

## #84 The Blame Game: 100 Years of Teacher Bashing

**Jennifer Berkshire** Welcome to Have You Heard, I'm Jennifer Berkshire. And Jack as you know, Mike Bloomberg is everywhere right now.

**Jack Schneider** He, he really is. I keep looking over my shoulder to see if he's making me a cup of coffee in the studio here.

**Berkshire** So as Mike Bloomberg has made it into the headlines and is climbing in the polls, there's now this concerted effort underway to sort of resuscitate his record in the past and things like stop and frisk have gotten a lot of attention. His comments about redlining, his various, his treatment of women, etc, but also out there is the way that he talked about teachers. There are a number of stories making the rounds. Really, like going back and seeing those headlines—it was really a low point for...kind of the nadir of teacher bashing.

**Schneider** Yeah. Uh, well, yes and no. You know, I certainly, when I was reading a story about Bloomberg that was describing how, you know, in some ways he has a traditional sort of left of center agenda and in other ways he has more right of center and his education policy was listed as one of those areas where he has been more right of center. I thought, well, gosh, bashing teachers was pretty bipartisan during the Bloomberg era. And then I thought, well, gosh, bashing teachers has always been a kind of bipartisan sport for policy elites. And so it was a nadir in recent memory. But you know, I, for instance, think back to, I don't think back in my personal experience, but to roughly 70 years ago. Arthur Bestor published a book called *Educational Wastelands*, a series of treatises that came out in the 1980s about how bad teacher education was and how bad our teachers were. This is something that is pretty cyclical, that we get it every generation where somebody will decide that schooling is just too important to be left to these teachers who we've got today. And we better do something about it.

**Berkshire** Well, I think what's really interesting is that, you know, we're now at a moment where some of that bashing has receded, right? That people are, Oh my gosh, teachers, they're underpaid. Oh my gosh, there aren't enough of them. What have we done to the profession? Um, as people who listen regularly know we were just in Texas where teacher bashing that was at a frenzy just five years ago has now receded. And I heard, you know, multiple people talk to me about teaching as a calling. And you realize...

**Schneider** That actually this is precisely the sort of ebb and flow that we're going to be hearing about from our guest. Nice transition there, Jennifer. Yes. We're going to be talking with a historian of education, Diana D'Amico Pawlewicz who is at the University of North Dakota and she has been working on a project that is about teacher blaming and its long history, which dates back to well before even Arthur Bestor and his educational wastelands all the way back to the 19th century and the origins of teaching as a profession.

**Berkshire** Well we better get her on the horn because we've got a lot of blaming and bashing to get through.

[Music]

**Berkshire** So you probably thought then when we titled this episode 100 years of teacher bashing that we were being, well, hyperbolic. But think again. In her forthcoming book *Blaming Teachers: Professionalization Policies and the Failure of Reform in American History* Diana D'Amico Pawlewicz traces the origins of the teacher blame game way back to basically the origins of public education in the US. But it was one particular story that leapt out at us. That would be the tale of young Emma Daly, a teacher in New York City. Concerned about poor leadership at her school she sent a couple of anonymous letters to the city superintendent. Which backfired spectacularly. Oh and the year? It was 1922.

**Diana D'Amico Pawlewicz** The superintendent, his name was William Ettinger, was just enraged at the idea of receiving an anonymous letter, either from a teacher or on behalf of a group of teachers, because it's just totally smacks of impropriety for him and nobody fessed up. And so he dispatched a series of handwriting experts to try and get to the bottom of this. And ultimately, you know, after comparing writing samples, the experts identified Emma Daley and when confronted with these findings, she, they charged her with forgery, which was an offense punishable by imprisonment. Daley tearfully admits that she was the author of the letters avoiding jail time but facing public ridicule. And so all of this really goes to the point that teachers did not have a whole lot of authority and very many means at their disposal to make changes from inside the system.

**Berkshire** Fast forward 100 years and the story of Emma Daly feels disturbingly familiar. And that is the point. One of the core arguments of Diana's book is the from the earliest days of public education reformers of every stripe have fixated on professionalizing the teaching force. Yet the remedies consistently undercut the authority of teachers.

**D'Amico Pawlewicz** The tragic irony here is that on one hand, this sort of language of professionalism is, is consensus building. It gets broad based appeal, right? Who doesn't want to be a professional? And so the public is on board, teachers are on board, their unions are on board. But what I find in the book is a couple of things and one of them is that this idea of a professional, it's kind of like a facade or an illusion. So not only do people have very different ideas of what a professional teacher is, but maybe even most important of all is that these ideas of the professional teacher have almost no bearing, no similarity to professionalism as other fields, other male dominated fields have experienced it. So, you know, there are lots of kind of attributes around the professional teacher and common parlance. But the core, the three kind of biggies when it comes to defining what a professional is or who a professional is not has to do with expertise, authority and autonomy and for teachers, the reforms that have been offered in the name of professionalization have never tried to kind of increase those.

Instead, they've kind of been ways to undercut that because they've professionalism professionalization in the schools. It's kind of functioned as a way to support the larger bureaucratic order and sense of efficiency of public schools. And those kinds of, those two things have kind of not fit together well. These kind of idea of the expert autonomous teacher, but also the rule follower and the one who, um, follows the dictates of a larger system.

**Schneider** Diana, it seems to me that there's another factor here at play that is undermining of teacher professionalism and it's the way that we talk about teachers and that's something that you address. And so I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about how teacher bashing is a useful rhetorical tool and the uses to which it is put and by whom?

**D'Amico Pawlewicz** I think that this kind of language of blaming teachers has been a fixture in American public education since the rise of publicly supported school systems in the mid 19th century. It's just part of the vocabulary of public schooling and you know, so we've got policymakers, social reformers and members of the public right there. They're looking around and they're seeing troubles, right? Weak economies, surges in immigration and so on. And from there they kind of turn to the public schools, these institutions that were created and supported with the intent of shoring up local communities and the nation. And so why were they falling short and in a resounding chorus they kind of answer "teachers," right? If only we had better teachers, then we'd have better schools, which would lead to stronger communities and country.

You know, I could give you a couple of examples. Some of my favorites that I've pulled out. So, you know, in 1895 Joseph Mayer Rice, who's a renowned education critic at the time, writes to a national audience, "the greatest fault in the schools of our country lies in the professional weakness of our teachers. Raising the standard of our schools depends on increasing the professional strengths of teachers." Right? And so then there's a load of folks who have kind of echoed that sentiment. Just a few years ago, Arne Duncan speaking as secretary of education says bright young people don't even consider teaching. And in that speech he calls for what he says is a sweeping transformation of the teaching profession.

**Berkshire** As for why teachers make for such tempting targets the story Diana tells is both familiar and also surprising.

**D'Amico Pawlewicz** For a variety of reasons, I think teachers have been easy targets. I think for one is that they're somewhat defenseless. And I think that maybe sounds ironic now because their union has become so powerful. But early on I certainly think there was part of that. I think that gendered nature, nature of teaching made teachers very easy targets here.

**Berkshire** And by the gendered nature of teaching, Diana's referring not just to the fact that teaching emerged as a female dominated profession. The organizational structures of public education evolved around a female workforce and gendered assumptions about the skills and attributes of those workers.

**D'Amico Pawlewicz** I think a key part of the story with the rise of unions, but also understanding the history of public schools. We have to think back to sort of the story of origination. So early on, um, public schools and teacher policy are created upon these gendered assumptions about women, right? That they're docile, that they're applicable, um, that they'll be good rule followers, that they don't have any professional aspirations of their own. Um, and the idea very much, especially early on, right? Folks had been advocating for public schools, um, since the rise of the nation, but didn't really get a lot of traction in those calls for a variety of reasons, right? One is that it sort of was this manifestation of big government people didn't want anything to do with that. But when they finally do begin to pop up in large numbers and we see systems forming around them by the, you know, middle of the 19th century, one of the things that's happening is that there's a lot of immigration going on.

And so all of a sudden, whereas folks had faith in the home to kind of take care of education, right? That sort of idea of republican motherhood where the woman of the house could put the hood pass on the kind of knowledge that was necessary for kids to grow into reliable citizens and workers. All of a sudden that's being called into doubt with this push toward immigration, right? We have a fear about what's going on in homes. We have a fear about, you know, are, can we trust these new mothers, these new parents to impart the kind of attributes and skills that we feel are important? And so this is really when we turn to public schools and particularly to women as teachers.

So it's not only this kind of in loco parentis, but it's these stand-in mothers, right? These American women who are going to be in the front of the classroom, but only for a short time, right? So where policy policymakers are envisioning young women who will be there for a short amount of time until they get married and until they have their own kids, then they'll leave and go take care of their own responsibilities.

**Berkshire** In other words, these gendered ideas are the backbone of our public schools.

**D'Amico Pawlewicz** So even as women's roles in society have changed, they have the right to vote, they can own property and do all kinds of things, the kind of structures that those perceptions gave way to are still very much with us in our institutions. And this is not unique just to schools. And the same, I would say goes for race, right? These are institutions that were built upon premises of inferiority and supremacy, right? So these ideas are baked into our institutions. And so when we look at how these spaces are getting navigated, we have to remember that those fundamental ideas that we may very much disagree with today are kind of the brick and mortar.

**Berkshire** That gendered dynamic, by the way, extends to the unions that even by the early 20th century are already playing a key role in defining the teaching profession. Diana refers to what she calls the paradox of unionization for teachers - that even as their unions grow in size, power and influence, the individual teachers within them find their authority being undercut.

**D'Amico Pawlewicz** At the same time that we have this rise of teacher power that's manifested in the new union. So in New York city has the United Federation of teachers, um, we're also seeing this paradox of unionization. So in the name of teacher power and collective action, individual teachers and particularly women of the elementary schools are losing out. So I'll give you an example. So in New York city, as in many other cities, teachers were paid according to salary schedules that not only pay, that initially I suppose paid women and men just different amounts, but then later shifted those as men started to come into the public school systems with the GI bill following WWII, to give high school teachers more money and elementary school teachers less. In New York City, elementary school teachers who were the largest group of teachers in New York city, but also everywhere because of the nature of public schooling, fought for what they called a single salary schedule that equalized pay for all teachers in the system.

So regardless of level, regardless of gender, teachers were going to be remunerated equally. This was a real sticking point. So while the women, elementary school teachers who led the Teachers Guild found this to be a true victory, the men who had organized and populated the high school teachers association in New York city found this to just be a complete insult. They argued that this was deprofessionalizing, that it would make men run from the schools, and they wanted nothing to do with it.

**Berkshire** In the early days of teacher organizing in places like New York City there were many different groups, all jostling for influence. By joining forces, teachers gained a much more powerful collective voice. But power wasn't distributed equally.

**D'Amico Pawlewicz** In New York city and other cities, there are like dozens if not hundreds of teacher organizations, right? So they're by level, some of them are by religion, some of them are by ethnicity. So there's lots and so there's a splintering and the result of that is that teachers don't have a one single voice where they can speak powerfully back to the things that upset them. Right? So folks like Charles Cogan are saying, we need to come together and organize in the name of solidarity. The High School Teachers Association basically says, maybe we could be interested in joining with the Teachers Guild, which was the other largest association in New York city. But the single salary thing has got to go right. So the members of the Teachers Guild are like, no way. This is a huge victory of ours. This is, this is kind of the thing that we are most proud of and, and probably a clearer statement of our professionalization in terms of elementary school teachers.

Charles Cogan is negotiating the terms and essentially rolls back the single salary schedule in the name of collectivity, right? And so when doing that and rolling that back, he agrees to a plan that allows higher pay to be diverted to high school teachers and therefore to the men in the system, um, which allows the High School Teachers Association and its members to sign on board. And at that point we get the United Federation of Teachers. So the United Federation of Teachers is kind of this key moment in this history, right? It changes the nature of unionization, but it comes from, you know, somebody having to lose out. And the folks who lost out in this

moment where these women, elementary school teachers, and you know, for labor leaders like Albert Shanker, who becomes a really key figure in this history, in the second half of the 20th century, teacher professionalism and union power went hand in hand. But those were understood through gendered and racialized ideas of authority and success.

**Schneider** It seems like you are suggesting to us, and I don't disagree, that if you want to understand the teaching profession, you really have to understand gender in America and that many of the historical complaints about teachers are really complaints about women or framed differently. They're just views about women, right? So teachers aren't smart enough is when you are paying attention to gender is really a kind of revealing statement about how American culture views the intellectual capacities of women. And similarly the argument that teachers are looking after their own interests, that they are, you know, a group that needs to be combated by policymakers or by organized parents, that also is a kind of statement about women. That women ought to know their place, that, you know, anytime women are doing things on their own, that that is unsettling of the order. And I'm just interested in hearing you talk a little bit more about that.

**D'Amico Pawlewicz** Yeah. Jack, I agree with you. I think even if we think about lots of arguments around teacher pay, right?, and the pushback that we get is teachers are self interested. Why would they, what did they think they earned more? Why, why did they think they deserve more? Right? And there's this kind of this connection that if teachers get more than, than the kids must get less, right? And so we're putting on teachers this kind of equation that we don't put on other professional occupations, particularly male dominated professional occupations. And what I would suggest is that this kind of critique of teachers as self-interested goes back to the gendered roots of the profession and the notion of the mother teacher in the front of the classroom, right? Early school leaders and policymakers were explicit that they wanted teachers in the room because of their nurturing maternal capacities. Right? That wasn't a coded part of the language whatsoever. And even as we speak less explicitly about that over time, I think that those created norms as ideas created norms that still shape how we understand the role of the teacher in the classroom.

**Berkshire** What's the opposite of teacher bashing? That would be teacher worship. But as Diana made her way back through the annals of US public education she found the two difficult to untangle. And gender was the reason why. Take Horace Mann, who is regarded as public education's "dad."

**D'Amico Pawlewicz** And for him women are the cornerstone of this new endeavor. Right? So in 1853, Horace Mann writes that public school teaching was "women's work, the domain of her empire, the sector of her power, the crown of her glory." And so for him, these very Victorian notions of femininity were central to early ideas of the ideal teacher. Horace Mann wasn't alone in these ideas of women as the ideal teacher because of their nurturing maternal abilities, something that they consider to be innate.

Another education, reformer and and key voice in the formation of early public schools was Catharine Beecher. And whereas others might have been arguing that paying women would have distracted them from their true responsibilities, she argued against that for her. And this is a quote that she wrote in her book, *The True Remedy for the Wrongs of Woman*. She explained every woman ought to be trained as an educator. “No woman ought to be considered as qualified to become the head of a family till she has become practically exercise in this her highest professional duty.”

So I guess my point here is that just very early on, the idea of the ideal teacher and the idea of the mother went hand in hand. And so I think, Jack, that circles back to exactly the point you were making about these ideas of women not being smart enough, not being able enough about being greedy and self interested. Because I think at the core we're thinking about this kind of domestic relationship between the mother and the child.

**Berkshire** OK so Diana has taken us way back to the early days of public education to understand the gendered roots of the teacher blame game. But what about the present day? The pendulum has swung back in the “teachers are so great” direction. What does she make of that?

**D’Amico Pawlewicz** There's been this persistent love hate relationship [since] early on. I don't think that there really ever would've been a time historically that folks said they hate teachers. What I think they would have said is that teachers are not doing well enough what they needed them to do. And I think that probably is part of what's going on now too is that we love teachers. Teachers are great. Teachers are the most important, but also...Right? And there's that caveat that either we need them to do better or they're not doing well enough. And so we need these other interventions, more standardized testing to measure what teachers are or are not doing, more standardized curricula so that we are teacher proofing the schools even more. Right? And I think one of the key points here is that, right?, there's always been this consensus that schools and teachers are of critical national importance. That has always been the case. But in equal measure, what has always also been the case is this idea that teachers are not the ones who are determining that work or deciding how it ought to be done, right? So there's a belief in the importance of the teacher's work, but also a belief that teachers are not the ones who can set the parameters around that work. And so I think it leads this kind of fraught love hate relationship a little bit.

**Berkshire** That was Diana D’Amico Pawlewicz. She’s an Assistant Professor of Educational Foundations & Research at the University of North Dakota. And she’s the author of *Blaming Teachers: Professionalization Policies and the Failure of Reform in American History*. That will be out in August. And Jack and I will be right back with your 60 seconds of sunshine, among other things.

[Music]

**Berkshire** So Jack is, we were listening to Diana, I had a vivid flashback. The year was 2015 and I happened to be in Chicago. So what did I do there? I dropped in at a conference where you were delivering a paper because that's what one does.

**Schneider** I don't think you intentionally came to see me. I think I was a surprise to you there.

**Berkshire** So what was so interesting was that it was a session about, you know, teachers and how they're regarded and all the things Diana was talking about. And there was a gentleman on the panel who was basically presenting the results of some research showing that one of the reforms instituted in New York City had worked, right? That they had succeeded in recruiting teachers with higher SAT scores. So this was great. And as I looked at his little bar graph, seeing the scores go up and up, all I could think about was the fact that this coincided almost exactly with the very height of the kind of teacher bashing rhetoric that we started out this episode talking about. And that kind of told me that, well, basically the whole thing is bunk.

**Schneider** Yeah. It, you know, it also raises questions about what the trade offs are when you are, you know, increasing let's say SAT scores while you are, you know, basically implying the teachers aren't smart enough. Who are you driving out of the profession and who are you keeping out of the profession? You know, there's a great deal of educational research that shows that many things matter inside the classroom. And, you know, frankly, I think that I would prioritize things like, you know, do I have teachers in the classroom who look like some of the students in this school? Do I have teachers in the classroom who can establish trusting and caring relationships with students? There are a great many things besides a teacher's ability to do well on a standardized exam that matter tremendously for the profession.

**Berkshire** So, Jack, that's all really interesting. But can we just talk about your presentation in Chicago? You had this amazing PowerPoint, and I have to say that you really rose in my estimation, and this was before I had any idea that we would be spending so much quality time together.

**Schneider** I don't remember the PowerPoint. I do remember though that I was presenting results that were very different from the things that other people were presenting there in terms of like what matters in the teaching profession. I think it's very related to what we were just talking about with Diana, that you know, the, the deep context of the teaching profession and the history of the teaching profession tell us that it is a highly gendered profession. That's something that we were talking about a great deal with Diana, but we also know that there are other aspects of the profession that should raise questions about our efforts to do things like raise barriers to entry via standardized tests. So, you know, the ones that stand out for me are how flat the profession is, which is of course related to the gendered piece.

**Berkshire** What do you mean by flat? That doesn't, that doesn't tell me anything.

**Schneider** Well, so, there is no career ladder in teaching. It's something that, you know, policymakers have long observed and long done very little about, that you enter a teacher right after college and if you stay all the way through the end of your career, you leave as a teacher. And you know, again, this is very related to the gendered nature of the work, that you know, who women have long experienced barriers to their upward professional mobility. But we can see that because of the flatness of the profession, there are going to be certain disincentives for some kinds of people to enter the profession. There are going to be consequences for keeping some people out of the profession as a result as well. I also think about the fact that teaching is a mass occupation, that we need at any one time, three and a half million teachers to staff America's schools, this is going to have a really strong influence on teacher prestige. It means teaching can never have prestige because so many American adults do it for a living. It's like the old Groucho Marx quip that you don't want to belong to any club that would have you as a member.

And then you know, something we've talked a lot about on the show over the years is the apprenticeship of observation. That there is no other occupation that people observe for 13 years before beginning their own professional careers. If we watched doctors and lawyers for 180 days a year for 13 years, we would probably think that their work wasn't particularly hard. It would be totally demystified to us or at least we would imagine it had been. And so these things absolutely contribute to the inclination of Americans to believe that teaching isn't that hard, that teachers ought to be doing more, that teachers don't have any particular skill set.

And so again, I, you know, when I'm thinking about reform efforts or policies that are going to shape who is in the classroom, the first place I go is thinking about, well how does that mix with all this other stuff we know about who is already being channeled into the teaching profession? Who is being encouraged not to be a teacher given the shape and structure of the profession and the culture around teaching? And you know, what is this going to do to the people who have already committed their careers to teaching?

**Berkshire** So Jack, once again, you've managed to bring us down.

**Schneider** Well, yeah, at least we are...we've been brought down by the weight of knowledge.

**Berkshire** Yeah, it's true. So I so enjoyed Diana's book. I am so excited for when it comes out and you know, I get this eerie feeling when I'm reading these histories, like I'm basically playing a part that has been played so many times before and I'm not entirely aware of the totality of it. Do you ever get that feeling?

**Schneider** Uh, no.

**Berkshire** Well, anyway, it's time for our moment of sunshine.

**Moses Rifkin** My name is Moses Rifkin and I'm a science teacher in Seattle, Washington. And I'm somebody who cares a lot about helping students think about their identities and think about social justice. And that was sort of frustrating for me for a while as a science teacher. There just aren't that many resources for people like me to teach about social justice in the context of science. A couple of years ago, I hit upon an idea though that I found really fruitful, which is to have students in my class use the tools of science to explore the question of why there are some identities that are overrepresented in science and why there are some that are underrepresented in science. That leads to all sorts of questions by the students. They get really engaged, and we end up covering topics like systemic racism, like stereotype threat, like implicit bias. So by the end of it, by starting with this really powerful question, my students are taking this, this question to a really powerful place and producing work that I think is really the first step towards, I'm hoping, a lifetime of staying engaged and active in this, in this important work. My name is Moses Rifkin and this is my 60 seconds of sunshine.

**Berkshire** If you'd like to learn more about Moses Rifkin's Underrepresentation Curriculum project check out [underrep.com](http://underrep.com). I'll also include a link in the show notes to this episode. And if you have an idea about how to bring a little sunshine to the Have You Heard listening audience, you'll find everything you need to know at [HaveYouHeardBlog.com/sunshine](http://HaveYouHeardBlog.com/sunshine). Jack - I don't know about you but I always feel so much better after I hear that moment of sunshine.

**Schneider** I think it's because you and I aren't talking to each other for that 60 seconds though. You know we can just reboot and start over again.

**Berkshire** I'm going to start encouraging people to go on a little longer.

**Schneider** Yeah, maybe we should just take a one minute time out several times during the episode.

**Berkshire** Well, as our regular listeners know, we rely on your support to keep the podcast going. It's how we pay our outstanding producer and when there's enough money in the kitty, I hit the road. I go to places like Texas. Who knows where I'm going to go next. And if you're interested in chipping in to keep the pod going, you can go to [Patreon.com/HaveYouHeardPodcast](http://Patreon.com/HaveYouHeardPodcast) and see all the cool little extras you can get for your small monthly donation. Things like a reading list and a special VIP pass to an area that we like to call In the Weeds. And we go there right after the show is over and we hold forth on some issue that is of excitement and interest us. And Jack, you picked today's topic.

**Schneider** I did, but before we get there, I will remind people that although our Lilliputian bank account is what keeps the show afloat, the thing that keeps the show moving forward is the energy and enthusiasm of our listeners. And the best way that you can show your support for the show is by sharing it with people. Share a favorite episode, a recent episode, any episode, and go on and give us a rating wherever you get your podcasts. A five star rating I think brings more sunshine into the studio than any other. And there's a Twitter handle:

@HaveYouHeardPod. And we've gotten some good show ideas from listeners and every once in a while one of us will also ask listeners via the podcast handle, you know, what are some of the questions we should be asking an upcoming guest?

**Berkshire** So Jack...

**Schneider** Oh yeah, yeah, right. Today in the weeds - I can't believe you are making me lure people over the payroll paywall. So yeah, I was just curious about how climate change as this looming apocalyptic threat changes the nature of schooling, both in a sort of microscopic way with regard to, you know, how science is taught, for instance, how history is taught, and a macroscopic way with regard to like, well, what is the purpose of school? How for instance, should we hold schools accountable given the fact that the nature of life on this planet is going to be dramatically different by the time that children who are just entering school leave at the end of high school or college?

**Berkshire** Those blue books are going to have to be waterproof.

**Schneider** This is not a joke, Jennifer.

**Berkshire** So if you want to hear Jack use the word anthropocene, join us in the weeds.

**Schneider** It will be used.

**Berkshire** Otherwise, we'll see you next time. I'm Jennifer Berkshire. This is Have You Heard.

**Schneider** And I'm Jack Schneider.