

You Might Be Right - School Choice - Transcript

Nina Rees: Charter schools are public schools. They are schools of choice. They bring the best of public education without a lot of the politics in public education. And so the reason they're successful is because anyone can attend them. But at the same time, the leaders of these schools are driven by outcomes.

Kaya Henderson: We are cooperating and collaborating, which I think is actually the best way for charters to exist in an ecosystem where there is a traditional public school system.

Marianne Wanamaker: Welcome to "You Might be Right," a place for civil conversation about tough topics brought to you by the Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy at the University of Tennessee. The political fault lines of charter schools are complicated with resistance coming from elements of both major political parties. In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee Governors Bill Haslam and Phil Bredesen, and their guests, assess whether charter schools are a productive addition to America's public school infrastructure. Do they actually produce better education outcomes and how do they affect traditional public schools in the process?

Bill Haslam: Good to be back with you, Phil. This whole topic around public education and the issues around it is one that we really did both deal with a lot as governor. Tennessee historically has struggled with educational outcomes for our students. But before we introduce our first guest, I think as we were talking about charter schools, this is one of those issues that they're strong feelings on both sides, but it doesn't, in my experience, doesn't necessarily break down into a right versus left or a Republican versus Democrat issue. My experience was we had the legislators and how they saw this – this is now one of those where you stand depends on where you sit. And some of our most conservative legislators who represented rural districts were the biggest opponents of school choice, whether it be charters or vouchers, because of their personal relationship with their school district. So again, my experience has been this isn't totally a Republican-Democrat issue.

Phil Bredesen: No, I think that's absolutely right. There's a lot of issues that when you peel them apart, they're more cultural issues. They're rural versus urban kinds of issues. I think this may be edging into that. I think so often the discussions, the policy discussions about these things, are all being performed by people who are urban. And that's where the big universities are and that's where these people live.

Bill Haslam: Right.

Phil Bredesen: I think they can sometimes be a little blind to the fact that there's an awful lot of the country that just looks at things very differently and the environment's just very different. Bill, both of us did a lot of things in education and you made a lot of progress and really made charter schools a part of the strategy. I'd be interested in, just before we get into this with outsiders, how you felt that worked and why was it important?

Bill Haslam: I think we have made progress in Tennessee. And again, this is one of those that I look at it, you kind of started a ball rolling that we were able to keep pushing, some of that due to Tennessee being a big winner in the Race to the Top. I always said it's all about student outcomes. It's about how much can a student learn during that school year. I always thought there were two or three keys. One, raising standards, expectations, what we expected a child to know at every grade level. I always used the story, we had set the basketball goal at six feet and then told all the high school parents that their kids could dunk.

Phil Bredezen: Right.

Bill Haslam: Well, they really couldn't, but it felt good. And so raising those expectations again is part of the problem you start it. And then we had to have a way to accurately assess what a student had learned.

Phil Bredezen: I always thought of charter schools is not a magic bullet to fix everything, but certainly a valuable tool in the toolkit to the toolbox to be used. They're applied differently in urban and suburban and in rural areas.

Bill Haslam: I think one of the consistencies across difficult issues, whether it be climate change or education, is that there's a lot of folks that want there to be a silver bullet for it against it. My experience in government, the most effective approaches were silver buckshot, if you will, that gave you a lot of different alter options to hit the target. I think charter schools have been a good addition to the education environment in Tennessee, but they're like everything else, not without their issues and not without the need to make certain they perform.

Phil Bredezen: Bill, we have up next a real expert and advocate for charter schools, Nina Rees, who's president and CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. She's been doing that for about a decade and has done a terrific job of enhancing that organization's stature and footprint. Before that, she's worked in the education field. She was in the George W. Bush administration, the first deputy under secretary for innovation and improvement and has a long history in this field and knows a lot about it. I think this is going to be a great conversation.

Bill Haslam: Nina, thanks for joining us. This topic, like others we deal with, tends to have people go to their corners really fast and get into fighting position. But if you had the famous kind of elevator speech to give, the quick, "I've got 30, 45 seconds to explain why I think charter schools are part of the answer to our challenges in education," what would you say?

Nina Rees: Well, thank you so much for having me on this podcast. First of all, I'm a big fan of both of you and I think one of the reasons the charter school movement is so powerful is because of the leadership of governors and the fact that the movement grew out of states. In terms of the why, charter schools are public schools. They are schools of choice. They bring the best of public education without a lot of the politics of public education. And so the reason

they're successful is because anyone can attend them, but at the same time, the leaders of these schools are driven by outcomes.

Phil Bredezen: That's good. Both of us have been involved in our own way with charter schools. There's no one here who's an opponent to the concept. One of the things that always brings me up a little short, however, is when you look around the world at the school systems that we seem to really admire for their performance – I think Finland and Singapore – they're all monopolistic systems. They're all government-run systems. You sort of have this discontinuity here. On one hand, I can understand the argument for charter schools. On the other hand, something almost the opposite of that seems to be working so well in other places.

Nina Rees: Well, the reality is we have tried the monopolistic system in this country and certainly it's the status quo in most states. Charter schools are still public schools. They still have to adhere to state standards. They have to test students every year based on your state standards in reading and math. They have to show outcomes. So they are not necessarily – We have 15,000 school districts in this country. They're each governed differently. Charter schools simply allow for an entity other than a school district to authorize a school. I will also add that if you're affluent or if you're middle income in this country, you can move to a school district that has grade schools, you can send your child to a private school. We saw that alive and well during the pandemic. Those who had the means ended up hiring tutors and creating pods in order to give their children a leg up. Our traditional system, unfortunately, wasn't agile enough to adjust to the needs of families as quickly as they were supposed to.

And so as a result, a lot of families who had the means made those choices and those who didn't ended up staying in systems that were unable to serve the needs of their family. So charters simply allow for an option that's already in place for many families in this country. I come from another country myself. I'm a big fan of studying other countries. Singapore is a very small country. So in a way, you can compare Singapore to a state and ask this question of all the governor friends that you have, "Why don't you adopt some of those models that are applied in Singapore and see if they work?"

Bill Haslam: Nina, one of the things that critics of charter schools would say is, "Well, it's really not level ground. Okay, so the results might be better, but it's not level ground. They're not taking the same amount of special ed students. They don't have some of the legacy fiscal burdens. They can have different discipline processes, et cetera." So what do you say to those folks that say, "Well, okay, the results are better, but you're really not comparing apples and apples?"

Nina Rees: When you talk to our charter school leaders, and I'm sure you've met with a lot of them, a lot of them when posed with this question will say, "Give us traditional schools where students are left behind and parents are not making choices. If we had access to the building and we had the freedoms and flexibilities we have in our charter schools to expand the school day, school year, attract the best and brightest teachers, pay them differently, we will

demonstrate to you that we can continue to do better by applying these tools that we have." So I very much disagree with this notion that charters are doing better simply because they're schools of choice. And I think our model has proven itself to be effective, but I think we need to do, be more open to attracting these individuals through the traditional system, and quite frankly, having the dialogue with superintendents and folks in the traditional system to make sure that they see the proof in the pudding and that they are welcoming to our innovations.

Phil Bredezen: All right. Let me ask you a question just down at the detail level. You have a school building somewhere and today it's a public school and it's got a principal and some teachers and some administrators and some testing. Tomorrow a charter school takes it over and it has a principal and some teachers and some testing. What in detail is different about it?

Nina Rees: Most of them don't let the rules and regulations that tend to inhibit traditional school districts and school systems from doing innovative things. And so having that mentality is really important when you're dealing with challenging issues. And because of that and because of the freedom and flexibility that they have in managing their school, they're able to just do things much faster.

Again, during the pandemic, during the first few weeks after the pandemic hit, I spoke with a number of these school leaders. They were not waiting for a school district official to tell them what to do. They were leveraging philanthropic dollars or existing dollars that they had in their budget to offer Chromebooks to all of their kids to make sure that their teachers were being trained using online tools and whatnot. So those are the types of things that a charter leader can do that's different from what traditional systems can do.

Phil Bredezen: I asked a moment ago about if you flip the switch and one day there's a charter school here with principal and teachers, how is it different, and you talked about the lack of regulations, the ability to innovate, the ability to move quickly. Kind of the third rail there, and I would like you to address it, though, is that one of the other differences might be that you can get fired if you're not performing something, which is devilishly difficult to do in a public school system, which I guess cuts both ways. I mean it's on one hand if you want to value the profession, I'm sure lots of teachers who've devoted themselves to this and that's what they've been trained for are anxious for some protections in that sphere. But on the other hand, if teachers are not doing their job, you want to get rid of them. How does that play into this? How important are the arrangements for employment of teachers and principals in the charter movement?

Nina Rees: Well, as I'm sure you know, in most states, charter school teachers are not unionized. And by not being unionized, the school leader has more autonomy around not just firing them but also as I said, giving them more money without having to wait a certain number of years to move them up and such. So in that instance, I think that's the key differentiator. The fact that they're not unionized and that the school principal is running the school with fewer rules and regulations are certainly not tied to the union collective bargaining contract.

Bill Haslam: One question as we begin to wrap up, and thank you again for your time, one of the concerns, like I said, I'm actually a charter school advocate, but occasionally my concern has been particularly if the town is smaller or even a middle-size city, that when we introduce a charter and give people the option of sending their child there, the public school in that district in that area might now be at numbers where it doesn't work. You have an elementary school with 200 kids and 100 of them go to the new charter school. Now you have a difficult time making the numbers work where you were. Any kind of response to that of how we think about the rest of the school system when we introduce charters?

Nina Rees: So the superintendent of Miami-Dade, who is now the superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, when he entered the job in Miami, he had a very robust choice system already in place. Students could go to private schools, charter schools. His system was also an open enrollment system. And so one of the things he did early on is to work very hard at making his school district the best option for families. And by doing that, he was able to keep a lot of students. And now when people study school choice, that is one of the systems that they look at as a model of how do you respond quickly to the needs of families.

But that's a great question and I don't want to just lightly touch on it because I think if the school district is small and you're just dealing with a couple of schools, the math simply doesn't work. I think in each instance I think a conversation needs to take place. I would not have the school system with the funding that goes into it at the same time that there is an alternative. I think this is where individuals at the governors level, superintendent level need to start to have more of a conversation so that there's not a sense of competition but perhaps collaboration. Because both of these systems are public systems, and I think we need to get to a place where the traditional system is treating these charter schools the same way that they treat magnet schools for instance.

Bill Haslam: Maybe now's a good time to ask our Howard Baker question of, can you think of a time in your kind of advocacy for charter schools where in the discussion you were able to say, "You know, you might be right" about somebody who wasn't seeing the world exactly the same way you do?

Nina Rees: Oh, that's a great question. My entry point to this movement was because of my advocacy for more choices. So for a very long time I was an advocate of opening the door to private schools. One of the reasons I decided that charter schools were the best form of choice is because of advocacy I had done in Washington D.C. to open the door to the D.C. Student Opportunity Scholarship Program which now allows a number of students in D.C. to attend private schools. And so I was at the U.S. Department of Education at the time when this program passed and I was in charge of the implementation of it. In that first year, I went door to door with the person who was overseeing the program to attract families to apply to the scholarship program. And at the same time, we also went to all the private schools in the D.C. area to ask them to participate.

I was really deflated because a good number of the most elite independent schools were not willing to participate in the program because they feared some of the rules and regulations would follow these kids to their schools even though we made sure that those rules did not follow them, except for a measure that asked the students to take it the same test that DCPS students were taking. So this wasn't necessarily a conversation, but I guess I decided right there and then that if you really wanted to open the door and access for families to attend better schools of choice, you had to have a mechanism to bring innovations in their own neighborhoods and that relying simply on existing private options was not going to cut it. And so that was a kind of switch that went off in my head and that's why I'm a huge advocate of charter schools.

Bill Haslam: Would it be fair to say that what you took away from that was in the, while believing deeply in choice, you're going to place your cards on charters rather than the voucher process because you can bring schools to their neighborhood?

Nina Rees: Yes. And I also just think the private school sector is not necessarily innovating. I think a conversation does need to take place with some of these private schools in terms of how they're operating and why is it that they wouldn't be open to programs like that particular one. Yes.

Bill Haslam: Nina, thank you. To me, what I appreciate about you is whether, regardless of opinions on charter schools, we need more people who believe that every child can learn and every child deserves the opportunity to learn and that everybody means everybody. So thank you very much for your work.

Nina Rees: Thank you so much. And that is in fact the spirit behind the charter school movement. Thank you so much for having me.

Bill Haslam: Thanks, Nina.

Phil Bredezen: That was interesting. She's a persuasive advocate.

Bill Haslam: I think so. And again, full disclosure, I started the conversation being a very strong believer that charter schools is part of the answer. It's not the whole answer, part of the answer. I was very intrigued by her point of, if we really are going to offer choice, while vouchers are one alternative, bringing a better school to that child's neighborhood is a more effective way to do it.

Phil Bredezen: Yeah. Well, a point she made, and I'm sure she's gotten good at expressing things the right way, but really changed my perception of it a little bit, is she kept making the point of charter schools are public schools. And I think we forget that.

Bill Haslam: They take public money and live by the same rules in terms of receiving special ed

students and having to follow the same requirements that the state puts on schools as everyone else does.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah, I mean if I just look at it from the inside, I mean if down the street from me there's a charter school and a public school, they're different in their management, but they're fundamentally the same in terms of the resources they put in and the commitments that they are supposed to be meeting. And that to me was a little shift in view.

I think the fundamental thing you and I have shared about this, even though we're from different parties, is just you look at these kids and think of them as every one of them has certain God-given advantages and disadvantages and skills and our job is to how do you take that reality and turn it into the most successful, help them, the most successful life that they can possibly live. Certainly, flexibility in the system and how it operates and how it responds to them has to be key to that.

Bill Haslam: We've decided that education is something – We have the whole debate about in healthcare, is that a right or a privilege, etc. We've decided in this country, I think rightfully so, that education is a right and it's a responsibility of the government. So if it is, we need to make certain we don't treat it like a monopoly that you referred to earlier, the bad kind of monopoly where you just assume everybody's with us.

Phil Bredeesen: I look forward to our next guest.

Bill Haslam: Our next guest is Kaya Henderson. And full disclosure, Kaya and I are friends. We serve on the board of Teach for America together. But Kaya's the CEO of Reconstruction. It's a technology company delivering K-12 supplemental curriculum that highlights the history and contributions of black people in subjects such as math, geography, and cooking. She's a long time educator. She started teaching with Teach for America and then became its executive director in 1997, went on to be the deputy chancellor of the D.C. Public Schools in 2007 and then became chancellor on 2011. She graduated from Georgetown with a bachelor's degree in international relations and has her master's in leadership and serves on several boards as well. Kaya, thank you for joining us. This is a personal treat for me to have you with us today.

Phil Bredeesen: And likewise, it's great to – We have met once in the past, I'm sure you don't remember, but it's just great to see you again. I want to just start out with, you have a lot of practical experience as chancellor in the D.C. system with charter schools and so on. I'm curious just to start with, were they effective and where they had effectiveness? I'm assuming there were some, what are the characteristics that made them that way? What made them stand out?

Kaya Henderson: So I think an important thing to remember is that charter schools are just schools the same way that traditional public schools are. And I would say many of the same things that make a great traditional public school make a great public charter school. So

leadership matters significantly. The ability to get, grow, and keep amazing teachers, amazing central office staff, amazing support staff is great. Having rigorous curriculum, doing deep work with families and communities, all of the things that we know make a good school make a good school.

In D.C., we ended up creating two parallel systems that actually look quite similar. In D.C. public schools I would say we have always had a handful of schools that did amazing things for kids and a bunch of schools that were horrible and needed deep reformation and then a bunch of schools in the messy middle. We've created a similar system where we have a handful of charter schools that do amazing things for some kids. We have a handful of charter schools that really need deep transformation and then we have a bunch of schools in the messy middle. I think that the question, at least that we have to confront as a community is, we're probably spending twice as much on schools in the city as any other city that has roughly 90,000 kids and we've gotten very similar results to the traditional public school system.

So I think the thing that we're all in pursuit of is quality at scale. I think we know how to make one good school or a handful of good schools. But I think what's elusive for all of us, including my friends at large charter networks, is how do we get to the point where every single school in any of our networks are meeting the needs of every single kid to reach their highest potential? And I think none of us have cracked that nut. And I actually don't think that the governance model matters, right? I think it matters in some things, but I think we've had both sets of governance models and neither have been able to deliver what I think is the holy grail, which is schools that serve all kids very well.

Bill Haslam: Kaya, one of the arguments for charter schools is this argument that doing something outside of the network in an excellent way, that the rising tide would lift all boats, that the impact of the charter schools on the rest of the public school network. Any observations on whether that's true or not?

Kaya Henderson: Many people don't remember, but charters got started somewhere in '97 or '98 here in Washington. And so for 10 years, we had a charter sector that was growing. And, in fact, lots of families were leaving the traditional public schools for charter schools and none of that was impacting the traditional public school system. In fact, I might argue that the better that charters got and the more kids left the traditionals and went to charters, to some extent, the worse DCPS got. It wasn't until we got to some very different leadership, it wasn't until we got to some changes in policy for the traditional public school system, that we were able to then rebuild. And we weren't rebuilding because we were worried about competition from charters. My take has always been, if charters are doing something better than us, let them do that. And that allows the traditional schools to concentrate more on the things that it needs to do for the kids that are not being served by charters.

And so I think that for 10 years it really didn't have an impact. And I think what did move the traditional public school system was different leadership, different policy, different resources,

and a different focus. Now, my charter friends here might say, "Oh yes, because of the burgeoning charter sector, that's what spurred DCPS to improve." But I like to say, "Well, what was DCPS doing for the 10 years before we got there in 2007?" I just think the politics was so loaded. I think now we're at a point where we're no longer competing. We are cooperating and collaborating, which I think is actually the best way for charters to exist in an ecosystem where there is a traditional public school system.

Phil Bredeesen: A lot of people who are believers in charter schools think that the idea that you take away the bureaucracy, you give more flexibility to the schools to hire and fire teachers and all those kinds of things is going to make a difference, and you're sort of saying it doesn't. If you look at good charter or bad charter schools, what's the difference there, if the governance is not the answer? What's the difference between them?

Kaya Henderson: When I think about I've had the luxury of watching the evolution of the charter movement pretty much from the beginning to now, and at the very beginning people were just saying, "Free us from the teacher certification rules and the procurement rules and the facilities stuff and let us hire our own people, contract with, and we'll be able to produce better results." Here in D.C., lots of other things didn't matter. Yet, and still what we saw as charters began to scale was many of the bureaucracies that were eschewed in the traditional public school system began to be created and replicated in the charter system. We call them charter management organizations, but all they are central offices, right? Because there are efficiencies that have to be realized at scale because not every single school needs to go out and recruit teachers if you can do that in some kind of centralized way.

So that's what I mean when I say I don't think the governance. I actually think there are some real similarities in terms of the governance that you need in order to operate a system of schools. And the difference between a bad charter and a good charter is the same thing as a difference between a bad traditional and a good traditional. If the academics aren't rigorous, if you don't have good teachers, good professional development, good accountability, if you don't have the ability to assess and understand where your kids are, if you don't have good leadership, that's the difference. And I think what we've seen in the worst charter schools is accountability run amok where there isn't the kind of oversight and that has led to some really egregious abuses in a handful of charter schools, right?

But let me tell you that there are also egregious abuses in traditional public schools, too. So sometimes anti-charter people are like, "They're just taking people's money. They're not following the rules. They're doing whatever or whatever." The same is true in the traditional public school system. Bad actors are going to be bad actors, so I think we have to be vigilant on both fronts.

Phil Bredeesen: But certainly the part of the thesis of charters is, once freed up from the rules and the bureaucracy of a big public school system, you're free to fix those problems. If they're not fixed, why is that? Is it a lack of sophistication on the part of the boards of the schools? Why

can't a charter school fix that?

Kaya Henderson: I think that we make a big presumption that schools can fix all of the things that are wrong in kids' lives. I think that schools are an important and necessary solution to ensuring that kids, especially poor kids, especially kids of color, get a different shot. But it's not schools by themselves. I think a lot of our charters, especially during the pandemic, when you realize that you've got to deal with –and not just during the pandemic – but it's whack-a-mole when you just deal with the educational issues. There are healthcare issues and job issues and housing issues that act on education. I think to think that any one school or system of schools can solve all of that for kids is beyond all of our capacity.

And I think for charters, it's actually harder than for traditional public schools sometimes because at least as a traditional school system, I could go to the mayor or the city council and say, "We actually need transportation subsidies because that's what's holding back our young people and that's what's causing truancy," right? The charters couldn't do that by themselves. They had to find ways then to just subsidize transportation on their own. And so I think that beginning to see young people as part of an ecosystem where it takes a lot of actors to ensure their success is the way we solve this complex problem of getting kids to where they need to be. And I think the problem in charters is they're not plugged into that ecosystem. And so they're often trying to create the supports and the resources themselves in addition to running a good school.

Bill Haslam: My observation is that is a fair point. You don't lack, you're not integrated into the whole system that's balanced by, I tend to think, a lot of charter leaders bring a little bit – we're generalizing here – but a little bit more of an entrepreneurial spirit about how are we actually going to solve this problem, that they really are working to solve the problem. So I guess comment on that balance you bring.

Kaya Henderson: I think that's right. I think that's absolutely right, right? And I am astounded at the innovation that some of our charter leaders bring to solving these problems. But I would say what more could they be doing if they didn't have to solve those problems? If they could focus their time and attention on education? And that's a little bit what we thought could happen by being freed from some of these traditional bureaucratic things.

Bill Haslam: So what I hear you saying is the pluses are the entrepreneurial spirit, the limits are they're not integrated into the system. One of the issues there is, as you said, the politics are so bad in this. So help us understand why the politics are so fierce, one, and then number two, what can we do about that?

Kaya Henderson: Yeah. So I want to talk about two –

Bill Haslam: Solve that. That's easy.

Kaya Henderson: I want to talk about two levels of the politics, right? I want to talk about the capital P and the small P. By the small P, I mean very local actors, leaders of charter schools and leaders of traditional public schools. All of the school leaders that I've met want all schools to be good and they will work together in clear ways. They want to be collaborative. One of the proudest things that I did when I was here in Washington was we created a leadership program with Georgetown University, which is my alma mater, for school leaders to get a different kind of training than school admin training because it takes more than that to run a school. We ran the program for the first couple years with just DCPS school leaders. And then we were able to bring together charter leaders and DCPS leaders in this master's degree program. Learning together, solving educational problems for the city together.

It was the first space where these leaders were actively working together because the big P politics. So the charter advocacy community and the traditional public school's advocacy community set this thing up to be about competition, set this thing up so that charters measure of success was outperforming the traditional public school system, right? That everything was combative and adversarial. And here I think it precluded us from doing the important work of working together. I got hammered once. I was testifying at a city council hearing and the city council members were saying to me, "The charters are eating your lunch in middle school. Why can't you improve middle school achievement?" And I said, "Look, if the charters are eating my lunch in middle school, then let's let them do middle school. If they are great at middle school, let's let them do middle school and then I don't have to think about that. I can figure out elementary school and high school and focus on that." And the next day in the Washington Post it was, "Kaya Henderson is giving away DCPS to charters and blah blah blah." It was terrible. All this community backlash.

Bill Haslam: Wait, we can identify.

Kaya Henderson: Woo. My gosh. So I think that the rhetoric, the positioning us as fighting for a fixed pie of students, not sort of recognizing this as more of a portfolio model where there are lots of different kinds of schools and parents should have choice.

Phil Bredeesen: You've said something which is very different from my worldview of that.

Kaya Henderson: Okay.

Phil Bredeesen: In the spirit of you might be wrong, I want to ask you about it.

Bill Haslam: That's, "you might be right." It has to be corrected.

Phil Bredeesen: You must be right. Yeah. You may well might be right. I've always seen the competition as an important feature of it. And I guess my business background is in the healthcare field. For example, here in Nashville we have a number of for-profit hospitals, a number of nonprofit hospitals and lots of debate about which one is better, and which one is

right, and who runs the best operation, and so on. The reality is that I can't discern any difference along the axis of profit or nonprofit in the hospital. There's lots of difference in the hospitals and some good ones and bad ones. But the axis to me seems to be hospitals which are in a competitive situation get their act together and hospitals which are not in a competitive situation don't. So I would tend to believe the same things happens in schools, that where you have a public school or a charter school which has to actually compete for the students it has and the parents and so on, you're likely to get better results. That seems contrary to your portfolio message. Convinced me.

Kaya Henderson: Not only is it contrary to my portfolio message, but it's not –The data in all of the places where we have charter schools doesn't actually bear that out.

Phil Bredeesen: Okay.

Kaya Henderson: In some cases, the traditional school system got better. And then I think you can argue about the whys, right? But in lots of places we have charter schools and competition and the traditional district is still not competing. So I think that competition by itself is not the thing to spur that on, right? Even in those hospitals, those hospitals that don't compete, you still have to try to get the best leadership, you still have to try to get the best doctors. And so when I look at what happened in D.C. for the 10 years before we started the big transformation from 2007 to 2016, is DCPS didn't have the capacity, the resources to compete and didn't have the leadership to compete and whatnot. And literally, people were like, "Okay, let's just give up." But I look at places like New Orleans where we're like, "Look, let's go whole hog on competition." And you look at the long term results for students, I think we saw initial bumps at the beginning, but the long term results for students don't bear that out.

Phil Bredeesen: It's persuasive. I mean, the contrary data from my perspective against the point of view I just expressed is that, if you look at school systems around the world that we tend to admire from the standpoint of we think they're doing a better job than our public schools, I think of places like Finland, they're almost all monopoly systems. I mean, they're not competitive competitive systems.

Kaya Henderson: That is right.

Phil Bredeesen: So that would argue that I might be wrong in that case.

Bill Haslam: Okay, I got two last, quick questions. First one, end of the day, are charters important to our education system or not?

Kaya Henderson: I think they are important to our education system. They are an important laboratory that we can learn from. We look at how many traditionals are now doing extended school day or extended school year. We learned that from charters. Looking at all kinds of things, I think they're important places to innovate and I think we can learn from them. I don't

believe what some other people believe, which is that they're a panacea. Charters serve 5% of students in this country and we got to figure out how to serve 100% of students in this country.

Bill Haslam: Your comment about quality at scale really is the challenge and all the other conversations need to start with that. Last one is, kind of in honor of the name of this show, can you think of a time when you've realized in the middle of a discussion or something that the other side might be right?

Kaya Henderson: I mean, I feel like that happens to me four times a day.

Bill Haslam: Personally, that's a really good sign. We should all feel that way.

Kaya Henderson: This is a great one. We were closing schools, which is contentious and terrible and nobody wants to do it.

Bill Haslam: Right.

Kaya Henderson: My team, which was smart and cute and amazing and wonderful in all of the things that you want in the leadership team. They had data, they had done all of this thinking.

Bill Haslam: I've never heard cute as an essential description there, but we'll go with it.

Phil Bredezen: I hope it isn't. And I'm in a lot of trouble.

Bill Haslam: We were hoping for old and gray, but go ahead.

Kaya Henderson: So we had worked out a solution for a particular community where the school was closing and the community members were saying, "You can't close." And I said to my team, "Look, we're going to put together a proposal, but we have data, but the community also has data. It might not be on spreadsheets or it might not be in a deck, but we need to actually put both sets of data together to figure out what the right solution is." And so my team went out to this community and the community said, "You can't close this school because the transportation doesn't work." And my team was like, "Yes, it does. We've looked at the maps. We've done all of the things." They said, "All you need to do is cross this bridge in order to get to the next school and it's within a half a mile and blah, blah blah."

The community members asked to meet with me because they weren't getting any traction from my team and they said, "Just come out to the community and let's have this conversation." They took me to where the bridge was supposed to be and the bridge was not there, right? And so it had been knocked down. There was no way for kids to cross this busy highway. And for me it was a good reminder that we have to do this work with community. But for my team it was also like, you could have all the information that you think you have, but you have to be open to other people's perspective. And so we made a different decision for that community and it ended up

being the right decision.

Bill Haslam: Kaya, that's awesome. Thank you. You've been wonderful and we really appreciate you joining us today.

Kaya Henderson: Thank you for having me.

Phil Bredesen: Really enjoyed it. Thank you.

Bill Haslam: What I love about Kaya's approach is she's going to do it based on data, but also based on this idea of community and outcomes.

Phil Bredesen: I always find it's a little hard to find people who have this great depth of knowledge or something, but also a kind of down to earth touch that it all has to be tested against the real world.

Bill Haslam: Yeah. So circling back around to the charter discussion, one of the things that my experience has been that the charters do bring is the innovation that Kaya talked about, but they also bring, like I said, both an entrepreneurial spirit and an eagerness and kind of a zeal, if you will, that is always good to introduce into the package.

Phil Bredesen: But just like in any business, I mean there's businesses started all the time with great enthusiasm and zeal, but where the people don't have the ability to actually execute, I think that same thing can affect charters where you can get them started with people who are very enthusiastic, but just really don't know. I mean, when I first got started in business with basically taking over failing HMOs, it was the same issue. All these community groups that started these and they were incredibly enthusiastic and they grew rapidly and they had no idea how to manage that growth or how to make things happen in a broader context. So I think that's kind of one of the challenges probably of a charter school, which is, after the enthusiasm, how do you actually make it work?

Bill Haslam: Yeah. I think my perspective from being in office, and then being involved in education issues since is, this is a really hard mountain to climb. A child doesn't just walk into the school building every morning. He or she comes with lots of other issues. Maybe it's literally hunger. Maybe it's parents breaking up, maybe a neighbor got murdered. I mean, it could be any score of things. And we're expecting the education system to address all these societal issues and it's just not going to happen and it's not fair.

Phil Bredesen: Right.

Bill Haslam: We have to incorporate this sense, this reality that, again, every morning children walk in with a lot of problems. And as I always said, government's better at fixing pothole than we are at fixing hearts, and yet we're asking our school systems to fix a whole lot of things.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah. I really struggle with that and obviously my connection with education was different as mayor than it was as governor. But it seemed to me important to not fall into the trap that everything is so messed up by the external world that you can't really make any progress. I just always looked at it as, "Well, I can't fix a lot of these problems, but I can do everything I can so that when you walk up the steps through the front door of the school, you have the best experience we can possibly give you given your realities."

Bill Haslam: Right. I mean, again, circling back to the point of this program, one of the things that I think has to happen is to take the politics out. Charter schools are not the devil in the education system nor are they the single shot solution. But I think they can be a piece of the solution. I'd love for the discussion to go away from good guy versus bad guy to how do we use all the different pieces we're going to need to take on what's a really hard challenge.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah. I mean, the fundamental idea, which she certainly was talking about, which is to say, "When you have a system with the problems we have, let's experiment. I mean, let's try some different kinds of things and see if we can't figure out what works." I mean that's what successful companies do. They don't design a product and then live with it come hell or high water forever. You put something out there, you see if it works. If it doesn't, you move to something else.

Bill Haslam: I think that's a pretty good summary. To me, this conversation's been particularly poignant. Both of us ended up maybe not running for governor because of education issues, but spending a lot of times because we both figured out really quickly how central it was to everything else.

Phil Bredeesen: No question. I mean, I certainly came to see it as kind of number one, two and three of what you can do in the state to really fundamentally offer each child in the state the best possible chance to make use of the kind of God-given strengths that they have.

Bill Haslam: Agree. And to me what we can't let up on, and what we can't let politics interrupt, is this idea that every child, every child regardless of income, zip code, anything else needs to have the chance for quality education.

Phil Bredeesen: We pride ourself as a country as being a very socially fluid place, that there's opportunity for everybody. And it's, unfortunately, not as true as I would like it to be. I really think the key to making it true, through government action anyway, is what we do with public education.

Bill Haslam: It is our best shot.

Phil Bredeesen: Best shot.

Marianne Wanamaker: Thanks for listening to "You Might be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating and reviewing the show.

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This episode was produced in partnership with Relational Marketing and Stones River Group.