figure out where you were. You have a tee shirt on that says hook 'em horns. So I'm guessing that you were in the Republic of Texas.

Berkshire Can I just tell you that one of my very favorite things about..

Schneider Is burnt orange?

Berkshire About being in Texas was that I visited an elementary school in North Texas and their bell sound was the charge sound: duh duh duh duh duh. So if you're a regular listener, you probably know that last year we announced that as part of the intense focus on 2020 we wanted to do our bit and do some travel around to particular states where the debate over education and politics is heated and maybe getting lost in by the national media. And I am just back from Texas.

Schneider Part of this effort of course, is to better understand how places that are traditionally associated with the Republican party, right?, red states are reacting to present threats to public education. And I think Jennifer, that you probably found some interesting responses from people, who may be traditionally vote Republican, but who are inclined to throw their weight behind candidates who support the public schools.

Berkshire That would be one way to put it. I went down to Texas because I heard about a really interesting effort to hold these, these bipartisan forums to get Democratic candidates and Republican candidates on the stage together talking about one issue, public education. And it was really fascinating. You really heard Republicans scrambling to reposition themselves as advocates for schools, as lovers of teachers. And the reason that this has happened is we're going to hear in this episode is that Republicans in Texas had embraced positions prior to 2018 that were controversial with their own constituents and they paid a price in the 2018 election.

Schneider One thing that will be interesting to track here is whether Republicans and Democrats end up mouthing the same platitudes about public education while pursuing different kinds of policy proposals, or if they actually line up behind a policy agenda that really could be a kind of consensus policy agenda.

Berkshire Well Jack, not only did I have a great time in Texas and learn a lot, but it really made me eager to hit the road again and soon. And I know we usually save our appeal to listeners for the very end, but I'm hoping that if people are out there and they have an idea related to education and politics and think we should come to their state, that they'll reach out to us and also consider putting a little money our way. All you have to do is go to [HaveYouHeard blog.com/support](http://HaveYouHeard.com/support) and you'll see all the different ways that you can help us really take the show on the road in 2020.

Schneider I think it'd be even more convincing, Jennifer, if there were pictures of you in all of your tee shirts from each of the States that you visited. Oh, and I've see you're wearing your Michigan button right now, so there must be something about that later.

Berkshire Foreshadowing...Are you ready to go to Texas?

Schneider Yee haw!

[Music]

Berkshire When I heard about an experiment in small 'd' Democracy happening across Texas, well, I had to see it for myself. The concept is really pretty simple. Candidates for the Texas state legislature from both parties are invited to take part in local forums focused on one issue: public education. They answer a series of questions on statewide issues that voters really care about - things like school funding, high-stakes testing, the teacher shortage and private school vouchers. And, yes, there are a few rules.

[Forum moderator]

Berkshire There've been forty of these forums in all, leading up to the March primary election. They're organized by a non-profit group called Raise Your Hand Texas. And it's a sign of just how polarized we are these days that the idea of Democrats and Republicans appearing in the same space to talk about public education seems kind of novel. And that's exactly the point. Cherie Mueller is a parent advocate in Keller, about 20 miles northeast of Fort Worth, and one of the organizers of the forum here.

Cherie Mueller This was the point of public education. The founders, they had just kicked of our country. They had just kicked out a king. They needed to make the democracy work and they knew an educated people would be the best at analyzing policy, evaluating candidates, and that for a democracy to be successful, the quality of the civic participation was needed and that they could only do that through education.

Berkshire What makes events like this so unique is that Texas is as polarized as, well, anywhere these days. This part of the state has been a Republican stronghold and was also a hotbed of Tea Party activism. In fact the Republican incumbent who participated in the Keller

forum was first elected in 2012 as a sort of Tea Party firebrand. But Cherie says that when it comes to public education, the polarization that divides Texans on so many issues gets a lot harder to find.

Mueller Public education is probably our most nonpartisan issue out there. That's where you find, I think, Democrats and Republicans agree most of any issues out there. That's probably the one where we can find common ground. 95% of children in Texas are public education students. One out of 10 kids in the country is educated in this state. We need to find solutions here.

Berkshire Of course bipartisan quote unquote solutions in education are not exactly a new thing. For the past three decades as we so often hear from my co-host Jack Schneider, Republicans and Democrats have teamed up on things like accountability, standards and charter school expansion. But what's happening in Texas seems to be, well, a little different. There's a shift happening here that I wanted to understand. Which is why I've come to the part of the state known as the Metroplex. That would be the vast metropolitan area around Dallas and Ft. Worth. And the first thing I learned is that it's growing incredibly fast. Places like Keller that were just fields not that long ago are now booming.

Mueller This is northern or northeast Tarrant County, which is one of the fastest growth areas in the country. My school district in fact added 15 schools in the last 20 years. Our total number of campuses is 42, so everything in this area is moving. There are more people...people are coming in faster than the roads and the schools. It's inexpensive to live here. Companies have transferred here, we have several Fortune 500 companies who've put headquarters here. They're coming every day and the developers are building houses left and right.

Berkshire If you're agog at the number of schools Keller has built, the actual number is even higher. It turns out to be 17 new schools in just the last fifteen years. Other parts of the Metroplex are growing even faster. Chris Wallace is the CEO of the North Texas Commission - a Chamber of Commerce-like group that covers 13 counties in this part of the state. I asked him to give us a sense of just how big this area is and how big it's expected to get.

Chris Wallace So it's a 9,000 square mile area, about 7.5, 7.6 million people, expected to double, definitely by the year 2050. So it's a huge population growth. It's about a 33% from an economic growth standpoint over the last 15 or so years. So tremendous economic growth, tremendous population growth and our forecast on both is very positive,

Berkshire But all that growth has put employer groups like the North Texas Commission in a bit of a difficult spot. How do you paint a picture of this region as an economic juggernaut, I kept hearing in my travels, and try to lure quote unquote knowledge employers here when Texas spends less per student than all but a handful of states? For the Commission that's meant pushing for more school funding and backing candidates who support public schools.

Wallace When we're, when we're talking with incumbents who are running for reelection or we're talking to candidates who are running for an office, we push three criteria points. One is that they're pro-business. Two is that they're pro public schools and three is that they're pro local control so that school districts and counties and cities have the local freedom that we need them to have is closest to the people.

Berkshire And all those people who've been pouring into North Texas? Well, they're having a measurable impact on the state's politics. Of the 12 legislative seats that flipped from Republican to Democrat in 2018, six were in the Metroplex. We're going to hear more about that in just a bit. But first we need to find out about what's been happening on the other end of the political spectrum. Just like in many other states Republicans in Texas have been shifting to the right. In fact I'm betting that if you know anything about Texas politics it's from stories like these back in 2017.

[Video clips]

Berkshire Well, you get the point. So let's just pause here briefly to recap some of the trends we've been hearing about. This part of Texas is growing incredibly fast, and as it does its suburbs are getting bluer. This is happening even as the GOP has been shifting right. Meanwhile the business lobby now realizes that in order to produce all of those skilled workers that companies require you need a strong public education system. But wait - there's one more thing. North Texas may be suburbanizing at lightning speed but the state - even the Metroplex part of it - still hangs onto its rural identity. That's also an important part of our story.

Pastor Charles Johnson Its mythos is rural in its foundations: cattle, oil, big sky open country. And yet it's local control. It's... we call it limited government - local control and love your neighbor. And those three components are in a cocktail, a cultural and social and political cocktail that make for a progressive conservatism or a conservative progressivism, at least when it comes public schools,

Berkshire That voice belongs to Pastor Charles Johnson. He's the founder of Pastors for Texas Children, a network of religious leaders in the state who are pro public education. And back in 2017 when the state legislature was consumed with bathroom bills and sanctuary cities Johnson and his members showed up to protest another conservative priority: private school vouchers.

Johnson Well I think the sort of general conclusion was that churches would want government, financial relief for their church schools. But really the opposite is true. Pastors understand that 90% of our children go to public schools. And so we started taking that message to them and taking the message of the attack on public education to them. And they started saying, where do we sign up? How can we help? And that's who we are and what we've become.

Berkshire Johnson's network includes some 2,500 pastors, about ½ of whom work in rural communities that are typically the most Republican. That's also where opposition to private

school vouchers is the most intense. But the group's goal is to bring people together across the political spectrum to support public education.

Johnson One of the ways that we're described is we get rural, conservative Republicans to ally with urban progressive Democrats in a pro-public education, anti voucher push, for charter accountability and transparency. That'll be the next big legislative initiative, and to get some sense, get some common sense about the standardized tests. We've got a long way to go about that...To basically double back down on great public schools and people in Texas are for it.

Berkshire By now you're probably wondering - what is this place called Texas where so many unlikely bedfellows are rallying behind public education? To find out we're going to take a little road trip to the far reaches of the Metroplex. We're headed to Plano for a Raise Your Hand candidates forum and a close-up look at public education activism in action.

Missy Bender is the regional advocacy director for Raise Your Hand Texas in Collin and Denton counties. She's a Plano resident, a former school board member, and what you might call a "Texpert" on state and local politics. If that isn't a word, by the way, it should be. And as Missy explains this part of Texas used to be reliably red.

Missy Bender It's known as one of the reddest counties in the state of Texas. But if you look at the last election, in fact, the very forum that you attended this evening, you have two

candidates who opposed one another in that last election. And it was only won by the Republican by maybe 300 votes or less.

Berkshire Was that a surprise?

Bender It was a surprise. But we have seen over time, more and more moderate Republicans becoming frustrated with the direction of the Republican party here going further and further to the right and farther away from maybe what their values are. So that's challenging them to make a choice. Do I stay there or do I move to another different option? And I think we saw some of that movement last election.

Sharon Hirsch Lots of corporate relocation, lots of people coming from other parts of the area. They resonate, the democratic values resonate with them. And slowly but surely we're turning blue.

Berkshire That's Sharon Hirsch. She was the Democrat who ran against incumbent GOP state representative Matt Shaheen in 2018 and came within just a few hundred votes of defeating him. Sharon is a former administrator for the Plano school district, and she says that the issue of public education was key to her near win and most of the races where Democrats succeeded in flipping formerly Republican seats.

Hirsch In the last cycle, 12, we won 12 seats, flipped 12 seats to Democrat in the Texas house. We only have nine more to take control of the Texas house. And the primary driver of that was public education. They kept kicking the can down the road, not doing a darn thing with our public schools.

And we saw firsthand when we were working in the schools in 2011, \$5.4 billion was cut from our schools. A lot of people lost their jobs, programs that we were used to having, you know, we had to cut, professional development kind of went away. And then we've been digging ourselves out of the hole. So I think people said enough is enough. And for me, I followed the 85th legislative session and when it ended disastrously, and there was no movement on public education. I said I'm getting in.

Berkshire Plano is a wealthy community and because of the way Texas finances its schools, the city has been sending a huge chunk of local property tax revenue to the state which is then supposed to redistribute it to communities that have less property wealth. It's called Robin Hood as in take from the rich, give to the poor. But as Missy Bender explains the problem in places like Plano is that as property taxes have gone up and up so does that the amount that the state quote unquote recaptures.

Bender In just a couple of years, it's increasing \$50 million a year. So that was sending us into a deficit budget situation. So here we are sending all this money away more and more every year, more than we could even collect. So we're taking money out of our savings account in order to send it away. And our students are doing, our teachers are doing more with less and it's just not a sustainable system. So you have that happening here and then you had other situations elsewhere in the state of Texas where they weren't getting enough to pay teachers. There was no inflation factor in the formulas. So we were just getting less and less and less and paying more and more and more. And it had reached a breaking point where people are saying, 'you're taking all of my property tax money.' And they thought we were getting it in the school district to use, but they learned that wasn't the case, that all of that growth was actually going to the state of Texas for its purposes.

Berkshire And what made people even madder was the sense that their elected representatives weren't doing anything to fix a growing pile of problems. After legislators failed to figure out a fix for the state's school finance woes back in 2017, education activism exploded here. You've already heard about Raise Your Hand and Pastors for Texas Children. There's also Texas Educators Vote, Texans for Public Education, Friends of Texas Public Schools, Texas Parent PAC. And behind a lot of these efforts were local educators who were starting to realize that they have some real power. Jodi Davis is an elementary school principal in Frisco.

Jodi Davis Frisco at one time was the fastest growing school district in the nation. We have 41 elementary schools and I think we currently have 10 high schools with two more being planned that will open soon. It wasn't that long ago that we just had one high school, so it was very rapid growth.

We're about 65,000 students right now. And when we talk about the employee base, Frisco ISD for a long time has been the largest employer in the city. And so I think that brings us a lot of voting power that educators bring to the table.

Berkshire Which brings us to tonight's candidate forum in West Plano. Along with Sharon Hirsch and Aimee Garza Lopez who is challenging her in the Democratic primary, Republican incumbent Matt Shaheen is also in the house. Just a little added context here. Shaheen is a member of the hardline conservative House Freedom Caucus. And he has been something of a darling of another influential and controversial conservative group: Empower Texans. You may recall their ill-fated campaign to quote unquote blow the whistle on teachers who were promoting a culture of voting in their schools.

But you would never know any of that from Shaheen's remarks tonight. He has nothing but love for Plano's schools and the teachers who work in them.

Matt Shaheen And as I've visited these different schools, my memory is of teachers just loving on our students and doing whatever it takes to make sure that they're successful. So everything that we can do to support our children and we, you know, we did support raises and all those types of things, but more to show in the support of our teachers and our principals in all our education. I just want to make sure they all understand that I'm here to listen. I want to engage with you and understand what your challenges are. That's why we will do a complete visit of all of our schools and the district. The whole idea of replacing the STAR test with something else came from the teachers that I talk to. So you're a great asset. Our teachers are literally the reason why Texas is doing so well economically. When I talk to CEOs who are moving to Texas, it's because of our workforce and it's our teachers, it's our principals who are building that workforce,

Berkshire Now a number of people I talked to said that it was significant that Shaheen even showed up at this forum. It's a sign that he's waking up to the reality that public education is an issue his constituents really care about. But does a change in the way that politicians are talking about education translate into policy? If you've been paying attention to the controversial and highly political state takeover of the Houston schools, well, it's easy to dismiss all of this as just so much political rhetoric. Missy Bender says that she hears progress but that ultimately words aren't enough.

Bender Yes, they're hearing us, but how do they vote? So the message that I delivered at the end is you must vote and you must think about public education when you vote because when you do that, it might lead you to some places of thought that maybe you hadn't thought about before in the same way. So we're wanting to offer lots of nonpartisan information so they can do their research and cast an informed vote.

Berkshire Where groups like Raise Your Hand are having real success is in redefining public education as a non-partisan issue. By doing that they've vastly expanded the field of people who are willing to embrace the role of public education advocate. Dina Rowe is an elementary school principal in Plano. I had a chance to talk to her and roughly 10 other school leaders, teachers and parents before the forum. They're part of a Raise Your Hand fellowship program that is training them to speak up on behalf of public education. And many of them said they'd never done anything like this before. Z49

Dina Rowe What I hope is that education, public education, particularly is a priority for all people, all politicians and all people interested in serving our great state. And so that's what the work around what we are doing is advocates for public ed is about, is making sure that it's less polarized and that it's more about just providing an excellent strong public school system for all of our 5.4 million children in Texas.

Berkshire Not everyone buys the idea that the work that Raise Your Hand and a whole host of other advocacy groups are doing is nonpartisan. In fact the Texas Republican Party sent around a strongly worded memo to GOP candidates warning them to steer clear of forums like the ones I attended. "If you have been offered an invite to an event of this type, please decline." That's me using my Republican party voice. And that brings us to the big question that has really been at the heart of this episode.. Could support for public education cause voters to vote, well, differently?

During my travels I met up with Mark Terry. He's the head of the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association or TEPSA. He hails from red rural Texas where support for public schools runs deep. And on the night Mark and I met, President Trump who is beloved in rural Texas, was railing against what he called failing government schools. Mark, by the way, feels like his party has abandoned him on the issue of education. And so I asked him whether Republicans who feel the same way might consider changing the way they vote.

Mark Terry Well I think again, it's other issues that keep that from happening. Because there is a...our rural areas are very conservative, and those issues would I think preclude that from happening. I think you're going to have better luck in the urban areas, than you will in rural areas. And being from a rural community, myself, very conservative, very good, but they love their public schools. So they're kind of in the same boat as me. We're really conservative, but wait a minute, the public schools are where it's at. That's where our kids go. That's what we want to support.

Berkshire Well, you can't blame me for trying. A Texas-sized thank you to everyone who assisted me with this episode, especially the folks at Raise Your Hand Texas. And Jack and I will be right back to discuss what he thinks about what I learned in the Lone Star State.

[Music]

Berkshire So Jack, as I was shopping around for the souvenir that I was going to bring you home from Texas, I was really worried, would I pick out a cowboy hat that could fit over your not inconsiderable dome?

Schneider It's actually a perfectly average size head. It's just, I think the perception that you end up with from my limitless knowledge of education policy, Jennifer, that is really, I think shaping your understanding of my Stetson size.

Berkshire Well, I did pretty well because you look great. You are rocking that hat. Pictures or it didn't happen.

Schneider Well Jennifer, I thought that this was great. And it, you know, is certainly evidence of one of the things that we have said we wanted to do more of in 2020 which is send you on the road to do some on the ground reporting. And as I was listening to some of these voices on the ground, one thing that I was wondering was, where are people in Texas with regard to unions and with regard to teacher activism? In so many states, we see that support for public education is defined as a left of center issue, that the teacher's unions and the Democratic party are seen as, you know, fitting together hand in glove. And that really wasn't something that came up here.

Berkshire Jack, that is such a perspicacious question on your part!

Schneider Can you say it with a little bit less surprise and condescension, Jennifer?

Berkshire So I noticed this too. You know, I'm in North Texas for one day, then two days, then three days, almost a week, and the union never came up. And so finally, you know, I started asking people about it and I would hear things like, 'well, we're a nonunion state.' In Texas teachers don't have collective bargaining rights. They can't strike. And so the union is obviously much weaker than in places like Massachusetts or in New York or Michigan where it was historically strong. But so what you've seen happen is something really interesting, which is that these nonprofit groups that we heard a lot about in the episode have emerged to fill that space. And then what they do is define public education and support for public schools as a nonpartisan position. And that I think, what's so interesting is that that really speaks to not just teachers and school leaders, but to parents too. Right? And I wondered if with your considerable knowledge of things like polling about public education, have you seen that this is a thing where people really view schools as nonpartisan?

Schneider Yeah, absolutely. So, you know, support for public education has historically been quite high among parents and non-parents. And one of the things that I find really interesting about how you were just framing this is that if an issue is presented as nonpartisan, it essentially puts whichever political party is not supporting that issue in a really difficult position, right? Because if supporting public education is viewed as a priority of the Democratic party and you know, robust alternatives are a part of the Republican party platform, you have simply an ideological divide that can be navigated through a variety of justifications. But if you have an

issue that we ostensibly all agree on, right?, like national defense, you don't see Democrats coming out and saying, I am not for national defense. And it's actually put Democrats in a really difficult position over the years to try to fund their policy priorities while maintaining really sky high budget levels for national defense. So I think this will potentially put Republicans in a challenging position given who the Secretary of Education is, given her influence on the current president. You know, how then do you justify the kinds of policy positions that are currently being pursued by the present administration?

Berkshire Well Jack, you succeeded in setting me up for my announcement about where I want to go next. Going to Texas and hearing just how these Republicans are scrambling to sort of reposition themselves as just the biggest lovers of public schools and teachers that you could ever find made me curious to go to a state where you really don't see that happening. And I'm thinking of Michigan of course. And what you see there is that the Republicans are saddled with positions that are really unpopular with their own constituents. And the reason that they can't shift the way we heard Republicans in Texas trying to do is that they are, they operate under the influence and with the deep pockets of the DeVos family. And I thought it would be really interesting as part of our 2020 series to go to Michigan and hear what that sounds like and also try to get people to talk about what it's going to mean for the 2020 election. The only thing that's missing is a little funding.

Schneider I was even going to just...

Berkshire Bring out your checkbook?

Schneider ...Play a role I rarely do and be the person who drags people to the...

Berkshire Can you sound a little more enthusiastic?

Schneider paywall. I mean, you know, Jennifer is of course always trying to get to Michigan in February. You can't stay away.

Berkshire And I can't think of a better time to go then when that Great Lake sky is down like four feet off the ground.

Schneider So if you want to send the snow queen off on her latest reporting trip, one way that you can do that is by going onto Patreon and searching for Have You Heard and becoming a supporter.

Berkshire Have You Heard Pod.

Schneider Excuse me, cause you wouldn't want to support all the other Have You Heards out there. They're bad. We're good. And that is one way that you can sustain the show, by becoming a subscriber at any level greater than \$2. You even get yourself access to our In the

Weeds segment, which has been left to me today. And there's actually a surprise for Jennifer In the Weeds.

Berkshire Well I can't wait for that. And just to note that our Have You Heard travel operation is quite lean. We're, you know, your little donation will help with things like, you know, buying an airplane ticket, paying for a rental car, which Jack, just so you know, my rental car in Texas was a pickup truck.

Schneider Oh, that's amazing. And how about reporters notebooks, Jennifer? Reporters, notebooks, batteries, and of course Stetson hats

Berkshire And of course, deluxe accommodations. Well, Jack, after my Texas adventure and now the prospect of future travels, I'm already feeling pretty sunny, but you know what time it is?

Schneider If I didn't, that would be like a real failure of mine to take the easy handoff here. Yes, it is time for 60 seconds of sunshine. And today we're going to be hearing from a school enrichment coordinator at Ida B. Wells Middle School in Washington DC and she's talking about, something that on its surface wouldn't seem like a ray of sunshine. It has to do with students who are navigating trauma. But the effort I think is really inspiring. It ended up producing what they called the Garden of Hope book and we're going to hear from her now.

NiLa Austin I'm NiLa Austin. I'm currently a school enrichment teacher slash coordinator at Ida B. Wells Middle School in Washington DC. And my students and I, one of the projects that we are currently wrapping up is the Garden of Hope book. And it's actually a book that we wrote. We focused on traumatic experiences and more specifically the traumatic experiences of my students. So to kind of dive into that process, obviously the children, so they weren't super open with exposing a lot of the negative experiences that they've had thus far in their life. So we read Kondwani Fidel, *Hummingbirds in the Trenches*, and we read *A Rose That Grew from Concrete* by Tupac Shakur. And then we also read *Our Lives Matter* and I cultivated, so for the cultural workshop, which is from our, for the culture curriculum, and we had an opportunity to bring the authors and they had deeper discussions about the types of trauma that they discussed in the books, and the students were able to interact with them and gain some confidence and feel comfortable when it came time to write their own stories and detail all of their own traumatic experiences. We brought a few mental health professionals in to kind of give an idea of what healthy coping mechanisms look like, so the students would have a richer vocabulary when it came time to discuss the thing that they did to kind of solve any negative feelings that they were experiencing. And now we started this process in August, now it's January, and our books were just bound and they were delivered to the school. And we'll be having an official book launch on February 27th. My name is NiLa Austin, and this is my 60 seconds of sunshine.

Berkshire And just a reminder that if you'd like to submit an idea for your own 60 seconds of sunshine, you can find everything you need to know at HaveYouHeardblog.com/sunshine. Until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire

Schneider And I am Hos... No - what's a better Texas name? I'm Tex Schneider.