

Have You Heard #86 You've Got Questions - We've Got Answers

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

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

**Berkshire** And Jack, can I just say that it's really nice to see you?

**Schneider** I mean, I actually, I do feel the same way, but uh, this is my fifth hour on zoom today. So seeing you with the computer as an intermediary, um, is not a high point for me right now. You are not catching me at my best.

**Berkshire** That was very delicately put. So we went back and forth about what a good topic for this episode would be. We had all sorts of great stuff in the hopper ready to go. I interviewed somebody about fracking and, and how fracking turns out to be really bad for school district finances. We did a great sit down with a colleague of Jack's about special ed. And suddenly all the stuff that we had done felt really irrelevant

**Schneider** With everything grinding to a halt we felt like we needed to do something related to coronavirus and the current pandemic. So we responded last week with an episode about the historical context here and any previous parallels, and in fishing around for what might be a useful episode this week we decided to actually turn it to our listeners. So we took listener questions and then we went out and found experts who could help us answer those questions.

**Berkshire** And we got so many great questions that we've actually decided that we're going to do another episode and we would love to hear from you.

**Schneider** So as soon as this episode is over, jump on Twitter and let us know via the show's Twitter handle @HaveYouHeardPod what questions you would like us to try to answer in the future.

**Berkshire** First up is Yawu Miller, he's the senior editor at the Bay State Banner in Boston and you may remember him from an episode we did last year. That would be # 67 White Home Buyers, Black Neighborhoods and the Future of Urban Schools. Like a lot of people these days, Yawu is working at home and so is his sixth grade son. And that brings us to question number one.

**Yawu Miller** My name is Yawu Miller. I'm from Boston, Massachusetts. My son has been given online learning assignments from his school. The assignments are not for credit. They won't count toward his grade and they won't count toward graduation from the sixth grade. My question is, should I tell him?

**Berkshire** Okay, so Jack, obviously this question just sets you up to reveal that among other things you are apparently co-writing another book about grades?

**Schneider** You say 'apparently' with disdain and just a hint of disbelief there, Jennifer.

**Berkshire** I had to learn this for myself reading *EdWeek*.

**Schneider** It was funny, somebody who wanted me to write about grades sent me the ed week piece and said, see grades are in the news. And I read the *EdWeek* piece and saw that there were like three paragraphs of me being quoted in it and sent that back to this editor and said, I think I covered everything I would possibly have to say in the *EdWeek* article already.

**Berkshire** So I want you to just set the stage for us a little bit. Why is this an issue at all? Right? It's not just that that Yawu's son happens to attend a school where grades have been suspended. This is part of a big national debate. What's going on?

**Schneider** Yeah. It's really fascinating to see grades suddenly become more visible to people, in all of their problematic nature. Right? That they're a part of what David Tyack and Larry Cuban called the grammar of schooling. Things like homework or teachers standing in front of the classroom or desks, right? The basic infrastructure of school that shapes it and gives it structure and really limits what is possible in school, but which we don't question because that's a part of school. That's how it's always been done. Grades are a part of the grammar of schooling and we so often are just oblivious to the roles that we ask grades to play and they play a number of different roles. And it's been interesting to listen to. Educators really struggle with that. So I'm thinking of hearing a principal say something like, you know, on the one hand, we don't want to punish kids for the fact that they have different levels of support at home.

Some don't even have internet access on the other, what are we going to do? Just tell the kids that this doesn't count or everybody gets an A? How hard are they going to work in that situation? And so there we see two very different purposes of grading coming to the surface, right? Grades being used as like a part of a permanent record to record what a student knows and can do. And it would be inappropriate to do that right now. And then grades serving a totally different function, which is to motivate students, right? In that sense, they're not so different from gold stars or from punishments like suspensions or detentions where we're trying to compel students. So I thought the best person to ask to weigh in on this would be my coauthor Ethan Hutt.

**Berkshire** That name sounds really familiar. In fact, I feel like I just heard it.

**Schneider** Well, if you listen to the show, Jennifer, as I would expect you occasionally do, you would have heard Ethan a couple episodes ago and if people didn't listen to that one, they should go back into our archive. But not now. Right now they should hang on and listen to what Ethan had to say.

**Ethan Hutt** So I'd like to start with the caveat that I would defer to a parent whenever it comes to knowing the best way to motivate their child. But with that caveat aside, I do think that this represents a unique, a teachable moment for parents thinking about talking to their kids about the multiple ways that grades and credits function in our school system. Because like, whether we like it or not, the grades are always a two way communication in our schools. The first part of the communication is between teachers and students and teachers and families. And teachers are using that to communicate feedback about how well a student did on assignment, how they're progressing at grade level, that kind of thing. The second part is when teachers are trying to communicate not to the student, but to future teachers or future schools, or you know, as students get older to future employers, colleges, etc.

And you know, this second part of the communication is what makes grades so stressful and makes often grades such a negative influence in our schools. It's the idea that the grades are gonna follow us far beyond, you know, third grade or fifth grade or 10th grade, into our future lives. And what's interesting about this moment is it's this part of grades, this sort of future stalking of the grades that's been short circuited in this really unique moment that we're in. And so it might be instructive for parents to highlight this moment for their children and to explain to them that while there are lots of times that grades are gonna follow them around and have consequences long past the individual class that they're in, that this particular moment is not one of those times. And maybe we hope this will, you know, this sort of insight will allow them to develop maybe an intrinsic value of learning, maybe to sort of discover subjects anew and a new reason for doing their schoolwork.

But even if they don't do that, maybe it'll just help them be a little bit savvier about, you know, the times that they need to suck it up and just do school. Or when there are, you know, other values at stake in that schoolwork beyond that sort of intrinsic desire to learn. You know, I've, I would love for students and our schools to always have that sort of deep intrinsic love of learning at the heart of everything. But in reality it's, it's much more complicated than that. And so I find that making this distinction about the different functions of grades, I find that distinction, at least in my own mind, really clarifying. And so this might be a moment to introduce it to our children and help them to learn a bit, a bit wiser and maybe a bit savvier.

**Schneider** So Jennifer, obviously the big story in education during this pandemic has been, uh, the rise of distance learning that students like my daughter are now being educated at home with varying levels of parental involvement. And, uh, primarily what we're seeing is a big push to get students on screens all day long, educating them via online learning platforms.

**Berkshire** So we got a great question about the role that ed tech companies are and are not playing in the great American distance learning experiment. It came to us from Andrew Ford. He's a data analyst in the New York city department of education division of early childhood education. Oh. And he's also one of our Patreon supporters, which means that it's thanks in part

to Andrew that you're hearing the show right now. So thank you Andrew. And let's hear your question.

**Andrew Ford** The COVID crisis has forced teachers to quickly adapt to distance learning. Ed tech companies have seized this opportunity to frame themselves as a solution to our shock education system. However, their solutions often leave out students with special needs and those without home computer access. How might the ed tech landscape change after the pandemic and what repercussions would those changes have for historically marginalized groups?

**Berkshire** Well we knew exactly who to turn to to answer Andrew's question. Audrey Watters writes the blog Hack Education and is the author of the forthcoming book Teaching Machines. Audrey is our foremost chronicler of ed tech's debacles and because she knows the industry so well, her view of what's playing out right now is pretty bleak.

**Audrey Watters** I mean, this is just devastating and I am, what I fear is that it's going to go from bad to worse because we know the cast of characters, right? We know who we're dealing with here. When we, when we think about what the ed tech industry and education reformers who work closely with ed tech and we know their track record, the promises they've made and promises they've broken. And so it's like there's just, there's really just not an upside to any of this. It's, it's deeply tragic.

**Berkshire** Take Zoom, which is how Jack and I connected for this podcast, teachers are holding classes on Zoom. But as Audrey points out Zoom was designed for a very particular purpose.

**Watters** Zoom is a piece of enterprise software that corporations use. And corporations have a very different idea of what privacy means, right? What they have a very different idea of what, who, who is able to do things and say things without the superiors knowing about them. And so when we translate these products into the classroom, um, they, there are all sorts of red flags in terms of, in terms of privacy. So zoom, zoom has one that I was deaf. There's definitely, like I, I told you so. But then there's also this idea that we're going to have students of all ages, um, spend such a vast proportion of their day doing video conferencing is, is ludicrous.

I talked to my niece who's a student in Maine. She's 10, I think, maybe 11, 10. Yes. And her teacher had handed out a schedule in which she was literally supposed to be in Zoom classes from eight o'clock in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon. And that's just impossible. I mean, for adults that are now spending most of their day in Zoom, it's exhausting. These meetings there, it's exhausting. It's all of the, all of the kind of energy you have to put into, you know, interacting with people during a meeting. But none of the kind of reciprocity that you get from having, from being around, from being around your colleagues and friends. And so it's just, it's just not sustainable at all.

**Berkshire** But what about Andrew's question? Now that we're seeing the limitations and failures of ed tech play out in real time isn't there an opportunity for us to pressure these companies to finally live up to what they've been promising?

**Watters** I think if I were to put on sort of my rosier glasses here, that is likely to be one of the major outcomes... We've been hearing for so long that education technology is the silver bullet. It's going to be the thing that helps students move more efficiently and more effectively through the course material. And it's just not going to be able to accomplish that and it wouldn't be able to accomplish that, I would say under normal circumstances, under the best of circumstances. We know that that's just not what ed tech does. But these are so far from normal circumstances.

So I do think that there is, I do think that there is an opportunity for us to be able to push back and say stop over promising. The thing that concerns me greatly is that I think that I'm already seeing the, you know, the Christianson Institute, the education reform people, the GSV folks are having their online conference this weekend. They're really doubling down on the message that this is their moment. And in the past, making a shoddy product has never stopped them before. No one's ever, no one's ever been held accountable for these things in the past. And I just am not certain that this is going to be that there'll be held accountable now.

**Berkshire** So Jack, can I just be honest and tell you how much I hate Zoom?

**Schneider** I thought you were going to say how much you hate the little microphone that you can see me holding in front of my face.

**Berkshire** I hate everything about it.

**Schneider** I keep feeling I should just eat it. It's, it's just sitting right here.

**Berkshire** And I know there are some good things about Zoom, for example. I figured out that thing where you can make yourself, you can enhance your appearance.

**Schneider** Oh well, I figured out I can be an astronaut because I can make it look like I'm in outer space. So you and I have both accomplished our dream.

**Berkshire** If only listeners could see that for themselves. Well, I mentioned enhancing my appearance because I have a feeling that this next question is going to bring a tear to my eye, which fortunately you will not be able to see.

**Schneider** I'll be able to see it. I just won't be able to wipe it.

**Berkshire** So one of the things, you know, we're so focused on all the things that are all the horrible things that are happening right now, that it can be almost impossible to wrap around what's going to happen next. And that as we're stuck in our homes and being safe, whole

economies are grinding to a halt. And this is going to play out in a dramatic way when it comes to how our schools are funded.

**Schneider** Yeah, that's true. Both for K-12 and higher ed. I think ultimately it will be more pressing at K-12, but we're already seeing budgets slashed in higher education staff let go. Uh, folks told, you know, hopefully we'll be able to rehire you at some point.

**Berkshire** Well our next question comes from Roberto Jimenez Rivera. He's a school committee member in Chelsea, Massachusetts. He was part of the successful push to force the state to make a major investment in public education - the Student Opportunity Act. But that was before the bottom fell out of the state's budget.

**Roberto Jimenez Rivera** Chelsea's student population is very economically disadvantaged and high needs and we don't have a wealthy tax base. So our district budget relies heavily on money from the state. We've had many years of budget cuts, but we're really excited to have a significant increase after the Student Opportunity Act was passed last year and funds are supposed to start being faced in this year. However, the COVID 19 outbreak means that the state budget outlook is pretty grim. The Center for State Policy and Analysis at Tufts is projecting that the shortfall for next year could be anywhere between \$1.2 and \$2.6 billion. So my two questions are one, how are districts supposed to set budgets for next year if we have no idea what the state budget is going to look like? And two, we know that in times of crisis equity often goes out the window. So how is Massachusetts going to make sure that the most vulnerable students aren't the ones who end up paying the price?

**Berkshire** Now obviously Roberto is focused on his community but hearing his question we guessed that the same issues are about to play out in every state. So we reached out to somebody who has an excellent handle on the big picture. Derek Black is a law professor at the University of South Carolina. He recently wrote a piece for the Washington Post about tough financial times ahead.

**Derek Black** There was a certain amount of good movement happening this spring and a lot of places, but the final budget paying for all that may not be passed in a lot of states, South Carolina being one of them. So if you're in a state that doesn't have a final signed off budget, what is very likely to happen is that instead of passing the new budget that they've been working towards this spring, the legislature would just pass a continuing resolution, which would mean we're just going to continue with last year's budget. That means that every new thing that was fought for is not going to be in next year's budget. And that's my big worry - that all of these things that advocates thought they had deals on or thought the legislature had agreed to, if that final budget isn't passed, or if the legislature starts to get queasy about whether the economy could support any budget increases for the year, well then boom, they'll just pass a continuing resolution and we'll carry on this last year's budget.

And that means we're kind of back to the drawing board in many respects, because when's the next time this is going to be taken up? Maybe in the fall, you know, depending on your state's legislative calendar, maybe in January. I don't know, but by fall or January, I'm assuming we're going to be in a worse economic situation, or at least the chickens will have come home to roost with lower tax revenues by then. And so things like pre-K, mental health counseling or teacher salaries that were going to be paid for, I doubt there's going to be much stomach for that in September or January.

And on top of that, which is really the more doomsday scenario I was articulating in the *Washington Post*, is the high likelihood that if those revenues have dropped far enough, the States will say, we've got to find some new savings. And that's what we saw in 2008 and 2009 and 2010 that public education was the first place that states looked for to find tax revenue savings. So I'm afraid that if we don't lock in the gains that we've made already this spring, or that we thought we'd made, if we don't lock those gains in moving forward, we're going to experience new losses that set us back to a lower point than than what we were a decade ago, and that, that's my fear.

**Berkshire** Listening to Derek lay out a pretty gloomy picture, what strikes me is that we are in a different situation than 2008. One thing that's changed is that as a result of this crisis, people have a much better sense of what it is that schools actually do. In other words it's going to be much harder for politicians to make the case that we don't need schools, or they can just go online. Everybody has now seen that movie and they didn't like it.

**Berkshire** Well we got a great question to that effect. It comes from Moses Rifkin. He's a high school science teacher in Seattle and regular listeners may remember him from a few episodes back. Moses made an appearance in our 60 seconds of sunshine feature. And these days he's teaching remotely like everybody and trying to figure out how to make it work. So Jack, you had this, you tweeted about something the other day and as is so often the case I was both touched but also like a little bit embarrassed.

**Schneider** Embarrassed? I thought you were going to say disgusted. Embarrassed is actually better than disgusted.

**Berkshire** Well, you mentioned earlier that you're, you know, that your daughter is home, right? And that this involves various degrees of remote, of distance learning. And you mentioned something about her referring to her, her classmates as a family. And I thought, Oh wow, that, you know, that's so magical. And I think that really touches on what's so hard right now both for kids but also for teachers who suddenly are having to try to build a connection with their students over an internet connection, that is when their students have an internet connection.

**Schneider** Absolutely. And it's, I think, raising questions about, or at least awareness about the role that a teacher plays in a student's life that goes well beyond filling that student up with content knowledge that might be measured by an end of year standardized assessment. That

our best teachers help students make sense of their lives. They are constant presences for students. They are friends, role models, allies, and in some cases, gurus.

**Berkshire** Well, we got a great question to that effect. It comes from Moses Rifkin. He's a high school science teacher in Seattle and regular listeners may remember him from a few episodes back. Moses made an appearance in our 60 seconds of sunshine feature and these days he's teaching remotely like everybody and trying to figure out how to make it work.

**Moses Rifkin** I've been thinking a lot about compassion and connection and I am curious as to how teachers are doing that with their students through remote learning, not just in informal moments, uh, at the start or end of class, but actually curricularly like building it into their class.

**Berkshire** I'm guessing that teachers out there will know exactly what Moses is talking about. But as I listened to him it occurred to me that I happen to know somebody who seems to be doing a pretty good job figuring out this whole issue of how to build connections with students in these crazy times.

**Gretchen Conley** My name is Gretchen Conley. I am a first grade teacher in Southern Illinois in a very rural school which teaches pre K through eighth grade. We have about 230 students and I'm also Jennifer's sister

**Berkshire** As Gretchen has been telling me about her new life as a virtual teacher, what's so impressed me is how she keeps adjusting. When one thing doesn't work she tries something else. For example, the first tech platform she tried was really glitchy so she ended up setting up a closed Facebook group for her students and their families.

**Conley** It just seems to keep evolving. Kids are really doing some neat things and sharing that with the group and the kids really like to see each other. I think that was one thing that was missing. And the other platform, they really, they couldn't see the work that the other kids were doing. One of the first things that appeared on the Facebook page was a little boy outside on the farm and he was giving a weather report, a Facebook live weather report. And then the other kids started sharing examples of things they were doing at home. Like one little boy had found a bunch of salamanders and brought them into the house and put them in the sink. Um, I've had kids, uh, go on little scavenger hunts. One of my students, one of my teacher's aides read a story and then encouraged the kids to go on a scavenger hunt around their house. And she had a whole grid of things that they could look for. So then in the comments the kids posted things that, pictures of things that they had found.

**Berkshire** Gretchen - it sounds like you're saying that to establish the kinds of connections with your students that Moses was asking about has also required building stronger connections with their families.



**Conley** That's right. I think the families are, are looking for that school/home connection to stay strong right now. There are a lot of the parents are very uncertain. If you just kind of ask open ended questions to your families to kind of see what they need. If you can get ahold of them, send them messages and just ask how it's going and then you can kind of find out what they need.

**Berkshire** Well, Jack, so much of the sort of frenzied debate has been about, you know, like, well how do we transition everything online really fast and you know, how do we cram as much stuff into kids as possible? You heard that example that Audrey gave about her niece in Maine who's doing zoom conferencing from like 8:30 to three in the morning. I'm sorry, three in the afternoon.

**Schneider** Developmentally appropriate, I think that's what, that's what the psych literature is telling me.

**Berkshire** Well, our next question gets at something much bigger.

**Ryan Heisinger** Hi, my name is Ryan Heisinger and I'm a high school English teacher in Newark, New Jersey. My question is, what can we reasonably expect kids to remember from this period of time and how do we want them to remember the role that school played in their lives during this time?

**Schneider** So just a moment ago, I referred to all of the different roles that teachers can play in student's lives, including gurus. And I thought, let's turn to a former teacher of mine, Tom Lysaght, who may have some wisdom here about helping young people make sense of this situation and helping adults who care about those young people support, uh, kids and young adults as they're going through this.

**Tom Lysaght** Well, I think first of all, adults are getting a time out to learn how to come back and play well with others because we haven't done a very good job for the youth today in creating this world. But I think youth are getting a recess. So much of their life has been controlled by adults. You know, they often feel acted upon as opposed to being agents of their own reality. But now you're in charge, youth. So now what can you do or create? Focusing is difficult. Focusing is a challenge, especially in a distracting society like we're in. But focus allows light to cut steel. It allows steam to move a locomotive. So it's important to pay attention to what we're paying attention to these days. And what's our intention with what we're paying attention to, you know, as opposed to what are we allowing ourselves to be occupied or distracted by? What are we giving our attention to? Because human beings are humans by the act of willing, not by what you wish.

So my suggestion is that they choose a noble goal and then make a mighty effort towards that goal, whatever that might be: to be a good student, to create while you're sheltering in place,

family harmony, to be a caring friend, to master a skill, a hobby, an instrument, and not to “should” on yourself.

You know, like what “should” I do or what you know, but to listen to your heart. What do you love? What allures you? What have you always wanted to devote time to time that now you have, how can you use it? Not to simply distract our amuse. I mean that's for break time from your main time because we all have an aspiration, a star we wish upon a dream. So how can you use this time to move toward that dream? To be a master of what you can control, not a victim of what you have no control over. And then you can say, look at what you're doing and say, is this moving me towards my noble goal or is it a distraction from my noble goal?

**Berkshire** So Jack, I think like a lot of people I've really been grappling with sort of, you know, what to do as we go through this just, you know, unbelievable crisis, right? You and I have a podcast together. Our topic is quite specialized. We are a niche as they say. And yet on the other hand, so much of what's happening has to do with education. I feel like where, you know, I often, I usually have many answers, I'm not feeling so certain about things these days. And so that's why I thought let's reach out to people, see what they want to know. And it worked really well. We got lots of questions. In fact, we got so many questions that we have enough to do a whole nother episode.

**Schneider** And another thing that I liked Jennifer, was that, you know, as somebody like you who often feels that he has answers and presently does not feel that way so much, is that we were able to turn to experts who within their particular subfields or areas of specialization, actually do have something pretty clear to say about how to make sense of the present situation in education.

**Berkshire** I want to give a special shout out to our Patreon supporters. It's your financial support that keeps the show going and given the uncertainty of the times, that really means a lot to us. Now, if you want to become a Patreon supporter, that would be outstanding. Here's how it works. Just go to [patreon.com/have you heard podcast](https://patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast). If you chip in a couple of dollars a month, you get access to reading lists and a special extended play area that we call In the Weeds. And I have picked out a topic for today's In the Weeds conversation that Jack is going to love. Will coronavirus kill the meritocracy?

**Schneider** We really need an uplifter like that. That's good. I thought I heard coronavirus I thought this was going to be sad. This'll be a fun one.

**Berkshire** If this is a topic you can't wait to hear more about, well, head over to [patreon.com/have you heard podcast](https://patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast). Otherwise we will be back in two weeks to answer more of your questions. Stay safe everybody.

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Pick up at 1:23 "So Jack"

Play to the end

