

#100: A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door

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

Jack Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider

Berkshire And Jack, we are celebrating several key milestones on this episode. This happens to be the hundredth episode of Have You Heard. And our long, long awaited book, *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door*, is finally coming out.

Schneider I'm not positive, but I think the hundredth anniversary is a huge diamond. So can you guess what I got for you, Jennifer?

Berkshire I have no idea.

Schneider I signed a copy of the book and I drew a picture of a diamond for you.

Berkshire Well, all of this left me with a major question. You know, what is the appropriate anniversary gift for a podcast cohost who has everything?

Schneider We already talked about this and it's a diamond and I'll just, I'll text you my address.

Berkshire Well, I couldn't get you a diamond Jack, as you know, I am on a fixed and reduced budget, but I was able to get you something really special. What would you say if I told you that I had found a former staffer at a conservative free-market think tank to agree to read the book, come on the show, tell us what we got right? Where we fell short and also give us what I hope is a ringing recommendation.

Schneider That sounds amazing Jennifer. Way better than a diamond. In fact, I mean, what, what am I going to do with a diamond? And I mean, I know you couldn't get Barry Goldwater's cryogenically, frozen body thawed by the time of episode airing. But but tell me who you did get.

Berkshire Well, I did the next best thing, Jack. I found you somebody from the Goldwater Institute.

Schneider This is so good. Oh, thank you, Jennifer. This is exactly what I wanted. I hope that all my friends and family are listening. This is what I want folks, not sweaters. I don't want any more sweaters. I don't wear them. All right. Take a, take a note from Jennifer here.

[Music]

Berkshire This story starts earlier this fall when I was doing some reporting about education and politics in Arizona. Someone referred me to a pollster named Charles Siler. I called him up,

we started chatting, and he mentioned that before he started advising pro-public education candidates he'd lobbied and done PR for a free-market conservative think tank called the Goldwater Institute.

Now if you're a regular listener to this show you can probably imagine what my reaction was. Let's just say it was one of tremendous excitement. I wanted to know more. And so Charles shared with me his story. Starting with growing up in a conservative fundamentalist family with Southern roots and finding his way to libertarianism.

Charles Siler As I grew up and what not, I was really looking at different ideas that were out there. And I was really attracted to libertarianism as a lot of young people are. The idea that people could be better off if they had more opportunities and less sort of impediments to live and make choices as they saw fit. I joined the military, served in the military, did public affairs for the military. And during a deployment, I spent a lot of time reading and it just turned out the books that I was reading were a lot of like free market economics. But as I was reading these books, I noticed a number of them were written by economists at George Mason University. When I wasn't in the military, I was living in DC at that time. And George Mason University isn't far from there. So when I got out, I decided to go and enroll at George Mason University to get an economics degree

Berkshire After he graduated from George Mason, Charles moved to Arizona on a whim. And when he saw that the Goldwater Institute needed a pitchman, he applied and got the job, which included selling the idea of education freedom.

Siler But also we worked on school choice issues. So like empowerment scholarship accounts, ESA's, which are vouchers by another name. We worked on expanding those in other states. So working with legislators in Tennessee and Nevada in different places to kind of help them model their programs after Arizona's, but also on marketing. Some of the expansions that we had in Arizona as the program had initially began, it was only eligible for students with special needs. And then slowly we would find other sort of sympathetic constituencies to expand it to the children of first responders, military families, children, living on tribal lands wards of the court, you know, and just this kind of slow, steady progression.

Berkshire In other words, Charles had a front row seat watching the free market theory he'd been steeped in for so long applied to public education. And what he saw did not reassure him.

Siler But once I started working in a libertarian free market conservative policy space, you saw a couple things. One, if you honestly paid attention, you would see that the real world effects of practically implementing these policies did not play out in ways that benefited people, whether that is dismantle, dismantling and privatizing public schools to, to trying to, I mean, it's in everything from the healthcare space to pensions, to public transportation, the ideas just make people worse off unless you're incredibly wealthy or resourced. And that was not the values that I came into that with the other side is that I believed the rhetoric around a lot of these policies that people were equally sincere. But I learned by asking a lot of questions and challenging a lot

of things, the motivations were actually to basically to tilt the scales in a direction that I saw as problematic.

Berkshire Now I'm guessing that at this point you are filled with questions, so let's cut right to the most important one, what did Charles think of our new book?

Siler I just finished reading *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door*, which I am really appreciative to have received an early copy of. One thing that's great about it to me is not only is it super informative and it covers a lot of ground that people who aren't on the inside wouldn't have a lot of insight to, but it's laid out in a really easy way to follow. You can follow the history of the school privatization movement. You can take a look at what they're doing, and hopefully after reading that, you can see how these things are coming to fruition in your own state. And then they have a prediction for what the future will look like. And I'll say, I think the future is even more dire than what they're looking at. But I think that the book, *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door*, is essential read for anybody who wants to understand the school choice fight and what's going on in their own schools and in their own states. So I would definitely grab it, definitely read it. It'll be the best couple of days you've spent.

Berkshire The book by the way, will be out for real on November 17th and Jack, I feel like after that ringing endorsement that we could probably just end the show right here.

Schneider That's it, it's a short episode folks. Thanks for joining us. And Jennifer is now going to lure you to the paywall.

Berkshire Well, Jack, obviously a big part of the reason why we wanted Charles to read the book was to get his take on frankly, whether we're right.

Schneider Right. And, and who better than somebody who had an inside view to how one of these organizations was working, what its ideological motivations were, what policies it was pushing and what it had is a vision of the future. You know, it, it's an ideal situation because, you know, if we pass the book off to friends and allies, you know, I think they see things the way that we do, but if we pass it off to somebody else that one of these organizations, a true believer that, you know, they just on the books merits will have to reject it right, because it's critical of them and their vision. And so this is really a perfect kind of insider view of somebody who's actually open to the possibility. And in fact is ready to embrace the possibility that there is actually an, that is playing out across the 50 States to dismantle public education. And I think one of the very first questions that I want to ask him is about the States, because I think one of the things that you and I are arguing in the book is that even though Betsy DeVos is the most visible face of this effort to unmake public education, that really, this is something that's playing out at the state level, particularly in deep red states. And that it's already gone much further than I think a lot of people realize.

Siler But when it comes to school choice absolutely has been moved really far at the state level. And very quickly too. It was a very rapid rise. So Arizona had two other state voucher programs

before they came to passing ESAs and they were both struck down by the Supreme Court here. And other states that had the same issue. You, you refer to the Blaine amendments in many state constitutions that made it difficult for voucher programs and other things like that to, to actually be enacted and uphold in the stand legal challenge wants there was a work around developed that basically laundered the money through debit cards, issued to parents. Then other states latched on, in Florida, in North Carolina and Nevada, Tennessee, and South Carolina, in Mississippi, it really just started to spring up really quickly. And like you said, often in very deep red states sometimes slightly, slightly purple states, but, but really focused on red states.

You're very spot on on that. Like the state governments is where the battleground is in this space and Betsy DeVos is making it seem like it's a national issue. And there are definitely national concerns. When you look at like funding formulas for public education, the federal dollars are important. I mean, schools are strapped, especially in a state like Arizona, where we have so little education funding, we're still 48th in the country. Those few federal dollars are meaningful, but the bulk of education funding is also just at the state and local level. So, so there's just a lot of reasons that the states is where this fight is

Berkshire Jack, I'm sure. It seems to listeners like we have been talking about this book for a million years.

Schneider Well, it seems to me like we've been waiting a million years for it to actually come out. So I actually pity myself more than I pity them,

Berkshire But we really haven't talked very specifically about what it's about and it's, it's organized in a very distinct way. And I want you to just paint a picture for people of of how it's shaped

Schneider The book is divided into thirds, where in the first part of the book and the first four chapters, we look at the tenets of faith among the people who are actively seeking to unmake public education. So specifically we're looking at their belief in private goods and private values over public goods and public values, their deep faith in markets. The long quest to cut costs largely for the purpose of reducing tax expenditures and eventually reducing taxation and, and ongoing war on labor. And that then leads into the second part of the book where we look at present policy efforts that are really playing out at the state level. But which you can see playing out at the federal level, at least in terms of Betsy DeVos, his effort to normalize a really extreme agenda. And then in the last part of the book, we gaze forward into the future into a dark crystal in order to help people understand what really is at stake here. What are schools gonna look like? Will there even be schools, will there be teachers in the future? If these current policy efforts continue to gain traction and spread,

Berkshire It's the first part of the book that we really wanted to get Charles' take on. He understands the "why" behind the push to marketize education as well as anyone I've come across. So we asked him to indulge us by evaluating the four pillars that we argue are at the

heart of the dismantling agenda: a faith in markets, a cost-cutting crusade, a belief in private vs. public goods, and a war on labor.

Siler When looking at these things, whether it's the markets, the private versus public, the cost cutting, and the war on labor, all of this falls under an umbrella of just profit motive and really private profit motive. It's not about like social profit, it's about individual profit. And so if the private profit is the bar stool, these are the legs of the stool. So the cost cutting is huge because one of the big tenants is they want to eliminate tax burdens on people who have money. And they're happy to have regressive tax codes. They're happy to have public programs heavily funded by the poor, lower middle, and middle-class people. As long as the wealthy people are able to move their capital, the whole idea of trickle down economics and all of this stuff plays into that, but they want to get rid of tax costs, which they see is kind of a vampire drain on the wealth created by innovative, hard-working entrepreneurs.

Berkshire So far so good. But there was one part of our argument that Charles said didn't quite capture the extent of what's driving the animus towards taxpayer-funded public schools.

Siler The war on labor is huge. They hate collectivized labor, but it's not just labor. They hate collectivization. And not just in the like economic sense of socialism or communism. If you look at what they do to democracy, like they hate direct democracy, voter suppression is a part of it. Why? Because it's, it's public collectivization. So like when you defeat all of the unions, people start to turn to the ballot to increase the minimum wage, right? It's the last place they have for kind of collective action where they protest in the street, a place for collective action, which they also work to curtail. But one of the things that I think is really critical for school privatization is that it isn't just about dismantling the collective power of organized labor. It's also about breaking up the collective power of the consumer. And so by individualizing education, you remove PTOs, you remove districts and, and families with homes.

Like I own a home in a very like desirable school district. You remove these ways that make it easy for parents to, to collectively organize and fight for good education. They talk about, and you alluded to this quite a bit like the Uberization or making education like Amazon, you think Amazon gives a shit. If I have a bad customer experience, I could spend hours complaining about some issue I have and they don't care. And that's what they want for public education. They want to disempower families. So it's not just collective labor, it's collective power of individuals that they see is, I mean, really internally, like they see as kind of lesser people, there's definitely a disparaging eye to people they see as takers, even though they're doing the greatest amount of extraction of wealth and resources that they can.

Berkshire So Jack, be honest here, did it bring you just a little amusement that the chapter that was sort of singled out there as not going far enough happened to be one that it was really my special chapter?

Schneider Yup. Yup. I got my feather out and stuck it right in my cap when he said that.

Berkshire Well, listening to Charles, talk about how it's not just a war on labor, but it's really a war on collectivism. Took me back to an interview that we did ages ago with Gordon Lafer, where he said that the really the dream, their dream for education would be to make it more like Comcast. Right. And that, that to take away all the public, all the, all the spaces for public resistance, things like you know, a school board or an actual school. And instead it's just you and your Comcast customer service person

Schneider That's right. Waiting endlessly on hold. So that you can complain about you know, your micro school or the gig worker who has replaced, you know, what used to be known as a teacher.

Berkshire Well, one of the themes that came up again and again, in our conversation with Charles is that he actually thought that however, bleak the vision was that we laid out in our book, it wasn't bleak enough.

Schneider No, I couldn't believe that. I couldn't believe that I was remembering when we sent an initial draft of the book to Larry Cuban, the Stanford emeritas professor, who was a mentor of mine and asked him for feedback. And before offering feedback, he sent me an email and said, I just need to know, are you trying to scare people here? Because that was going to dictate the kind of comments he gave us. And I said, yes, in fact, we are, we're trying to sound an alarm here. Because you know, if we were going for a kind of cool scholarly neutrality, I think he would have asked us to, you know, tone some things down and pair some arguments back. And so it was actually really refreshing to see we were going for alarm ringing and what we ended up with was a kind of factual neutrality that, you know, we really got it right by trying to be as extreme as possible.

Berkshire So Jack, I'm going to hand things over to you and let you set Charles up to tell us about how our vision bleak as we thought it was, is actually way too fuzzily optimistic.

Schneider We argue in the book that the ideological tenets of this fringe movement take life in several present policy efforts through these Neo vouchers that are often can be equated to money laundering through efforts to create for profits schools, through efforts, to move schools online and through efforts to completely deregulate public education. And the future that we predict is one in which if these policies continue to be driven forward, expanded and even adopted in other states, non red states, blue states, or at the federal level that education in the United States will be completely unrecognizable. That schools will be operated privately if they are schools at all, right. They will often be a la carte programs that teachers will be gig workers, who we won't recognize as teachers. And certainly not as professionals, they will be more akin to tutors who will be hired in a sort of Uber style fashion that schools or education providers since schools will largely be dismantled, will be private entities that advertise and try to appeal to consumers.

And that ultimately the way that we value education will be reduced to something that can be rated with a star like on Amazon or, or worse a smiley face. And for us, that's terrifying. But I'm

wondering, is this a really attractive vision to the people who are driving this agenda forward? Like when they hear that, do they salivate like Pavlov's dog? Is that the bell that gets them going?

Siler I mean, I think it depends on who you ask in the movement, because even though they're fairly unified in the policies they push, I mean, there's tens of thousands of people working on this in different capacities. And so there's going to be different degrees of enthusiasm for different extremes, but I think, yeah, absolutely. This is a vision that they get really excited about and, and would even go further. Really. I think what they want to see is all the tax money returned to taxpayers. And then if education is important to you, then you decide for yourself that it's important and you place a value on how important it is, but how much you're willing to spend on it.

And I think they would be happy to see a student loan market pop up for K-12 education. I think that that would be like an ideal vision to them because then you're making money on the loans. You're making money at the private schools, you're making money in taxes that aren't being paid. And I think they would even appreciate like corporate sponsorships of public education. That kind of thing, where it's like, we know that Ford needs this many people working in their factories. So like, we're going to give scholarships to students on this like special Ford education program. And I picked that company at random. It's not like they have any affiliation with any of this, so I don't want to brand Ford that way unfairly. So I think that like your vision, isn't scary enough, to be honest when I read it and like, that's not their end goal. I think that's like a step along the way again.

And I think that one of the things that you said is kind of funny to me is that you said like education will not be recognizable. It would actually be kind of recognizable to colonial Americans because that is the education system we used to have. A community may offer a school here that...Because everybody knew everybody in these very small spaces, school was something that was very private. Like you had private tutors, you had apprenticeships, you had, as you all even talk about some of the stuff, the pauper schools.

I think that the public education system they want wouldn't be recognizable to us because we've advanced and education has moved forward. In spite of the rhetoric, they try to say about public education, public education is incredibly innovative. Like schools today, when I go into to school board meetings, or I go to different things at different public schools, the classrooms look very different from the classrooms I went to, in some ways in ways that I think aren't, aren't exceptionally positive. But in most ways I'm like, 'oh, wow, this is like awesome.' The public schools are really doing a lot to move education forward and that's because they are able to leverage capital and leverage economies of scale and leverage public support.

But so, yeah, I would just say, one, your vision isn't scary enough. It should be scarier. And two. Yeah. I think that these things would be recognizable to people 300 years ago because they want 300-year-ago education models.

Berkshire If you're wondering how happy that little impromptu tip of the hat to education history made our own Jack Schneider, well, the answer is very happy. But perhaps not quite as happy as when Charles went on to identify one of the big weaknesses in free-market approaches to public education. That would be the problem of asymmetrical information. And it all comes back to a topic that is perhaps the nearest and dearest to Jack's heart: how we measure school quality.

Siler Free market advocates, to me, they either intentionally or ignorantly misunderstand the public education market. It's a market that has high asymmetrical information. So it's a concept in economics that just means one side of a transaction has a lot more information than the other side. And they're able to use that information advantage to extract more value out of the transaction than they normally would if everybody had equal or more equal information. When they talk about, we don't want regulation because the parents are the regulators, the parents vote with their dollars. Well, parents only know so much. They know their kid really well. They know the student; they don't know the school really well. They don't know education like practices and techniques and philosophy. They don't know the scholarship around education. And so what we see, and there's a lot of research that bears this out, but parents aren't effective at selecting schools for their own kids.

They're at best as good as random selection. And that is something that you would expect to see in a market with high information asymmetry. But what it does is when you're a private institution operating on a profit motive, you want to draw those dollars in. So it leaves you incentivized to signal to parents via marketing and screening, because what they're doing is they're selling the test scores or some other feature of their school that has nothing to do with academic fit for the students. And with the screening, it becomes really dangerous because the profit motive drives schools to want the students who are going to perform the best with the least amount of investment. So that means kids that have the right environment or excellence in education or academic performance. And we know this because there's so much other research. But that means, it means white, coming from stable families. And what we end up is creating massive equity issues.

Berkshire And that takes us to what may be the biggest weakness in the case for marketizing education.

Siler They completely mislabel the customer because in a free market, the customer pays for the product. And if the families are paying for the education, that's one thing, but if the public is paying, that means the public is the customer. And so that means it's incredibly important for the public to have information about how that money is being spent, what the outcome is for that money. And they fight vehemently against any kind of oversight, accountability, or testing. They do not want people to see what is actually being achieved with their money.

Berkshire That was Charles Siler. He is a former lobbyist and public relations guru for the Goldwater Institute, a free-market think tank in Arizona. These days he advises pro-public education candidates and volunteers with Save Our Schools Arizona. And great news. He has

agreed to accompany me into the weeds, that's the special segment we do for our Patreon supporters, to tell us more about the weaknesses in the school choice sales pitch. If this interests you, just go to Patreon.com/HaveYouHeardPodcasts.

And Jack and I will be right back. But first I want to say thank you to all of our listeners. 100 episodes is a lot of Have You Heard. And an extra special thanks to our producer Francisco Rafart for making us sound so good. This podcast wouldn't happen without you.

[Music]

Berkshire Well, despite the impression that listeners may be getting that this is a feel bad book. I think we both actually feel pretty optimistic. And one of the reasons that I'm so hopeful is that I've been talking to people like Charles, about what they're seeing on the ground and that in places like Arizona, where you really see the right beginning to talk about public education in terms that are so hostile and alien to their own constituents, that their constituents are now moving away from them. And we're seeing signs that once they make that shift, they don't forget quickly. This is not an issue that is getting much play in the 2020 election conversation, but as I've been arguing in a series of pieces that are coming out soon, I think it's a much bigger deal than people are aware of.

Schneider Yeah. When we started working on this book, I think we both had a kind of abstract aim to impact the 2020 election. And in working on the book, I think what became clearer for me was that the audience for the book is a somewhat surprising one. I think most of the people who buy the book will be people on the left and what I came to believe in writing it is that the audience that I most want to read this book is on the right you know, mainstream Republicans who are inclined to vote red in red States in, you know, fairly predictable ways. And the reason why I think that this is the audience for the book is that even though those folks disagree with people on the left about the finer points of policy, they fundamentally agree about the fact that every kid in the United States should get a high quality public education, right?

That's not in dispute. And I think when those people realize what actually has happened with regard to education policy in the Republican party and the way in which it's been hijacked by a really extreme minority within the party. And as they see this agenda beginning to play out, right, because it hasn't played out in a really clear way, it's been very intentionally obfuscated. I think there'll be very much against it. And I think that people care enough about public education that that will swing them one way or another.

And I'm not claiming that, you know, people are gonna read this and you know, completely change the way they vote in all elections. I don't think that's realistic nor do I think that's necessarily a good idea. I think disagreement is important, but I do think that the more people learn about this long standing right decades, long aim to unmake public education and the more that they learn about the progress that has been made you know, much to their surprise in most cases, I think I believe that they will speak up against it and vote against it and take action against it in a way that will really end that movement, probably not once and for all. But certainly

for a long time, I think it will suffer a crushing defeat. And that the Republican education agenda will really have to change. And you know, that's not to say that the Democrats have had, you know, fantastic educational proposals in the past few decades. I think, you know, as we've talked about on the show that they've got to figure out what their vision is. But my hope is that we can be a little part of a bigger story. That is a story about people coming together around their firm belief that public schools are an essential part of what we do in America.

Berkshire The book is called *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door*, and it'll be out for real on November 17th. And Jack had an excellent idea a couple of weeks ago. He suggested what if we encourage people to start virtual book clubs. If you start one, if you round up 10 of your friends or your colleagues and you get them to agree to participate, we will send you a free autographed copy of the, and then your friends who participate in the group, get a deep discount on their copies. And all you have to do to sign up is go to our website, awolfattheschoolhousedoor.com. Actually it's just wolfattheschoolhousedoor.com. Jack was shaking his head at me, very sternly and Jack, I have one last anniversary treat for you. Are you ready to hear what it is?

Schneider You're going to sell something now, and you're going to make me complicit. I can see, I can see the twinkle in your eye.

Berkshire Actually. I'm letting you off the hook for the usual, the usual hustling experience. I convinced Charles to accompany me in the Weeds this episode. He's going to give us some tips and pointers about what he thinks the major weaknesses are of the education, freedom sales pitch. I thought that would be really useful for people and Jack. I'm going to let you take a little time off. You can go to do a spa treatment. You can go read that novel that you've been wanting to get back to. It's really up to you.

Schneider It's, it's a novel that I'm writing. Actually, Jennifer, the lead character is a freelance journalist who starts sort of an out there blog. And that leads her to various adventures. So

No one would read that.

Schneider No, I don't think so either, but you'd be surprised.

If you want to join Charles and I, my temporary podcast co-host in the Weeds. All you have to do is go to Patreon.com/HaveYouHeardPodcast, you'll see a list of all the cool extras you can get by supporting the show. We do a custom reading list for each episode. This reading list will be particularly rich and you get just the sort of peace of mind that knowing you're really helping us keep the podcast going. And you enabled us to write this book.

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@HaveYouHeardPod We've also gotten some great ideas for episodes from you that way. And then finally finally, that's it? That no, there is no, finally, finally, thank you.

Berkshire Aren't you going to just throw in something, like on a personal note about how much you've enjoyed working with me on all these episodes? I felt something like that coming up.

Schneider I actually considered it and then I thought I would start crying. And I don't want to do that on air. No, but in all seriousness, Jennifer, you twisted my arm into doing this and deceived me about how long I would be doing it with you. And it is often the highlight of my week. I enjoy our little chats here but it is without a doubt, the most important thing that I have ever done in my professional career. Unquestionably the most important thing that I've done, we make more of a difference. I think in a half an hour, every two weeks, then I think all of the peer reviewed pay walled scholarly publications that I've ever written put together. So thanks for that.

Berkshire Well, on that note, I'm Jennifer Berkshire. This is Have You Heard.