You Might Be Right - Education Disparities - Transcript

Marianne Wanamaker: Welcome to "You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics, brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee. Nearly every major education reform effort since 1965 has targeted achievement inequality in America's schooling system. And yet achievement gaps have proven to be stubbornly persistent, despite the efforts of government at all levels, nonprofits and private individuals. Former Tennessee Governor's Bill Haslam and Phil Bredesen and their guests assess the evidence on education reform and ask whether a new public policy strategy is in order. This episode was recorded live at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, in April 2023.

Russ Wigginton: I'm Russ Wigginton and I get the tremendous pleasure of serving as the president here at the National Civil Rights Museum. And I think this is the perfect venue, the perfect place to have a conversation about education, about educational equity, about our educational opportunities, and about educational aspirations.

When you think about so much of the civil and human rights history and the current work that we have to do, still today, so much of it is tied to, what does opportunity look like? What does real opportunity look like for all Tennesseans? And so, to be able to host this robust conversation here at the National Civil Rights Museum is indeed a pleasure and a joy. Hopefully this conversation will reveal several things, the kind of policies and possibilities that we should aspire to reach and doing it through the lens of two outstanding governors who led and vigorously fought for educational opportunities for all, and the special guests that they have invited with them to be with us today.

Again, what a joy it is for us at the National Civil Rights Museum to host any conversation that has to do with helping everybody reach their full potential and seeing the humanity in each one of us. Thank you.

Phil Bredesen: Thank you very much, and it's a delight to be here. I wanted to introduce one of our guests to begin with, Dr. Carol Johnson-Dean, sitting to my left. I have the fortunate pleasure this time of introducing someone who I admire tremendously and actually have had a chance to work with over the years.

Dr. Johnson-Dean is a graduate of Fisk University in elementary education. She got a master's degree and a Ph.D. in educational policy at the University of Minnesota. She began her career at public schools in Minneapolis. And when I knew her, she became the superintendent of the Memphis City School systems from 2003 to 2007, which is during the time during which I served as governor.

We lost her then to the Boston City School system where she was a superintendent from 2007 to 2013. She claims she is retired now, I don't believe it, but she continues to rack up honors

and is a hugely respected voice in public education with a real combination of the academic knowledge and the practical experience that it takes, I think, to really affect change.

Bill Haslam: Well, thanks. And let me start by, Russ, thank you for letting us be at the Civil Rights Museum. If you're listening to this podcast and you haven't ever been here, you're making a big mistake, come. It's one of Tennessee's best treasures. And we appreciate all of you have made it happen.

And as I introduced my guest, I was with some friends Pitt and Barbara Hyde this past weekend and we were talking about they have a daughter who's teaching how far it is sometimes from those of us who talk about policy, to the classroom. You've already introduced Carol, but our other guest, Robert Pondiscio, knows what he speaks of. He actually went from a senior job at Time and BusinessWeek to teaching fifth grade in the Bronx. Okay. So, that's getting real very quickly. Okay.

From there, he worked for the Core Knowledge Foundation. He's an advisor and civics teacher at Democracy Prep. Like I said, before that, he had senior positions in journalism. And he's also written several books that have quite a following. One is, How the Other Half Learns: Equality, Excellence, and the Battle Over School Choice. And I need this, The Ultimate Online Homework Helper, and Kids Online. And he's also written, I want to hear about this, The Future: An Owner's Manual. So, Robert, welcome, and Carol, thank you. Thanks for joining us. This is going to be a good conversation.

Phil Bredesen: I want to start just by asking this. We are coming up on the 70th anniversary of the Brown versus Board of Education decision, a time when the country, I think, believed and necessarily was taking a huge step forward in promoting the opportunity for all Americans that our country is supposed to be about. 70 years has gone by. I'm curious what you think, looking back on that, what has worked in the way that we hoped, what hasn't worked in the way that you would've hoped?

Carol Johnson-Dean: Well, I'll start. I think that we actually have made progress. I think public education has had fits and starts, right? We start and then we don't sustain the effort. And so, the early work in terms of integrating schools was not sustained in a way that would have attributed to long-term success. And so, I think we have to really examine in what ways it didn't work in the ways that we had hoped.

And in part, I think it's because we think of things as one remedy solutions and really, the work is very synergistic. And I think what you're going to hear me talk about over and over again is not just about putting a bandaid on one thing where we try to integrate schools, or one bandaid on just early childhood, or a bandaid just on whether we retain kids at third grade. It's really about how the synergy of things working together in partnership. We still have a lot more to do. And so I don't say that we've gotten there, but I do think that we have to figure out how we're going to sustain the efforts.

And if I could just digress just for a minute, I think that the handoff is really important. And when Governor Bredesen served as governor and we went through the Race to the Top– And by the way, Tennessee was the first state to actually be awarded. I was in Massachusetts at the time, so I felt a little competitive. But I think what sold the federal government was that his handoff to Governor Haslam was so smooth and sustaining in terms of the values, in terms of setting high standards. All of those things sent a message to everybody that, "We're not pulling back, but we are moving forward and regardless of party, we are moving in the right direction for the children of the state." And the subsequent outcome of that, I have to say, is that Tennessee had one of the highest growth rates in the NAEP scores, the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Bill Haslam: Wait, not one of the highest, the highest. Right? Let's be clear here.

Carol Johnson-Dean: Thank you for that correction, Governor. I do want you to hear these themes about the importance of investments, the importance of early learning, the importance of teachers and leadership, and the really importance of making resource distribution be more equitable for the children of the state. But the continuity also matters in terms of messaging, so that teachers and principals here, we're not backing off for the high standards that we've set.

Robert Pondiscio: Okay. I guess I should out myself at the outset by saying, I'm not really a policy person despite the fact that I work for an education policy outfit, the American Enterprise Institute. I think of myself as more of a practice-based person, a practitioner, and that is due to my background.

So, I came to education at what in retrospect seems like the high watermark of the ed reform era. It was the early aughts, about 2002 or so, when there was all this tremendous energy around education reform, around charter schools, around closing the achievement gap. So, I left my job in the media world to go teach at what was then and still is the lowest performing school in New York City's poorest performing neighborhood, District 7, P.S. 277 of the South Bronx. By the way, the fact that it is still 20 years later, the lowest performing school in the lowest performing district is not insignificant. We should talk about why that persists.

But when I say I'm a practice person, if you think about it, and we just heard some, most of what we talk about when we talk about these problems are structural changes, funding, management, federal policy, Race to the Top, no child left behind. I'm the guy who insists on saying, "What are the kids doing all day? What are they learning?" Rather than talking about, for example, teacher quality, I like to talk about quality teaching. Not, "Who is the teacher?" But, "What is the teacher doing?" For example, what's the curriculum? What's the instructional, what's the school culture? So, those are the questions that inform my work.

Bill Haslam: One of the things that you wrote is that there's, I think, four million teachers in the country and the idea that there would be four million superstars is just not realistic, like any other profession, you're going to have some stars, some folks who maybe should be doing

something else, and a lot of other people.

So, I guess Governor Bredesen, like I said, I stole a whole lot from him. He won the Race to the Top money, and then I got to spend it. But one of the ideas that I heard him talk about way back then, see I was listening, was this idea that if you could choose between a great teacher in front of the classroom with very few resources, or a average teacher with a lot of the latest in screens, et cetera. Take the great teacher.

Robert Pondiscio: Sure.

Bill Haslam: Were we right in trying to emphasize it's all about getting the right person in front of the class?

Robert Pondiscio: Well, it's the right person, but it's what that person is doing. I mean, this is the one hill I'm still content to die on in this work. We just make the job too darn hard for people. And every time there's a new problem, we assume that the school is the venue of first and last resort to solve it.

So, I mean, I like to point out that, think of the job of the teacher. One of my hammer through glass moments in my first years in the classroom was very early on when I was asking, "Where's my curriculum? What am I supposed to teach?" And my staff developer said to me, "Well, Mr. Pondiscio, you're the best person to know what every child needs." And I promise, I thought she was making fun of me. I thought this was like a hazing ritual. She meant it, for reasons we probably don't have time to go into. It's a pedagogical technique. It doesn't matter what the book is, you want to inspire kids to become good readers, so let them choose their own book, et cetera, et cetera.

And we can talk about literacy, which is my passion. I think it's a failed model. But one of the things, and we know this from data, every teacher, virtually every teacher in America spends 10, 20, 30 hours a week on Google, on Pinterest, on Teachers Pay Teachers, these other websites, trying to find lessons that will engage their students, trick them into learning, so to speak. You may write the greatest lessons on the planet, but I want teachers to focus on studying student work, on building relationships with kids, building relationships with families, giving feedback. Other people can write the lesson. So, I'm very fond of pushing, perhaps only me, is we should really ask less of teachers, not less in terms of lowering their standards, but just make the job, as I like to say, make the job doable by mere mortals. Because to your very good point, governor, if you've got four million of anybody doing anything, you're going to have a normal range of human distribution.

Bill Haslam: It was actually your very good point, I just stole it.

Robert Pondiscio: Okay. It would be lovely if there were four million saints and superstars, but you have to make the job doable by the people we have, because that's all we have. That's all

we're ever going to have.

Phil Bredesen: Let me be a little bit of a contrarian here for a moment and answer my own question about the 70 years, the successes and the failures of it. I think an abject failure is that the achievement gap, if you want to call it that, is real today, 70 years later. And surely, the Brown versus Board of Education decision and what it did has not been unremittingly successful in closing that gap.

So, I'd like us to really focus on that issue and not on the ... I mean, conventional views of teachers are great and here's the resources they need. Where specifically have we failed in that? What is wrong with the system? What do we keep doing over and over again that's preventing us from doing that?

Robert Pondiscio: You know what I'm going to say. I'm going to say it's the curriculum, stupid! That we really–

Bill Haslam: Glad you answered him that way, not me.

Phil Bredesen: I no longer have any troopers, so I can't do anything about it.

Bill Haslam: They let me keep mine!

Robert Pondiscio: Our listeners cannot see how red I am in the face. I did not intend to aim that at you, governor. But no, this gets to my point about making the job doable by the people we have and making it sustainable.

My concern about the achievement gap, frankly, is that we are suffering from achievement gap fatigue, that because we have failed so badly at closing it, we just don't talk about it as much as we do 20 years ago. We have fashionable explanations to explain it away. It's real, it's persistent. It can be closed. I've seen examples of it being closed. And we need to rededicate ourselves to that work.

Carol Johnson-Dean: I'm going to differ a little bit with you on this and that is this. Who has access to what curriculum? So, I'm going to argue that there are children, long before kindergarten, who come exposed to– Their parents figure out that they need Sylvan Learning or Kumon, or they need tutors, before they even enter kindergarten. And then we have parents who don't know about all those things. And we know that half of the achievement gap in grade three shows up at kindergarten. Okay, so half of it shows up.

And so, I guess, I'm going to argue that while I totally agree with you on the importance of a strong curriculum, what I see happening, and I think this happened through the integration, is that we re-segregated within schools and put some kids in advanced placement, some kids in eighth grade algebra. We didn't give everybody equal access to high-quality curriculum.

And so, if you take pre-calculus and trigonometry at 12th grade and you take the SAT or the ACT, you're going to look very different than a kid who didn't. And so this, yes, exposure to curriculum, but only when we are committed to making sure that the resources are in place, the quality of teaching is in place, and we're not re-segregating kids into pockets within schools where some people get access to the treatment and turn out okay.

Bill Haslam: Carol, I agree with that, but you started out with, "Kids aren't coming to school on equal basis." Some of them have parents that have read to them every night, some of them never, et cetera. How do we take that into account? I mean, without slowing some kids down, how do we deal with the reality of that kids aren't walking into kindergarten at the same place?

Carol Johnson-Dean: Well, again, that's back to my point about resource distribution and equity. We have to spend more, and some people don't want to spend more. So, we have to be honest about that. Some of it's driven because of property taxes in different states and how schools get funded.

But what I will say is this, it's like the marathon was on Monday, right? And a lot of people were training, particularly the Kenyans, for years, right? And then we got a group of kids that showed up at 10:00, and they didn't know that they had to do all this training to run the marathon and now they're in it. And we can't slow the race down for the kids who've been training and are in it, because this is a international race. This isn't like Memphis. And so, we have to push, but then we have to figure out, what are the resource investments that are going to be necessary in terms of curriculum for the kids who showed up late, missed the bus, mom didn't tell them, nobody told them that, "These are the prerequisites you must have in order to achieve in this arena."?

Robert Pondiscio: Yeah. At the risk of wonking out, it's a different conversation with math and English because of home language advantages or disadvantages and whatnot, where math tends to be more of a school-based subject. Those are real differences and it's very hard to ameliorate those over time.

And we are having this conversation in Memphis, which happens to be the hometown, the city where my educational hero, E.D. Hirsch Jr., was born, not far from here. There was an interesting study, this just came out a week or two ago. It was a long-term study, and that's crucial because language proficiency is, as Hirsch would say, "A very slow growing plant." One of the problems we have in ed reform is reform fatigue. We expect results right now. Well, there's no such thing as right now results in ELA. I've said for years, "You show me a miracle, I'll show you a scandal." That's almost always the way it happens.

So, this study was based on nine charter schools, from memory, so please don't come at me if I've got the data or the precise facts incorrect, but they studied– It was lotteried in, lotteried out. In other words, there was a large group of kids, about 2,000 kids, who all applied for seats in

kindergarten in nine core knowledge rich charter schools.

And so, they were able to say there was the group that got in and there was the group that didn't get in, and they studied them over, I think, six years. And at the end of the six years, the treatment kids, the kids who were in the core knowledge schools were 16 percentile points higher than the kids who were not. To put that in relief, the investigators of this research said, "If every kid in America had a 16 percentile growth in ELA, the United States would be the fifth-highest literacy country on the planet." Okay? So, there's some work that we need to–

Bill Haslam: What are we now? For reference.

Robert Pondiscio: It depends on whether you're looking at [inaudible 00:19:31] or others, but I think we're fairly mediocre, usually in the middle 20s or some such, but we would be right at the top. Now, this is of course, one study. You need replication. But to me, it's the evidence that we've been looking for to prove Dr. Hirsch's theory about the power of background knowledge and language proficiency for 40 years. Here it is.

Bill Haslam: Robert, let me follow up then. Carol, I'd be curious on your comment of this. One of the things you've said is, "If you're not serious about literacy, you're not serious about equity." I mean, and you said, you don't think our approach to literacy is right.

Robert Pondiscio: Yeah.

Bill Haslam: So, give us a little bit more background.

Robert Pondiscio: Well, I mean, and I say this as somebody for whom these are personal issues. Every child I have ever taught as either a fifth grade teacher in the South Bronx, or later, a high school civics teacher in Harlem at Democracy Prep Charter School, has been Black and brown, has been mostly low income. So, the achievement gap is not a theoretical construct to me. It is names and it is faces. That's what animates me in this work. That's what's kept me in this work for 20 years.

And it is one of the most difficult things to do in this work is to maintain the energy and enthusiasm for reform. I mean, again, I don't want to impugn anybody's motivations, but education is a very fad-happy business. We're always chasing the shiny new thing as opposed to just sticking to our knitting. And I know I'm going to sound like that fusty old back to basics guy, but there's something to that. The reform fatigue where again, I alluded to it earlier, if we don't get instant results, we change strategies. Well, some things you can't change strategies on and language proficiency is one of them.

Carol Johnson-Dean: Well, I do think that exposure to early language experiences are very, very important. And I think if you look at the most recent NAEP data, looking at the National Assessment of Educational Progress data, looking at nine year olds as a group, we lost ground

significantly during COVID in almost every single state. And the reality is, the highest performers lost less ground than the lowest performers. And so for example, the Black percentage points in mathematics dropped by 13 points, and I think for whites by five points, for Latinos by eight points.

So, you have these big drops both in mathematics and in literacy, which speaks to a couple of things about how some families can support learning at home during the pandemic and some families were not able to. Some families were able to put pods together and figure out how to manage the technology, and other families went to work and their kids really didn't get what they needed.

And I know when I talked to my daughter, she said, "My being at home, teaching from home, does not help my kids. I need to be there. They can't count on learning in a space where they're counting on their parents to help them with tasks that I'm used to helping them with." And so, I think all that COVID did was highlight the disparities that really already existed and made it more imperative that we figure out ways to accelerate the performance.

I will say that organizations like the Hunt Institute in North Carolina and some of Governor Hunt's work in education, really are focusing a lot on the science of reading. I know that MTR here is doing a lot with literacy and reading. And I mean, I have to ask myself, if Barbados and Cuba have 90% literacy rates, what's going on here? Now, I realize you can't read whatever you want in Cuba. I get that, but at least you can get kids at a rate of reading. And reading and math are not separate entities, that is, there's a lot of literacy in mathematics and we have to figure out how we are going to– And particularly for our growing population of non-English speakers, how we're going to expose them.

Phil Bredesen: I want to push back a little bit to you again on this subject of the fact that kids bring different things to the classroom on the first day of kindergarten, and so on. As someone, as the two of us have been, you're sitting in the governor's chair and you're trying to figure out what it is you actually do, what are you going to ask for in terms of funding or in terms of changes in the law?

I mean, I will stipulate that kids come into kindergarten on the first day with all sorts of differences. They have different qualities of parenting, they have different genes, they have different personalities. I mean, there's a lot of things that are different about kids. No two are the same. So, the question in my mind is to say, "Well, okay, I'll take that as a given. Once they show up in there, what's the best way to make the best use of whatever gifts they bring into it and take care of any shortcomings they're bringing in?" What do you do in the classroom besides just– I mean, you can say, "More money." But my question will be, "Okay, what do you want me to spend it on?"

Robert Pondiscio: I'll go first. You alluded, Dr. Johnson-Dean, to the science of reading, which has been one of the more encouraging movements, I guess you'd call it, of the last couple of

years. We have seen legislation here, so I will talk policy a little bit, in 30-odd states encouraging the adoption of science of reading aligned reading curricula in early childhood. There have been any number of initiatives. You alluded also as well to third grade reading guarantees. To requirements that colleges of education in various states teach or at least cover the so-called science of reading.

I put that in the bucket of things that I choose to be optimistic about, because frankly, I'm a little bit pessimistic about the idea of improving classroom practice from state houses, let alone from Washington. But I choose to love this because it does seem like there's a burgeoning awareness that, "Hey, look, there's 26 letters, there's 44 phonemes. We can teach these to kids. They can learn to decode." And this, by the way, is what I saw in my South Bronx classroom years ago. Kids who could decode, they could read the text, but they struggled with comprehension. But not every kid can decode, but we can make a lot more progress in early childhood ed, which is, I think, our shared passion to get kids to the starting line. Right?

That's what I want to see them do. If we do nothing else in the next 10 years but nail decoding through the so-called science of reading, it's not a magic bullet, because then from third grade on, reading comprehension gets a lot more complicated. Decoding, reading the words on a page, that's a skill. Reading comprehension is a lot more complicated. But we have a lot of work to do to just get every kid in America to the decoding starting line. And for the first time in my entire career, I'm actually optimistic that we might get there.

Carol Johnson-Dean: I think Governor Bredesen brings up a really important point though, that students come into the classroom from various different places and various different experiences. I think that we've already proven that we can take poor kids from poor families and we can educate them well. Now we have to learn how to do it consistently, because I can give you example after example of people coming from very poor or disadvantaged backgrounds, single mom being raised and all that. And instead, we have teachers who see their assets, build on their assets as opposed to their deficits, and really try to stretch them and give them the experiences that they otherwise might not have, and that, I would say, affluent families routinely provide to their children really on a regular basis.

So, I'm going to go back to your comment about the state policy. So, here's a state policy and it's that instead of individualizing the learning for the children in your classroom or mine, we are going to say, "Everybody who doesn't pass this test on this day will be retained." That's not an individualized policy, that is a wholesale, "We're going to treat everybody the same."

Now, I'm a mom who actually retained a special needs son, but I tell you, I worked hours with the teacher to map out a strategy and a plan, because I had access to information. But if you are just going to do wholesale, then you're not individualizing or building on the assets, or working with parents. You're not listening to parents, for sure, and you're just deciding that everybody– And all the research from the University of Chicago and others have shown that 40% of the kids who were retained in the Chicago experiment dropped out of high school, just

dropped out, clearly dropped out, never stayed. And so, I don't know if we are willing to risk everything. I think if kids come individually and we try to map out individual plans, it means though some of the money we have to spend has to be in reducing class size. You can't expect teachers to individualize with 30 students.

Robert Pondiscio: Here's my concern. So, a quick war story from my teaching days. So, I painted a picture for you before of where I used to teach, the lowest performing school in the poorest performing neighborhood in New York City. All we did was we did a literacy block and then we did a math block, and then we came back from lunch and did a second literacy block, which I defined as, more of what's not working.

If you think about the logic of that, what we were doing when we did one literacy block wasn't working. So, what do we do? We added a second one. And yes, there's something darkly comic about that, but it's also, it's an endemic mindset. The old thing about, "Beatings will continue until morale improves." Right? This is why I became a curriculum and instruction guy because of the logic of that, like, wait a minute, if it didn't work for a little, why will it work more for a lot? So, this is what made me a lot more curious about curriculum, about instruction.

Carol Johnson-Dean: I think that's such an important point-

Robert Pondiscio: Sorry to interrupt, but that's why I have a complicated relationship with third grade reading guarantees. I like the idea, but if it's just more of what's not working-

Carol Johnson-Dean: Working.

Robert Pondiscio: –then it's not going to amount to much.

Carol Johnson-Dean: The emphasis has to be on what we're going to do differently.

Robert Pondiscio: Right.

Carol Johnson-Dean: Not repeating the grade. So, the punishment is, you repeat the grade, but if I got the same teacher teaching me in the same way and I didn't get it the first time, it's unlikely that we're going to see a difference.

Phil Bredesen: So, is the answer to making progress on this to do a lot of teacher retraining, to give the teachers better tools to act in the way that you're saying the good teachers act?

Robert Pondiscio: I think so, and it depends on what you mean by tools. That's the other great cliche in education. The answer to everything is, one, more of what's not working. Two, more training. Well, sometimes it's more training, more of the training that's not working.

I mean, another war story from my school, I said this all the time, the standard cliche about

schools like the one where I used to work is that it's filled with indifferent teachers punching the time clock at 3:27 and 30 seconds, because that's what the contract says and then going home because their union contract says that's their time. Sure, you see one or two people like that. But in the main, what I saw was people who were trying hard and failing, and they were not trying hard and failing despite their training. They were trying hard and failing because of their training. They were failing in the things they were trained to do, because the things that they were trained to do were not valid.

Bill Haslam: So, give us an example of how we're training somebody to do the wrong things.

Robert Pondiscio: Sure. Well, actually, we don't have time to go into this, I'm sure, but I would recommend to anybody a fantastic series of podcasts by a woman named Emily Hanford for American Public Media. She was just nominated for a Peabody Award for this. It was called Sold a Story, and it's a several hour podcast about how reading instruction in this country has just left the rails. And all of the things that she covers in that podcast was exactly the stuff that I was trained as a teacher to do.

Phil Bredesen: Pretend for a moment that the clock is turned back and I'm the governor, or if you prefer, have Bill the governor.

Bill Haslam: We'll have a show of hands here.

Phil Bredesen: And you come into my office and I would say to you, "That's interesting analysis and I can see where that is. I want to know what to do. What do I do when you leave here? What do I pick up my pen or my computer and do, or look at the budget? What do you want me to do to fix that problem?"

Robert Pondiscio: The word education famously appears nowhere in the Constitution. It's your job, it's your lane. When people tell governors, "Stay in your lane." You say, "This is my lane." So, I've always been curious as to why we did not, and folks hate when I say this, more routinize what happens at least at the elementary school level, there should not be that much difference between what a kid is learning, not just from different parts in the state in the early childhood years, but in the same district and even across the hall in the same school.

I mean, there's a real kind of free agent mindset that we just don't have in any other category of state employee. Let's face it, teachers are state employees. I don't know why we are so reluctant to be prescriptive. But then you have to align everything to that, and I'm going to bang that curriculum drum again. There should be not a lot of mystery about what gets learned in kindergarten, first, second, third grade. Then teachers should get trained that way by their state schools of education. I'm guessing, I don't know this, but in Tennessee, what 80, 90% of your teachers train in the state?

Phil Bredesen: Out of the state schools, yeah.

Robert Pondiscio: Who accredits them? You do.

Phil Bredesen: Right.

Robert Pondiscio: Right? The state assessments, who writes them? You do. For the life of me, I can't understand why it's so hard to align these things, to create the incentive structure that teachers know what they're supposed to do on a given day and get good at doing it.

Phil Bredesen: Carol, would that routinizing work?

Carol Johnson-Dean: Well, first of all, we have a growing and culturally diverse population, but I don't think our standards should be different. Because it's more diverse, it's just that how we get there may have to be differentiated with more time for some students.

I think about incentives a lot and you referenced incentives. And so, if there's no incentive for a higher ed institution to change how it prepares its teachers, if there are no incentives for partnerships between higher ed institutions and K-12. If there are no incentives between pre-K and– The incentive structures have to be aligned, because it's not just a matter of the governor announcing that everybody will be trained on these routine sets of skills, it's also that we have to create incentives for higher ed institutions to see value in preparing teachers to meet the diversity that's in classrooms. And so often, and I don't want to be picking on higher ed, but higher ed sometimes is not as adept and flexible at changing to meet-

Phil Bredesen: Really?

Robert Pondiscio: I'll pick on higher ed, I'm happy to do it. No, I went to ed school because I had to go to ed school, because the ed schools, they're the gatekeepers.

Carol Johnson-Dean: Licensed.

Robert Pondiscio: Right. You can't be licensed to teach without getting your degree from a school of education. Did it add value to my teaching? Frankly, it took value away. It took me a long time to unlearn the things that I learned in ed school. But for whatever reason, and again, I alluded to the ed reform era of the last 20 years, for whatever reason, we've just been reluctant to hold ed schools accountable. It's a mystery to me.

Carol Johnson-Dean: Also, if I could just say this, we have to decide what the ultimate outcome is that we want, right? Yes, we want kids to decode, but really, I think about us preparing citizens to think. Okay? So, long term, my goal for every child would not only would they read well, but that they can independently self-govern and think. And so, I'll give you an example. Two of the charter school leaders, somebody from the archdiocese and I, and one of the independent Christian schools in Boston, all decided we were going to do tours of middle

schools. Right? So we went to a traditional school, one of the schools that I ran. And the teacher was good, but I would say the curriculum was woefully non-rigorous. It was not a rigorous curriculum. Kids seemed to be happy and participating.

We went to a charter school and the kids were walking in straight lines, they were very quiet, they were very orderly, and it appeared that the goal of the outcome was that they were well-behaved. Again, I was looking for the rigorous curriculum that you're describing. And finally we went– The independent schools weren't all that interested in us coming, so we went to the Catholic middle school, and I was expecting the Catholic middle school to be like, sit in rows. Nobody was supervising when the bell rang. They just wandered through the hallways, got to their class on time.

And then when they got to class and they were given assignments, they must have asked the instructor 20 questions, "What constitutes an A in this class? What would you want the assignment to look like?" They asked so many thinking questions, that I began to think that they were being socialized not to just learn, but to think critically about the assignment and the outcome.

And so, I left there thinking, "Maybe we are short-changing our children because we have set the bar so low that we think that–" And I'm not negating the importance of reading. I'm just saying that we haven't decided as a society, "Who are we trying to create?" And we want thinkers. We want people who are decision-makers. We want leaders for the future. And we can't just pretend that kids are going to come up one day and learn how to design things if they don't have arts-rich experiences.

Bill Haslam: Well, let me shift the topic just a little bit. Robert, one of the things you wrote about was that in prior generations it would never have occurred to parents to blame the school for their student not being motivated to learn. That's a more recent phenomenon. And what I'd comment on is even this is, it's sometimes discouraging to me what can get parents to care about school, parents of all types. Okay?

Part of the Race to the Top application, we raised our standards. So, rather than 70% of our kids in the state being proficient, it went down to 50– I don't remember exactly, but it went way down. I remember thinking, "Parents are going to be up in arms when that many parents find out that their child is not proficient." But it was kind of crickets in response. We got nothing. Right now, on the other hand, parents are showing up in droves to talk during COVID, whether their child should wear a mask or not, and I'm not minimizing that. Talk to us about how parents should engage in their child's education.

Robert Pondiscio: What a great question. I love telling this story. Last May, the only time in my entire adult life I've stood in line. I live in rural Upstate New York. The only time I've ever stood in line to cast a ballot in any election was for school board last May, because we had one of these campaigns that have now become legion in this country, where people get very, very upset

about culture war issues and whatnot. So, your very good point, governor, is that that's what it took to get people activated. Full disclosure, I just yesterday filed in that very same community to run for school board.

Bill Haslam: Oh, wow.

Robert Pondiscio: Well, hold your applause. Be careful what you wish for.

Phil Bredesen: I thought he looked smarter than that.

Robert Pondiscio: Exactly. I've been saying to people, "I've been living in this town 25 years not making enemies, so I want to hold onto that. Bad idea to run for school board." But look, to be earnest about it, that's one of the things that really animates me is any community where I have to stand in line for a half an hour to cast a ballot for school board is a community where something good's happening.

Bill Haslam: Right.

Robert Pondiscio: Right? And I was a civics teacher, so the last thing that you're going to hear me say is that, "Well, this is ridiculous. You shouldn't be coming out because you care about this." Engagement is engagement. Okay, you've got their attention now, now what can I do with that attention? What is it that we can all agree on? Obviously, we're all invested in children. You don't stand outside in the hot sun for 30 minutes to cast a ballot if you're indifferent. Now, would I like to direct that into more sensible, more nuanced debates and discussions? Absolutely. But I'll take that starting line every time.

Phil Bredesen: Change the question a little bit. Still staying on the issue of, what are concrete steps that you can take, that are actionable items to do things? I'm the graduate of a very small school, a school district that had one school building, a 1 through 12 building, 43 people in my graduating class. Okay?

I thought it was a wonderful experience and the intimacy, the knowledge of all the teachers, of all the students that comes with that. You don't get the cliques in the school. I was a little bit of a nerd, that comes as no surprise to people who know me.

Bill Haslam: The little bit part, I suppose.

Robert Pondiscio: Well done.

Phil Bredesen: My best friend was the guy who was the alpha male on the football team. That's not something that would've happened in a school with 1,600 kids in the class.

When I was mayor, I tried to push the idea of breaking up schools into smaller schools to do

that, and I got enormous pushback because the sports teams wouldn't be any good. I never got it done. Okay? Is that a viable strategy? You people have seen these others.

Robert Pondiscio: Yeah, I would say that it is a viable strategy, but it's perhaps pushing the easy button a little bit. I mean, let's go back to what we were talking about before, where you've got, I think the exact number is 3.7 million classroom teachers and you're going to have that range from, "Do anything, just please teach my child." To, "Maybe you should consider a different profession like maybe lighthouse keeper or something."

So, if you reduce class size, you've got to increase that number. Well, so now that 3.7 is 5 million and now the number of should-be lighthouse keepers is probably larger. Right? So, everybody likes the idea that, "I'm going to have a small class size with a great teacher." Nobody thinks that through and realizes a lot of kids are going to have small class sizes with less than stellar teachers.

Carol Johnson-Dean: I grew up in Haywood County in Brownsville, so in a small rural community, and I can tell you that the rural communities really worry about getting physics teachers and chemistry teachers, and language teachers. And so, in some ways they suffer a great deal more than we acknowledge, the help that they need, the incentive structures we should build in for them.

I do think that smaller structures allow for the intimacy. I also think that we, as teachers, and I always think of myself as a teacher, we expect parents to come to us as opposed to us going to them. And so, I think that if we are authentic in our building relationships, and I say relationships really, really do matter, because you're going to make mistakes and the only way people are going to forgive you is you've built up some human capital talent and relationship building with them.

I think we have to go out to places where our parents are. And I know school people are hesitant to talk about faith-based connections, but a lot of the values and the beliefs in education as the way up and out, came from my parents and my church. And so, I feel like we miss the boat sometimes in activating parents through the mechanisms that they go to, the places where they hang out, and having the conversation with them on their turf as opposed to always expecting them to come to us.

Robert Pondiscio: I completely agree with you, and we've got data on this too, by the way. It's a bromide to say that, and I say it myself, that public trust in public education is in decline, but that's a two-way street. Teachers' trust in parents is declining as well.

I don't know whose data this was and I don't know the exact numbers, but there was a survey of teachers not that long ago, which listed any number of folks from your union rep to your principal, to your colleagues, to parents, "How much do you trust them? A lot, somewhat, et cetera." Parents were near the bottom. So, I mean, something I point out ruefully, is that

particularly as it pertains to low-income families of color in the communities where I've taught, the soft bigotry of low expectations is still with us. We just apply it to families and parents now.

Bill Haslam: All right. It's really about time for us to wrap up. There's a question we always ask our guests, no matter the topic, and that is ... The name of this podcast, "You Might Be Right," comes from Howard Baker's famous quote of, "Always remember, the other person might be right." Can you tell us an example particularly with education and maybe particularly with education policy, where you realized, "I didn't get that exactly right. The other side had it more right than I did."? Go ahead, Robert. You can go first and-

Robert Pondiscio: Sure. That question, that dynamic informed my entire career. And I described for you my ed school journey and coming with no experience whatsoever from the media world into a South Bronx classroom. Well, for a couple of years I was taught certain ways to teach literacy and I alluded to the son of Memphis, E.D Hirsch Jr., whose work I discovered on my own.

And when I, in my naivete, brought up his work with staff developers in my ed school, I would always hear some version of, "Oh, that's that dead white guy's stuff. Nobody takes that seriously." I'm like, "Wait a minute. That's not what his work is about at all. It's about reading comprehension. It's about language proficiency." So, I was acculturated into a dynamic that took less than seriously what in retrospect I now see as being probably the most small P progressive education strategy there is and something that's informed my career ever since.

Bill Haslam: Carol?

Carol Johnson-Dean: I think that because I grew up as a teacher, I think I always thought for a long time that we knew best, right? That we had the best answers. And so, I think what I have grown to realize is that there are lots of people with lots of ideas that we need to listen to. Some of them are parents, some of them are students. So, student voice is still really, really important. Some of them are policymakers.

I have been really impressed with the mayors that I've observed. Everything from your work, Mayor Purcell, obviously, Mayor Herenton, and Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton in Minneapolis. I feel like there are lessons and messages that I've learned from other people who are not educators, that have taught me a lot about education, that I underestimated. And so, I feel like that was a, maybe they're right sometimes and maybe I need to listen more. Listening is really an important leadership quality, and so, I just emphasize the importance to listen to people who have different views than your own, listen to people who've had different experiences, and don't make assumptions that you have all the answers.

Phil Bredesen: So, Bill, we've had fun with this asking our guests that question. How about you, do you have an experience in education?

Bill Haslam: Yeah. Actually, I mean, my answer would be just like Carol's. I mean, you come into this and you have these basic principles of what you know to be true about education, and then you learn a little more and you learn a little humility. I think one of the things Robert points out is there's nothing quite as humbling as having an exact prescription for how something should work and then you go see someone implement it and it doesn't work and you go, "Oh, I need to step back here and be a little more humble."

So, I think that learning that I didn't have all the answers and learning that it's probably a multifaceted approach that is going to work better than just, "Here's the answer. If everybody all across the state will do this, we'll be great." How about you?

Phil Bredesen: I was thinking that, I think actually the first time I remember in public life being this was about education is when I was mayor and I was very taken with the magnet schools we had, we had some really excellent ones. So, I was on a tear to start building more magnet schools, okay?

And a bunch of teachers came in to see me and said, "Please don't do this. What you're going to do is you're going to create a two class school system, where you're going to cream all of the most advantaged students out of the regular schools into these magnet schools. You're going to end up with the remaining students in the other schools. That's not a healthy thing. It's not a useful thing for those students." And so on. I mean, I completely changed my mind after that meeting, about what was appropriate.

Bill Haslam: I have one last word and I got to share this, Robert has, in doing the research, he has, "Some things I've learned." And there's one piece of advice on there that's just true period, regardless, and it's, he said, "You'll never regret not engaging with someone on social media." And that's just great truth to ... Well, Russ, thank you again for having us. It's been an honor to be here at the Civil Rights Mission.

Russ Wigginton: Thank you for being here. We appreciate it.

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.

Thank you, Governors Bredesen and Haslam for hosting these conversations. "You Might Be Right" is brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee, with support from the Boyd Fund for Leadership and Civil Discourse.
To learn more about the show and our work, go to youmightberight.org, and follow the show on social media at YMBRPodcast.

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