**You Might Be Right - Education - Transcript**
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**Jeb Bush:** This needs to be a national priority. Doesn't mean it has to be a federal program, but the leaders of our country need to recognize that this is really important to get right. The state government is the place where policy is set and then it's delivered locally.

**John White:** We do have to be interested in more than just our kids. We have to be interested in the welfare of all kids for the sake of our society. It is an existential matter. This country survives on a knowledge economy. You're talking about a world where we're going to have fewer immigrants and a less educated population. I don't see how that society survives in the long run.

**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, with funding support for members of our Producers Circle. To learn more about how you can support our work, visit youmightberight.org.

Is public education in crisis? In recent years, our schools have faced unprecedented challenges, from the pandemic and teacher shortages to debates over curriculum and student mental health. Test scores are down and U.S. students are falling behind their international peers.

In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee Governors Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam, and their guests discuss the evolving education landscape. What role should state and federal governments play in education? How can we make education more of a policy priority? And what reforms are needed to improve student outcomes?

**Bill Haslam:** Phil, both of us spent a large amount of our time and our focus in the governor's office on education issues, and it's actually one of the things I think maybe we did the best as a handoff from you to us on some things that the state was working on.

And as a result, Tennessee ended up being the fastest improving state in K-12 education results in that period right after you left office and right after I came in. Unfortunately, our nation has seen a dramatic downturn in some education results, and I think it would shock most people in America to learn like we're not even in the top 20 countries in the world when it comes to education results.

**Phil Bredesen:** Well, I think it's a good example of to get things done in the public sector, you need to have some consistency over a period of time. It can't be something which runs one way and then the other every two years or four years or six years or something like that. I think that's one of the things that worked with you and I that we each had our own take on some things, but were both after the same basic underlying kinds of results and could build on that.

I think maybe what's happening is people are not seeing anymore education as quite the vehicle to advance that they might have. It's easier now to blame immigrants as the reason I'm not advancing or something else. It's getting off the radar, and I think that's really unfortunate for the long term. We've got luckily some great guests who I think can give us some real insight into this.

**Bill Haslam:** Phil, our guest today is someone that we have both worked with, you as governor and me in several different things with Jeb. So Jeb Bush, as I think all of our listeners know, was the 43rd governor of Florida, served two terms. And a lot of people claim the mantle of being the education governor, but Jeb has as good of an argument as to having been that as anyone. And I think what shows is that even when he's left office, he stayed involved and now chairs ExcelinEd, a nonprofit organization he founded to support education reform nationwide.
So, Jeb, thank you for joining us. We look forward to the conversation.

**Jeb Bush:** Thank you for inviting me.

**Phil Bredesen:** Well, it's great to have you here, and I'd like to just start out. 10 or 15 years ago, I would have said we're on a pretty good course here. We're trying some things, some may work, some may not. I mean, No Child Left Behind was prominent and a Race to the Top in the Obama administration, and that seems like I would have been wrong. I mean, that a lot of things seem to have fallen off the wagon since then with regard to test scores and performance and everything else.

I wanted to start out with what has gone wrong? How did we move from this optimistic era where there was some bipartisan consensus, maybe not about the specific techniques, but about the need to address these issues to where we are today?

**Jeb Bush:** Well, I would take the last, call it last 35, 40 years. You can take the status of education, the K-12 education, in America in three different segments. The first, in the '90s particularly, there was some progress. There was some progress, but from a very low bar. And then with No Child Left Behind and initiatives in states during and prior to No Child Left Behind and certainly accelerated with the requirement of testing and accountability.

The aughts showed really significant game-changing improvement, particularly with lower income kids. The simple fact is, if you don't measure, you don't care. And if you have the proper kind of a measurement and real accountability, you focus everybody's attention on the needs of students and you can get results. And so there was a rising tide because of No Child Left Behind.

There was a lot of critics of No Child Left Behind that it was nationally, it was a federal government mandate, and then Race to the Top added to that, and then we became hyperpartisan. At some point in the 2012, 2013, education fell prey to the partisanship. And I would say that in the last 10 years we've seen a stagnation, or sadly, decline because people have moved away from accountability. They've moved away from assessments.

Even today there are states that are eliminating their high school graduation tests. The requirements for accountability have been watered down. States have moved away from trying to make their proficiency levels equal to what the proficiency levels are, NAEP being the Nation's Report Card, to actually lowering them. Almost across the board we've seen a lack of progress and a decline.

**Bill Haslam:** Jeb, you brought up a couple of interesting examples in No Child Left Behind and in Race to the Top of things that helped push us forward, particularly in both of those cases, one Republican, one Democrat, in terms of assessments and accountability. I'm curious. And listen, like you, I'm a conservative who believes in the authority should be in local and state governments, but both of those were national efforts.

When we've taken away national efforts, when No Child Left Behind and we replaced it with ESSER, results have fallen. How should we look at what the federal role should be versus the state and local when the federal role actually has helped in the past?

**Jeb Bush:** The first step has to be put aside the role of the federal government. We certainly can talk about that, but this needs to be a national priority. Doesn't mean it has to be a federal program. The leaders of our country need to recognize that this is really important to get right, particularly as we're moving rapidly to the next phase of economic life that's radically different than what existed 30 years ago.

So first, we have to establish this as a national priority. I don't think right now you could say that it is. The federal role is important, but it's 10% of the money. To me, the most important part of the federal role is maintaining a requirement that states in their own fashion have accountability. That's the catalyst for success, but it shouldn't be imposed on them exactly how that accountability looks.

It's just got to be real. You can't make it fake. There are states that have accountability systems there's no transparency. Parents don't know how well their kid is doing. They don't know how well their school is doing. So there has to be some basis of maintaining, ESSER maintained it from No Child Left Behind and whatever the next reauthorization is, I think maintaining accountability.

Now, I'm biased and I hope you guys are. I think governors play a huge role in this, and the state government is the place where policy is set, and then it's delivered locally. That would be the system that Secretary Riley advanced in a bygone era and others have embraced. And I think we need to get back to that.

**Phil Bredesen:** Part of my frustration with the federal government, the Department of Education, during the time that I was governor was that yes, they sent you some money, but it wasn't that much in the scheme of things. There were a lot of control issues and so on, but there was no responsibility taken on the part of the Department of Education to do anything. I mean, if

the student's achievement was not there, it was the governor's fault and the school board's fault and everything else.

So my question is, if someone is going to have control, they ought to have some responsibility for the outcome as well. That seems like just basic management practice. And that seemed to have been lacking in what we're doing so far. The question is what role do you see the federal government actually playing that would be supportive of that?

**Jeb Bush:** Well, I mean, the first point you make is an important one, which is they've never had the dominant role and the funding levels have always been important, but not in the whole scheme of things–

**Phil Bredesen:** It's nice to have.

**Jeb Bush:** –ten to 15%. And we grumble about the burdensome regulations, form filling out kind of stuff that you have to do. I think we should let a thousand flowers bloom. We love to steal ideas from other places. One of the places that we stole ideas from when I was governor was Mike Bloomberg, who ran the school district in New York City. And he was doing a lot of interesting things in a place where reform is hard to do because it's heavily unionized, but he was achieving some really interesting things and we stole from him.

He stole from us. And if a Democrat had a great idea, we would take it. Jim Hunt, God bless him. When I created the A+ plan when I ran for governor in '98, there were two governors in the '90s that I studied their work and Jim Hunt was one of them and George W., my old, old, much older brother was the other. And so the federalist system works. I don't think we should abandon it, but I'd love to see the president of the United States and others in positions of responsibility nationally to say this is a huge priority over the long haul.

And as I mentioned, and I think this would be another element of this, we need to move to career and college readiness as the true objective of K-12 education. And I think we need to totally revamp how the training dollars and allow for more flexibility for states to craft programs that– For example, in Indiana right now, they're probably leading the way for reforming high school, making it truly, the true objective is, A, to make sure that any kid that can get college courses under their belt in high school, they do it.

And Indiana leads the country in dual enrollment and college credit being earned. And two, that they really focus on enlistment, employment, and education, the 3Es, if you will, are the highest priority. And so let states figure this out and block grant the money down. The federal government doesn't have the luxury of just spending money as far as the eye can see.

**Bill Haslam:** Jeb, we talked when we started about the disastrous results recently, but putting that in context for folks, the NAEP, which as you said is kind of the Nation's Report Card, students who are proficient, and proficient is not a really high standard, have gone in the last basically since 2018, the last six years, from 37% of the population to 30.

And the students who are below basic, which is again a pretty low standard in that same period of time, have gone from 32% to 40%. So we now have 40% of our kids below basic and only 30% are proficient or above. What happened? I mean, we talked a little, we started about that, but I want to go back to that. Or maybe instead of what happened, what can we be doing to reverse the decline? Maybe that's the question.

**Jeb Bush:** Yeah. I think we need to start at the earliest grades to create a true pre-K, in states that have pre-K, to 3 strategy. And there's a blueprint. Florida probably is a good blueprint, although we've abandoned some of the success that we've had. Mississippi is a good example. Tennessee's working on this now. But the idea is train every teacher– First of all, the schools of education need to be reformed so that teachers know how to teach the science of reading.

Many teachers graduate from schools of education that don't know how to teach reading. And at the end of third grade, if kids are not proficient or below basic, they're not going to be able to be successful in science, math, social studies, or anything else. That should be a national priority. Training teachers on the science of reading, put reading coaches, particularly in the lower income communities, to teach teachers, existing cadre of teachers, on the science of reading, doing early literacy screening, which is not a prohibitively costly thing to do. If you don't do that and you start worrying about it in middle school and high school, I think you get into some serious trouble.

**Bill Haslam:** Let me ask you the final question that we ask all of our guests. As you referred to the name of our podcast, "You Might Be Right," it was Howard Baker's statement to always remember that the other person might be right. Can you think of an example of something, maybe particularly with education, but if not, wherever, where you thought, "I didn't exactly have that right earlier. I now look back and think I've got a different view of that issue than I did before."

**Jeb Bush:** Yeah, I have a few of those. I'd say the one where I thought the policy decision was right, but how I went about implementing it was wrong, and that was by executive order, we eliminated preferential pricing, set asides, and race-based admissions in the state of Florida. We effectively, not effectively, we eliminated affirmative action by executive order and replaced it with a policy that–

For example, we had 18 people that were regulating whether a Black woman was a Black woman to be certified as a minority business enterprise. It was pretty clear the Black woman was a Black woman. You spent a lot of time and money regulating that rather than saying, "Let's turn these people into marketing folks and give them access to opportunity." I mean, basically we saw these big gains in procurement and our admissions policies because we were race conscious, if you will.

It's mostly focused on lower income kids not race as the focus of attention. We ended up getting better results. So I'm proud of the results and I'm proud of the policy change, and we were

significantly ahead of our time. But I stopped persuading. I stopped listening. We went on to the next initiative in effect.

So there was a lull in the opposition. There was a lull in the action for three months. Everybody just accepted the fact that I did this. And then there was a sit-in the office and I didn't handle it properly probably. And it created like a big stink, which led to the largest protest in Tallahassee's history. 10 to 12,000 people opposed to what we called the One Florida Initiative. And the lesson was I had to keep advancing the idea. I had to keep trying to persuade people.

I had to go in front of them and listen to their concerns. And the concerns were that the injustice of the past needed to be respected. That we lived not that long ago. This was 1999 when I did this. You go 30 years back or 40 years back, and in Florida, there were segregated schools, and there were segregated water fountains, and there was so-called separate but equal life. And so that history, I ignored. I was thinking about what the future looks like.

I was thinking about rising students, all the things that I thought were important, and it created a huge problem. It opened up old wounds. And so I guess the lesson learned is the bigger the idea, you can't pause and not do anything. You need to advance the cause, but you need to persuade people. You can't just impose it. You have to listen to people's concerns. And I learned that lesson with a very diverse cabinet, diverse team that was in my office.

They paid the price. My colleagues that were Black and Hispanic, they paid the price. They were the ones that got the wrath of people really angry about this. So the results that turned out to be fine. And the executive order, by the way, still stands and Florida is better because of it. But I screwed up on the implementation in a way that was a lesson I learned for other things going forward. It happened early in my administration, and I probably got better because of it.

**Phil Bredesen:** It was really interesting. You've got such a long history in the real world of making these things happen, and I think people will be really interested to hear about this.

**Bill Haslam:** And Jeb, for both of us, I want to thank you, somebody that didn't just care about it when your name was at the top of the line for Florida, but you've continued to do that in states all across the country in terms of really caring about making certain that education has the result for opportunity for kids in the future. So thank you on our behalf, and thanks so much for joining us today. Been very helpful.

**Jeb Bush:** I appreciate your leadership. One quick story about Howard Baker. I remember there were 18 people running for president. He was one of them with my dad, and he said something I always remembered. I always stole it from. He said, "When you're thinking about running for office, aspire to the top. There are fewer people up there," which I thought was slick. I think he said his grandmother. He had some expression. It's his grandmother or something.

**Bill Haslam:** Governor, thanks so much for joining us. We appreciate it.

**Phil Bredesen:** Thank you.

**Jeb Bush:** Take care.

**Phil Bredesen:** Okay, Bill, our next guest has got an awful lot of experience in this field of education. It's John White. John was Louisiana's state superintendent of education from 2012 to 2020. And prior to his appointment as state superintendent, he led the Louisiana Recovery School District and played a key role in the post-Katrina revitalization of the New Orleans Public Schools, something we've all heard about and read about.

He also had held senior roles in the New York City Department of Education, served as executive director of Teach for America. He's presently the CEO of Great Minds, which is a nonprofit curriculum publisher and professional learning provider.
John, welcome to the show, and Bill, your show.

**Bill Haslam:** John, thanks for joining us.

When I was a brand new governor, John was one of the folks who helped teach me a lot and was one of the people first recommended when I was trying to figure out how to find first base when it came to helping address education issues.
So thank you for then and thanks for joining us now.

**John White:** Well, thanks for being here. And I'd say both of you figured out a lot. I think relative to the rest of us, you figured out a heck of a lot. So it's an honor to be here as well.

**Bill Haslam:** John, let me ask you the first question. The NAEP scores, kind of the Nation's Report Card, came out recently, and what had been, I guess, a depressing trend in our nation's education patterns went from depressing to whatever the next level of concern is, maybe almost a panic five alarm fire level. I want to talk about maybe what specific reforms we should think about in education today. But what have we learned? I mean, all of us have been through education battles of various types. What have we learned from past reform efforts that might help us going forward?

**John White:** Yeah. Well, let me say I don't think that the story on the NAEP is so stark as everybody fell off a cliff and the country's going to the toilet. I mean, there are bright spots, and those bright spots have been bright spots for some time, by the way. And I don't think it's a coincidence that you could put them in a pretty singular category in terms of the approach that they've taken.

And I'm largely talking about Florida, Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi. I might put Texas and Alabama as newcomers onto that list, and I'd put the District of Columbia on that list as the only historically or dyed in the wool, at least at present, Governor Bredesen, Democrat jurisdiction. So what do they have in common? I'd say, A, they have put accountability for results at the center of their program. Never compromised on that question. Two, while the programmatic

dimensions of it look different, I mean, the higher education reforms that are in Tennessee, we would envy that in Louisiana. We don't have that. The early investment in data systems that Tennessee made still the envy of most states. But there's other dimensions. You mentioned the Recovery School District. You all emulated that in Tennessee, for example.

The programs look different, but accountability doesn't change. And the vigor of the approach from whether it's the governor, whether it's the legislature, whether it's the state board of education, or whether it's the state commissioner of education, the vigor of leadership where the state leadership says, "I am responsible. We are responsible for academic outcomes," like our state constitutions say that we are, by the way. It all flows from that.

And then the ability to sustain both accountability and that attitude of responsibility over multiple administrations. That's really in my mind what distinguishes those states. The stuff they're doing, if you really look at it, I mean, Tennessee has had this incredible progress in reading. What have they really done? They've really coached teachers, vetted curriculum, kept accountability, made the colleges of education teach people how to teach reading.

I mean, it's not rocket science, but there's a seriousness to it and a longevity to it. So I think you could ask, what is it about the political traditions in these places that's allowed for it? That's a reasonable question. What is it about the governance structure? Because I think when you look at New York State and you've got 800 or whatever it is local school boards and in Louisiana you've got 69, I mean, obviously there's a management challenge in New York that there's not. You could look at unions and the role of collective bargaining and all of that, but I think it's mostly about governor, commissioner, board legislature, someone saying, "We're going to be serious about it. We're going to maintain accountability. We're going to assume responsibility, and we're going to do it in a way that tries to sustain over time." And that's really what distinguishes those places.

**Phil Bredesen:** In these conversations, obviously there's discussion right now because of attempts to basically shut down the Department of Education in Washington. But as somebody who's worked at the state level and obviously with Mayor Bloomberg, what do you see the federal role in education to be? What can they usefully do to assist in this process?

**John White:** Well, I think the strictest answer to that question is that they play a civil rights role on the issue just like they play on other issues in which their tools are limited, and their role is really predicated on being a guarantor of civil rights when ostensibly states don't either have those tools or have the will to do it. I think in that instance, you can see the federal role in education having its roots in reconstruction. You can see it later as a part of the Great Society. You could see it later in a A Nation at Risk, which was the 1983 report that kicked off the education reform push that the three of us have been a part of. So I think, Governor, that's the easy answer to the question.

I think in a way the more substantively helpful answer is that the federal government has tools of scale, meaning it can create uniformity. It can capitalize things that need to be done in all

places. It can incent things that need to be uniform from place to place. And as a result, when states knew that for the sake of the nation, getting back to the politics, there had to be some coherence at scale. I mean, that's a principle of any successful great education system around the country or around the world, whether it's Finland, South Korea, Japan, provinces in Canada. It doesn't matter. There is a coherence to the system at scale, and the federal government can be a part of that kind of structure.

But it was the governors going to the federal government and in dialogue that then led to convenings under President Bush, the first President Bush, ultimately legislation around standards in the Clinton administration and testing ultimately. Ultimately, No Child Left Behind was a bipartisan piece of legislation.

These things were things that only the federal government could do at scale, which is to say, okay, states, you have to have these things in place and we'll provide these resources in some similar way from California to New York and elsewhere. So I think that role is valuable.
It's only valuable if it's done well, by the way. And there's a lot of stuff that you'll get no argument from me, the U.S. Department of Education does not do well. There's a lot of irrelevant stuff going on there that I think is vastly overstated in terms of its importance.

But if you're going to basically say, "We want to get rid of this source of scale," you do have to have some alternative view as to what comes after that. Is it just every man for himself? Because I've not seen a lot of evidence that that worked. And when the governors came to President Bush 35 years ago, they were saying very much the opposite.

So I think if there's anything that should trouble us right now, I think it's not the critiques of the U.S. Department of Education, it is principally there's been no articulation of what's on the other side of it. And that's not just a critique, but it's a missed opportunity, I think.

**Bill Haslam:** So following up on that specifically, what would be the impact of if we end up shutting the federal Department of Education, what's the impact?

**John White:** Well, I think, I mean, quite obviously, it's a cheap thing to say, but you have to be clear about what exactly that means. I mean, if you're just talking about moving programs from one agency to the other, I don't know that that really has much of an effect. If you're just talking about shutting down research arms, I think that will have some effect. The federal government is a serious subsidizer of our research activity and education, no doubt.

But I think probably most of all, when we've been at our best, I think – and look, look at Race to the Top. I mean, some people would call Race to the Top, which was the Obama era stimulus driven program that Tennessee really picked the ball up and ran with. I mean, if you look at what came out of that, all the reforms that happened in Tennessee from teacher effectiveness, standards implementation, data and assessment, and data systems, I mean, these things were emulated by the rest of the country, including us in Louisiana. We were looking at Tennessee.

So I think what you're basically saying is you're giving up on vigor and you're giving up on scale, unless there is some kind of thing to replace it. And the truth of it is right now, my assessment to the point earlier is some states, a small handful, have demonstrated the ability to have a program that is vigorous, that sustains, and that scales within their states.

Tennessee is one of them. I think Louisiana is one of them, Mississippi, Florida. There are some, but most have not. I mean, that's what you see on the NAEP. Most states are not ready to respond to multiple years, if not decades of struggle. And that should trouble us when we think about dissolving the one source of coherence and scale. I'm not saying it's the right one. I'm just saying someone needs to articulate what it should be.

Because if you're just saying to a bunch of agencies that have failed many of them to resuscitate their state's education systems, hey, now you're on your own. Same resources, just no framework. I don't see what that gets us. I have no problem with restructuring the Department of Education, giving it a new mission, all that stuff, fine, but how is that going to actually work for states that clearly aren't getting it done right now? And I think that's the question we should be asking.

**Phil Bredesen:** The Race to the Top, which I was involved with when I was governor, I've often thought that the real benefit of that was not so much the money. I mean, yes, it was wonderful and we were grateful for it, and there was a lot of use for it. Actually, Bill got to spend most of it, not me.

**Bill Haslam:** Thank you.

**Phil Bredesen:** But I think also it gave us a reason to make some reforms that would have been very difficult otherwise, things having to do with teacher evaluations and so on. When it's set up there against, well, we might get $500 million if we make these changes to the law, that's a whole different conversation with the legislature than I had an idea this week and here's what I think we need to do.

So I think the thing you're saying about nationally there being a way to put some overarching concepts and strategies behind this can really be an important role for it. If the department becomes dissolved in some fashion and some of the key programs just moved off to other agencies, where do you think that comes from in the federal government? Is that something that the president has to do, or are there other people who can do that?

**John White:** It's pretty clear to me that the Congress needs to act both to eradicate the agency, as well as to modify the programs that are really the lifeblood of the agency. I mean, if you look at the things that they've taken apart so far, they are discretionary, not fully codified in the federal statutes. From a K-12 perspective, the lifeblood of that agency are the title programs, Title I, Title II, as well as the Individual Disabilities Education Act. And those programs, it would necessitate Congress acting to change appreciably.

By the way, look, I don't think those programs are working in the way that the Congress intended them to work in the '60s and '70s when they were created. I don't think that they are really equalizers. How can you look at the NAEP results and look at how African American children are faring in this country and say that those programs are working?

By the way, kudos to Tennessee, which I think has the strongest outcomes for Black students in this country, a southern state. I mean, who knows that? I mean, that's incredible. That didn't come because of the federal government's remarkable administration of Title I. I have deep concerns about how at the federal, state, and local level those programs are administered, but I haven't heard anything from the administration about the future in terms of how we can actually bring an evidence-based approach to the spending of those programs.

I have ideas on it, but I'd like to hear a little bit more of that conversation. And not just from them, by the way, from all the organizations that represent the states or represent the school systems. The Council of Chief State School Officers represent the states. There's organizations that represent the school boards and the superintendents. There's really not been much talk about what the opportunity is that comes next on the other side of, Governor, to your question, whatever it is they're going to do with the department, and that is something that should trouble us.

**Bill Haslam:** John, I think one of the things that would bother all three of us is not just the discouraging results, but the fact that nobody seems to care. Let's just say somebody that's listening here and they don't have children in the school system, why should they care about the education results in our K-12 system in this country?

**John White:** There's not a viable society in the history of humanity that has shrunk in terms of its skills and its knowledge base. I mean, if you think about the heart of a society being the extent to which people believe, have a shared set of beliefs, and have the ability to communicate as well as innovate, those three things, you simply can't survive without that. I mean, I think for years we coasted on this, and I was a big part of that, a big beneficiary of it, on the international competitiveness argument that the Cold War fueled and on the civil rights argument, the equality arguments that the civil rights movement fueled. I think those days are over. I think clearly, and we can see this in a lot of other areas, people aren't so interested in those philosophical dimensions anymore.

But somehow we do have to be interested in more than just our kids. We have to be interested in the welfare of all kids for the sake of our society. It is an existential matter. This country survives on a knowledge economy. You're talking about a world where we're going to have fewer immigrants and a less educated population. I don't see how that society survives in the long run if you follow those two mantra, plain and simple.

**Bill Haslam:** John, one of the questions we ask all of our guests is around this Howard Baker statement of always remember the other person might be right. Can you think of an area, particularly on these education, maybe particularly even education reform ideas, that you

thought, "I didn't exactly have that right. The other person might've been more right than I was on that?"

**John White:** Yeah. I think when we were creating structural change in New York and in New Orleans, and I have to assume that in Memphis, a lot of this came up too, I think I didn't hear clearly enough for years, because I was so hell bent on this and earnestly moral case that kids who can't read, kids who can't do math, they're getting the shaft, and it's my job to do something about it.

And I wasn't quite hearing that not all of the objection was politicians who were just in it for themselves and wanted a microphone or wanted a check or wanted to appease the union or whatever it was. Some of it was people who were afraid of losing the social fabric in their communities, the name on the school door, the job that had been their mom's job and their grandmom's job in a southern world that didn't always offer a lot of jobs to folks that looked like them.

And that wasn't just a naive 35-year-old not hearing it. It was a zealotry that I had adopted, that many had adopted in those times. Governor Haslam, you may remember this, I had a very strong partnership with our governor, Governor Bobby Jindal, who did a lot of great things in Louisiana. He and I had a bit of a falling out when his position on the Common Core State Standards changed, which was a movement to assure that Tennessee and Louisiana had some shared sense, and Massachusetts and California and everywhere else, some shared sense that kids should be able to do basically the same things at a minimum.

And Governor Jindal started taking issue with that, I think largely for reasons of his own politics. And who was it who stepped in to talk with me about it? It was Black Democrats in Louisiana. We forged a coalition of centrist Republicans and Black Democrats that in our state makes up more than a third of our legislature.

It really was quite moving actually to see my own kind of politics shift from the I think ephemeral politics of zealotry and technocracy to a more enduring, at least for the time, a more enduring centrist coalition that tried to get back to some of the arguments about fairness, just fairness, that Black Democrats had been making to me on the streets of New Orleans or New York City. And it didn't change, I don't think, my beliefs about whether it was right to have a charter school over a struggling, failing school. It didn't change my belief about the Common Core State Standards or anything else, but it did change– it opened my heart a little bit to be a little more patient. And I'm blessed for that experience, as well as just working in diverse communities, rural, suburban, urban, Black, white, and everything else. I mean, I'm so blessed for that.

**Bill Haslam:** Well said.

**Phil Bredesen:** Thank you very much. This has been great.

**Bill Haslam:** Hey, John, thanks, like I said, for not just this, but you literally have been, in my

mind, one of the leaders in educational issues now for three decades in the country. And we appreciate the insight and all the effort you've put into it. Thanks so much.

**John White:** Feeling is mutual. Thanks for having me.

**Bill Haslam:** Thanks.

Well, Phil, we actually have a bonus guest on education. One of our earlier guests, Rahm Emanuel, who spoke to us on foreign alliance, also has some clear thoughts on education, and we're going to welcome him back. It's the first time we've done this, but I think it'll be worth it.

**Phil Bredesen:** I think it'll be good. Very helpful.

**Bill Haslam:** So Ambassador, let me ask you the first question. What we've seen recently is our NAEP scores, the Nation's Report Card, have abysmal is too nice of a word for the results that we've seen. And then maybe what's even more terrifying than that is it doesn't seem like anybody cares or is paying attention to it. What do we do to, A, change things so kids really do get back on a learning trajectory and how do we make the nation care?

**Rahm Emanuel:** Well, all three of us in one point or another, as I used to joke, I used to be 6'2 and 250 pounds and after what I had to do to get done on the school day in kindergarten, I'm now 5'8 and 148 dripping wet. So first and foremost, I mean, I've always viewed there's three doors a child walks through that's essential not only for their education, but their moral character, front door of the home, front door of the school, and the front door of the place of worship.

That child is going to be as good as the weakest door is in that area. And we have to invest in both the home and also in the activities. 80% of a kid's time is outside of the classroom, so you have to invest in that 80 if you want the 20 to succeed. I think part of the thing is we have to get back to the fundamentals around education. I actually think it's not harder.

And when I say that, both the scores in Mississippi on reading, the scores in Alabama on math, the fundamental approach that they took, and more importantly than the fundamentals, the time they took devoted to that subject. When we extended the school day and the school year in Chicago, it provided reading times – I'm doing this by average – went from 40 minutes a day up to a little over an hour and et cetera. That's how the reading scores went up. That is also true about what happened with times allocated to math. And then early intervention by doing one-on-one tutoring.

I look at both of you. You know this as two governors. You'd have scores like we have today post-COVID. There used to be a national emergency meeting of the Governors Association. Okay, what are we going to do? Now, you can say whatever you want about Ronald Reagan's Nation at Risk or President Bush's Leave No Child Behind or President Obama's Race to the Top. I would call all the governors in and mayors, educators and say, "I want by the end of the

summer a blueprint. What are the five things every school district has to do? I want a report card on what you've done to implement them. And I would go so far, if the president wants to expand the authority of the Department of Education, your national money from the Feds will be tied to seeing you implement these five things statewide." And I would be that strong about it.

I take this, I mean, as somebody who extended both pre-K kindergarten to every child, an hour and a half, hour and 15 minutes every day, our kids basically have gone unilaterally to a four day school week. The absentee rates in the United States are almost triple coming out of COVID when they were before. Look, I mean, the data is very clear. Kids can't learn if they're not in school. I mean, I can keep going, but it's not to go through my trick book of what we did in Chicago.

Democrat, Republican presidents, I would call an emergency meeting of the governors with attendance of the mayors and the education committee of the mayors, I would bring some educators, and I would say, "I want to see a blueprint, a checklist of the 10 things every state and city have to adopt. And I'm going to tie your money to implementation of those."

I think we all know the suburban districts are going to be different than urban districts. So in urban district, I want to see more one-on-one time in tutoring because you got to do early intervention. It's very clear when you have poverty, you have a whole set of situations that require a level of attention that a well-to-do suburban district doesn't have. But those are just off the top of my head things that I would do.

**Bill Haslam:** How do we get people's attention? I mean, one of the things that struck me is our school board meetings finally got people coming to them, but it was because they wanted to argue about masks versus no masks, et cetera. They weren't nearly as concerned about test scores. How do we raise the alarm, raise the awareness on this? What's national leadership look like?

**Rahm Emanuel:** Well, national leadership, these are the days, you know, in the past, if I was sitting in the White House and you decided you wanted to make this a big issue, you would either do one of three things, an Oval Office address, a national prime time press conference with these NAEP scores, or at the Blair House convene X amount of governors, X amount of mayors representing both Ds and Rs of both segment with educational experts. I'm going to lock the door.

We're going to do Chicago style. You're not going to get anything but pizza until you come out with a report. Nobody walks out of here. No bathroom breaks. And you're going to get us a checklist that everybody has to adopt. They can mold it. But we got to see X minimum standards in reading, X minimum standards in math. And it's pretty clear time on topic, going back to the basics, works.

When you tear apart Mississippi and Alabama– And this is the other thing I would say, a caveat. I'm interrupting myself. Mississippi and Alabama prove all the excuses people give to

demographics. If I had told you pick 50 states, which one would be leading in math revolution and which one would be leading in reading revolution, I got to be honest, and this shows my bias, I wouldn't have said Mississippi and Alabama.

And they've proven that. And so to me, national leadership is about saying, "Time out. Everybody stop. Put balls and sticks down. We got a national crisis." And I would say this as a Democrat, and I wrote this in The Washington Post, "You can't be a party that believes in equity and be complacent with one- third of your kids being able to, rather two-thirds of your kids not being able to read and do math at grade level.

You just can't believe in equity. You tell me how you get from A to B when kids can't read and do math. It's not possible. Being complacent about it means I'm leaving that kid in a position or that child for the rest of their lives who doesn't get a do-over, will always be second tier economically. This idea that we as a party, and this drives me crazy, walk around about believing in equality and equity, and we don't talk about our kids are failing at the basics in academics.

Nobody has ever succeeded by being dumb or failing, they're not dumb, that's a bad way to say it, of failing academically has succeeded otherwise in life. And so to me, it's a national crisis that requires national leadership. And I think you guys are doing a podcast together. You ran on different parties. I guarantee you, you have 90% overlap on education, and I don't know everything about your records.

**Bill Haslam:** Nope, that's pretty true.

**Rahm Emanuel:** And I bet you, if you put my record with yours, we'd probably get about 80% if I did it by me to you, Governor, me to you, Governor, or all three of us. There's some basics here that don't require a Democrat, Republican spend. And I also think, as I saw you shaking your head, both of you, we know that high school is the time in which we lose our kids. So you got to change the high school so it engages kids as much as that telephone engages them. And you got to basically decide, I believe not every kid could go to college, but every kid's education can't end at 18, which is where we are.

**Phil Bredesen:** You've talked about several things, and I wanted to just give you, or ask you, to really focus in on a specific question. I've always thought that the most important thing you can do when treating some problem is to start out by diagnosing it very carefully. That if you're really careful about diagnosing what the problem is, that gets you halfway to the solutions.

And you've talked about a number of things, but if I ask you the question today, okay, scores are going down. I mean, there's a lot of issues and we've touched on them. I won't repeat them. But what is the diagnosis or what is the problem? What is not happening in the school systems that needs to be fixed?

**Rahm Emanuel:** Well, one is, and I think based on everything I've read about the two of you

individually, you're right to say, "Okay, what is the problem?" But we also both, I think all three of us, look hard at data and then try to analyze what is the adjustment you would make. One, you can't replace time. There's no shortcut.

**Bill Haslam:** Right.

**Rahm Emanuel:** Our kids and parents because of COVID and bad habits, and you can see it in the workplace, but it's also at school, our absenteeism now is in the high teens. It used to be in the single digits. It's now double. I'd have a national standard as it relates to keeping kids, getting them to go five days a week to school and not having the fifth day be arbitrary. Two, I would reinstitute, we did this both on Freshman On-Track and third grade, early interventions when you start to track problems.

Three, I would set a minimum standard on reading and math and writing in the sense of both quantity of time and the instruction going back to basics. Four, as it relates to the early intervention, I would make sure that, and I'm sensitive because 84% of the kids in Chicago come from poverty, that we have early interventions on one-on-one tutoring. Things that all three of us have done with our own children do not happen at homes with an overlay of poverty. It just doesn't. It's not because parents don't want to, they just don't have the agency to do it. Those are the pieces I think make it up.

**Phil Bredesen:** Great.

**Rahm Emanuel:** I want to say, I also looked at your record. It's not too far off from what you tried to do. It's not too far off from what you tried to do, Governor. That's why I said there's a lot of overlap in what we would do.

**Bill Haslam:** That's right. Ambassador, you've been terrific to give us so much time. Like I said, these are really timely subjects, your education insight. And I'm guessing, like you said, one of the things I think we all learned from dealing with education issues as mayors and governors is there's no battles that are quite so fierce as those battles. And we all have a few arrows in our back from those.

**Rahm Emanuel:** I want to tell you one anecdote and then I'll shut up and get off and let go. So once a month, I would go teach a high school class in Japan when I was ambassador.

**Bill Haslam:** Right.

**Rahm Emanuel:** I went around, but I used to do it every Friday in Chicago about once a month. So I'm in Saitama, which is a suburb of Tokyo. It's an English speaking high school, but it's not. It's Japanese. It's a comfortable suburb. But I said to them, I said to the head of instruction, I said, "What's your number one concern?" She looks at me. And I thought, we don't have enough computers for computer science or whatever. She goes, "Our kids lack confidence." I said, "What?"

I said, "I just asked them, how many are going to college? And everybody's hand went up." I said, "How many of them in this school do reading, math, science, and computers at International and Japan?" She said, "Well, 100%." She looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language, and I was. I was speaking English. And I said, "Look, ma'am," I said, "I come from a city where if I can get to 50% doing reading and math at grade level, I'm out there doing the Irish jig and I'm a Jewish kid."

I said, "You guys got to realize, you're–" And think about that. This is a suburb of Tokyo. 100% are going to college. 100% do math and reading at international highest standards. That should be our goal. Our kids are no worse or no better than Japanese kids. That's the expectation of them. That should be our expectation.

**Phil Bredesen:** And as the source of that disparity, is it in the mechanics of teaching or does it lie out in the cultural approach to education?

**Rahm Emanuel:** You mean in Japan?

**Phil Bredesen:** Between the two countries. Is it that we teach differently, or is it that our culture is different?

**Rahm Emanuel:** I'm going to get myself in trouble, not the first time, so I'm going to say it this way. You know how you guys have a debate sometime in Tennessee about homeschooling?

**Bill Haslam:** Right.

**Rahm Emanuel:** Breaking news, every child is homeschooled. Every child is homeschooled. Some have done better than other, and that's not to make a judgment about other people's homes versus other people. Every child is homeschooled. It's where they learn the value of an education. And when we have children that don't have it, it is our responsibility to, unfortunately, have to step in and get kids earlier in an educational environment so they get exactly what the Bredesen, your children, have gotten and my children have gotten.

I'm just telling you, one of the things being away in Japan, it's a homogeneous society. 99% of the population is Japanese. You got four grandparents, two parents, et cetera. Every child is homeschooled. That's my conclusion after being in Japan and studying their education system. And we know it and we have a challenge. We have to step in and help these kids in the earliest time in life.

**Bill Haslam:** Well said, and we'll let that be the last word. You've been incredibly generous with your time. We appreciate it.

**Rahm Emanuel:** I love these subjects.

**Bill Haslam:** Have a great rest of your day. Thanks so much.

**Phil Bredesen:** Thank you. Thank you. Appreciate it.

**Rahm Emanuel:** Thank you. Thanks.

**Phil Bredesen:** I really liked what John White had to say because so many of these conversations about education just strike me as a little on the theoretical side, a little on the academic side, and don't really take into account just some of the political realities of getting changes like this to take place in communities across your state. I just think I've come to believe that among reformers, sometimes a lack of understanding of just what the realities are is one of the impediments to getting these things to work.

**Bill Haslam:** Well, I think you're right. I've always said it's a long way from Capitol Hill to the classroom, sometimes in geography, but very frequently in terms of political philosophy. And everyone involved in the issues needs to understand how hard it is to be in the classroom and how hard it is to make legislative change happen. And I think that's one of the roles of a great leader, is a great leader calls everybody to a better place and helps show them the reason why we have to be there.

**Phil Bredesen:** I remember Tip O'Neill, I think he was talking at the time about the Defense Department under McNamara at the time, but I remember him saying one time, "I just wish one of them at some time or another had run for sheriff somewhere." Just that notion of tying people back a little bit to some of the realities of getting things done at scale in a political environment is sometimes the missing ingredient.

**Bill Haslam:** About my third year in office when we'd been working on a lot of education issues, my daughter became an elementary education teacher in a pretty economically challenged district over in South Carolina. And I remember thinking, listening to her every day helped me as much as all the other conversations I had.

**Phil Bredesen:** Yeah, it's a key issue, and I'm sure we'll be back to it again, but a lot of stuff happening right now.

**Bill Haslam:** I hope the main message is for folks like we have to get this back on the national agenda. It just has to be talked about.

**Phil Bredesen:** Agreed.

**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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