

Education Freedom and School Choice

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, education, and culture.

Today's Topic is Education Freedom and School Choice.

Our first speaker today is Betsy DeVos who is the former Secretary of Education and the author of the book *Hostages No More: The Fight for Education Freedom and the Future of the American Child*. I hope to learn from Betsy about why school choice will improve educational outcomes. I also want to hear about how COVID changed the relationship between parents and schools, and whether some students might benefit from vocational training instead of a college track curriculum.

Our second speaker will be my buddy Darren Schwartz who is the What Happens Next movie critic. We are going to discuss three films. The first is the documentary *Waiting for Superman* which is about the success of charter schools. We will then review two classic films on teenage angst: the ridiculous comedy classic *Superbad* and the romantic comedy *Easy A*.

Buckle up.

I would like to dedicate this episode to my teachers with a special shout out to my sixth-grade teacher Ken Schlichter, my high school English teachers Cindee Scott and Jean Kelly, chemistry teacher Robert Koonz, as well as my college professors at UPenn: Alan Auerbach, Steve Salbu, Dick De Veaux and Claudia Goldin.

Great teachers have a profound influence on children and their future success. Thanks to all teachers who educate our next generation of students.

Let's now begin with six minutes of opening remarks from Betsy DeVos.

Betsy DeVos:

Thanks for having me on, Larry. I've spent more than 30 years advocating for an idea. I think every single American child deserves a world-class education. If we don't do a better job of educating and preparing our rising generation today, we may not have a country tomorrow. Well before COVID, America's schools were failing millions of children, and they were falling further and further behind. The system has become a giant albatross. The nation's report card, which lists the results of the only nationally administered assessment of student learning, showed the first

recorded decline in math and reading scores for 13-year-olds in the 50-year history of the assessment. And this was before schools were shuttered during the pandemic.

Couple of examples of just how bad things are. The bottom 10% of 13-year-olds saw their math scores fall by 13 points since 2012. So their scores are now the same as they were in 1982. 13-year-old black students saw their math scores fall eight points, while Hispanic students saw a decline of four points further widening the gap with their white peers. Not even high performing students saw any measurable achievement gains pre-pandemic. There wasn't a single bright spot to be found anywhere in the data. No student group of any age of any ethnicity saw their performance improve. Since 2012, most saw declines. And again, this was before COVID shut down schools and the first rounds of data post-COVID show the problem has gotten dramatically worse.

The typically proposed solution is more money, but the data tells a different story. In constant dollars per-pupil spending has nearly tripled since the 1960s. Today, the United States spends on average 37% more per pupil than every other major developed nation. Yet math and science test scores aren't improving. They're declining. The United States does not rank in the top 10 globally on any subject tested. These abysmal results make the obvious case for entirely rethinking our approach to education in America. My solution is education freedom. Education freedom means empowering families to choose how and where the education dollars already designated for their children are spent to fund students, not systems or buildings. It means freeing teachers to innovate and grow in their profession. It means re-empowering the parents behind the podiums at school board meetings.

I've spent a lot of time over the years thinking about education freedom. I've concluded it boils down to one simple question, a question to which even in these hyper-partisan times, conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats of goodwill across the country can agree. And the question is this: who's best situated to make decisions for your child, you or the government? I respectfully posit, parents have the greatest stake in the education of their own children, because no one puts in more work raising a child than his or her own family. So if we can start from there, start from agreeing that parents matter, then the answer to the next question should be equally simple.

Who should choose the school your child attends, you or the government? It's hard to conjure a good faith argument for the government being better situated to make that choice. In what world aren't you better situated to make that choice? Parents know their child, their unique needs, their quirks, their interests, their joys and their sorrows, their strengths, their fears, their ambitions. The government, by its very nature, does not and cannot know a child as a parent does. Not at the school district headquarters, not at City Hall, not at the state capitol. And most definitely beyond a shadow of a doubt not inside the four walls of the U.S. Department of Education.

Government control is rooted in making the system work, not in serving the individual student. Its priorities are in managing buildings and resource allocation and labor contracts in trying to make one size fit all. We know that government school zones strongly correlate to redlining. It's an undeniable fact that lower income students and students of color across our country are assigned to the lowest performing government schools. Every ounce of data bears out that truth. The only intervention proven to change that is school choice. Only when every child has the freedom to find the best educational fit for them can every child flourish. No more being trapped in the one size fits none system; no more being held hostage in a government run union-controlled school building. No more falling through the cracks.

I should note something our opponents often confuse. That's not an inherently anti-public school argument. It's a pro-family argument. It's an argument that free people are better positioned to make decisions for themselves than is a distant government. And it's an argument for innovation in education to look beyond the schools we know today, to the kinds of educational experiences and opportunities that students will need tomorrow. When we do that, we fix the problems that have plagued our schools for decades and give our rising generation those who will inherit and ultimately lead these United States the greatest opportunities to succeed.

Larry Bernstein:

I heard that parents were upset when they observed their kid's classes during COVID. What did parents see?

Betsy DeVos:

Parents had a front row seat and they were underwhelmed with the lack of robust learning that their kids were being exposed to. And in many cases, they were appalled by some of the materials that were being presented to their children unbeknownst to them. I think many of them realized to what limited extent they were able to influence their children's education, even though they may have chosen to buy a more expensive home and live in a good school district. In some cases, the curriculums that their children were participating in were absolutely antithetical to their own family's values. That really has set off the policy changes that are happening today to empower parents with those decisions.

Larry Bernstein:

Years ago, I attended a political fundraiser for Cory Booker when he was running for the first time to be the Mayor of Newark. And in his presentation, he highlighted that Newark's public schools were a catastrophe, and he was going to try something new. What did he implement, was it successful and how did it influence his legislative votes in the US Senate where he currently represents New Jersey?

Betsy DeVos:

Cory was a good friend for many years and we worked shoulder to shoulder to advance education freedom for families. He attempted to do that in Newark as mayor. And was rebuffed in many cases along the way, but was successful in getting a lot more charters introduced into the city. Sadly, he has not continued to advocate for the policy change that he knows firsthand will make a difference for many families primarily of low income means. And has instead really doubled down on towing to the teacher's union's demands to stay in line.

Larry Bernstein:

Why has Cory Booker abandoned Education Freedom's initiatives?

Betsy DeVos:

He wanted to run for President in 2016. And he acknowledged that he was taken to the broom closet by the teacher's unions and told you better get back in line or you won't have a chance. As you know, from reading my book, he did not support me in my confirmation for Secretary of Education. That was really hurtful. He had been a very good friend and ally, and we had served on multiple boards together, and he had spoken for our events speaking very publicly in support of education freedom initiatives. It's very disheartening to see and hear from elected officials who know in their heart of hearts that policies that support these choices for families are the right thing. And yet they are so beholden to the teachers' unions and all of their allies that they continue to do their bidding at the expense of kids. And, I would argue, at the expense of our future nationally.

Larry Bernstein:

Why have you personally been such a lightning rod starting with your nomination to Secretary of Education and then during your term? What is special about you that has created such disagreement?

Betsy DeVos:

Well, being nominated to the role of Secretary obviously put me in a different position than I had been for the 30 years before when I was advocating primarily state-by-state for these policies and these policy changes. But I had gone toe-to-toe with the teachers' unions in multiple other states, so I was known to them. I was viewed as a threat to their good gig basically. They abhor the policy ideas that I have advocated.

Larry Bernstein:

What is the purpose of the US Department of Education? And why did Ronald Reagan try to disband it?

Betsy DeVos:

Well, one quick thing on Ronald Reagan and the Department of Education. The Department of Education wasn't founded till 1979, right before Reagan came in office. Jimmy Carter's payoff to the teacher's union for having supported him for President in 1976. The first time they endorsed a candidate for president, he said, I will establish a Federal Department of Education for you. And it basically has become a political agency for the teachers' unions and all of their allied organizations. The opportunity to get rid of it in its infancy was a real miss on President Reagan's part. What the department does today is it takes billions and billions and billions of dollars as appropriated by Congress, sucks up a bunch of it to pay for itself, and then spits it out to the states and local districts with all kinds of strings attached to it to hopefully at some point help a student at some local level.

The reality is it does not add value to any child's education. We could better take all of that money and appropriate it directly to families to make these decisions for their children. They are only adding requirements and strings and regulations that are detrimental. And in most cases are around an agenda that is antithetical to individual students' needs. I've advocated that we should phase out the Department of Education. At minimum, we should be block granting all of those funds directly to the states and local districts because they're closer to the students they're serving. And we don't need to suck up all the billions of dollars it takes to run the department.

Larry Bernstein:

How will the educational freedom movement benefit students?

Betsy DeVos:

What we've done for the 44 years since the department was founded has not worked. It's actually made things worse yet that despite spending over a trillion dollars at the federal level with the specific mission of closing the achievement gaps. I think you look at that and use the data to say, that's clearly not working, so let's pivot and do something different. We've seen in every other area of life when there's robust competition, things get better and you get much more creativity. The same thing will happen with robust education freedom policies that are well implemented and have enough time to take shape. We're going to have a whole lot more creative approaches to what a kid's K-12 learning experiences can be than we have today. The system we have today is well over 175 years old. It looks roughly the same as it did when Horace Mann brought it to us from Prussia and established it to put kids in one end of the system and turn them out looking the same, acting the same, knowing the same things to go to work in factories. That's not the kind of society that we have today.

Larry Bernstein:

I had Sal Khan speak at one of my events and he discussed his book *The One World Schoolhouse*. He said that kids need to master subjects before moving on. How do you do that in a classroom setting?

Betsy DeVos:

You think about it more in terms of customization for, for each student. I think about the little school that several of my grandchildren are attending. It's an Acton Academy. It's a model where it is very student directed, student led, and you really don't have delineation of grade levels. Students will together write their constitution on how they're going to govern themselves, and then they hold themselves accountable to that. They don't have teachers, they have guides. The guides don't answer questions. They only pose new questions for the questions that are asked of them. And each student sets their goals for themselves. Their classmates hold each other accountable so they can move on as quickly as they can when they've mastered the material.

Many of them use the Khan material, particularly for math. It's really exciting to see how energized those kids are in taking charge of their own learning and to see what they can actually do and accomplish at much younger ages than most adults would think they're capable of. We underestimate kids and we've kept them in a system that bores many of them to death. It's no wonder that there's kids dropping out of school or checking out well before they've graduated when most of what they're required to do is simply memorize or regurgitate a bunch of material.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned the 19th century German education system. My grandfather was born in 1902 and attended a German school in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and he mentioned that at the age of 12, he took an exam where students were split into a vocational or a college track. What do you think of that idea?

Betsy DeVos:

We have vastly underrated and underemphasized vocational education and we've sent very clear messages for decades now that to be successful, you have to go to college. That's changing because the reality is there's many good career tracks that do not require a four-year college or university degree. That's something I'm really proud of the work we did while in office to highlight and expand people's views of what that could look like. I also went to Switzerland where I had the opportunity to learn about their whole apprenticeship model where 75% of the kids in high school are working in some kind of an apprenticeship.

Larry Bernstein:

What vocational programs are working in the US?

Betsy DeVos:

I've been encouraged to see places in states where employers have worked with their community college system to develop meaningful apprenticeship opportunities. It will happen much more organically and quickly in an environment where there's education freedom, where parents are saying, this is what my child really needs and wants. It's not going to happen in the top down, government-run system because nobody will ever agree on what needs to be done where. We know that grassroots and entrepreneurial activity happens best when the most people are empowered to drive those kinds of decisions and that kind of development.

Larry Bernstein:

During COVID, parents started some micro schools, what happened?

Betsy DeVos:

During the summer of 2020 while we were still embroiled in COVID, I visited Arizona late that summer with then Governor Ducey, and we met with a group of parents and teachers and a few students, all of whom had taken things into their own hands because the schools there refused to open.

They created their own little micro schools in the heart of Tucson, in the heart of Phoenix, there were Native American families from one of the reservations that were there, but they were all developing their own answers to what their kids needed. They're going to be able to grow and expand those today because the dollars flowing for their kids' education are going to flow through them to direct that. One of them did have a component around making pottery and building things with their hands. I think we're going to see a lot more creativity in that area.

My husband started a charter school 12 years ago in Michigan, a high school that is focused on aviation. There are 600 kids in high school. Not all of them are going to go into aviation related careers, but through that school, they're getting exposed to a whole lot of ideas and opportunities that they may be interested in pursuing, but it's also a convening idea that turns on their curiosity. It's just an example of the many different ways that we can engage young people and help them to think more broadly about what their future might hold.

Larry Bernstein:

I really enjoyed the documentary film *Waiting for Superman* about charter schools. What were your thoughts on that film?

Betsy DeVos:

Well, it was a very emotive film. Only the hardest of hearts could look and say I'm not at all impacted by the emotion that these families felt when their number was not drawn from the urn.

The solution clearly is policy that supports parents, empowers them to make those decisions with the finances for that child's education.

Larry Bernstein:

The documentary focused on the role of great teachers and innovative teaching methods.

Betsy DeVos:

There is no more important part of the equation than a great teacher in a child's educational experience. The reality is the system today does not reward great teachers. It allows for a lot of mediocrity because it's focused on protecting all of the teaching staff, not on doing what's right for students. I think for good teachers, an education freedom environment will be very rewarding for them because they're going to be able to find their niche and be in an environment that acknowledges them for the important role they have and reward them accordingly.

There's been so many teachers that have quit in the last number of years for a variety of reasons. And I think a lot of them will come off the sidelines again when they have an opportunity to be appreciated for what they have to offer. I had two round tables while I was Secretary with individuals who had been teachers of the year in their state or their local district, and had gone back to their schools hoping to be able to offer more.

All of them had quit teaching within about six months of their recognition. And almost to a person, it was because they felt underappreciated, frustrated.

Larry Bernstein:

I did an episode of this What Happens Next podcast in September 2022 with Jason Bedrick on secular intolerance of Jewish religious education. There had been a New York Times expose that attacked the more religious yeshivas for not teaching secular subjects. The Yeshiva's focus was on teaching languages like Hebrew, Babylonian Aramaic and Yiddish with less emphasis on English, and religious education more so than math or science. Some of the experts in New York Public Education were unhappy with that balance.

Betsy DeVos:

I think that's where parents have to be empowered to make those choices and decisions with and for their children. Health and vitality, that is not the purview of the government, that is the parent's purview. I think New York State has been totally off base on this. I had the privilege to visit a Yeshiva school while in office and also a Jewish girls' high school. I was the first Secretary to ever visit a Jewish school period.

We went into the Torah room and I thought, this is amazing that these young men are learning Hebrew and are able to communicate in a language that I wouldn't have the first clue about being

able to utilize. The focus on parents having those decisions was one of the founding principles of our nation. The right to practice your faith, the right to speak freely. Those rights have got to be protected and honored.

Larry Bernstein:

You were the Secretary of Education during COVID. What did you get right? What did you get wrong?

Betsy DeVos:

What we got right was the total focus on trying to make sure the system and families had everything they needed for kids to get back to school as quickly as possible. We've seen now how intentional the teacher's union leaders and many of their allies were in holding kids' hostage to get agenda items for themselves that had nothing to do with COVID. It had everything to do with agendas that were adult oriented and, in many cases, not oriented to education at all. This year the Chicago Teachers Union is out on strike again. And to me, it's just unconscionable that policymakers continue to fund and support a system that has proven itself incapable of educating kids and unworthy of our tax dollars.

Larry Bernstein:

School choice started in states like Wisconsin and Illinois, and it was a hotly debated topic in your State of Michigan. But recently school choice ended in Illinois. School choice is proliferating in red states, and retreating in blue states.

Betsy DeVos:

I was very sad to see what happened in Illinois, sad for those 9,000 plus students that are now going to be forced back into schools that failed them to begin with. It's really unconscionable to me.

Pennsylvania might be a purple state that is really on the cusp of having some massive expansion in their education freedom policies. They have a Democrat governor who pledged during the general campaign to support the expansion of school choice education freedom. There's a lot of folks in Pennsylvania working hard to make sure that happens, and that'll be interesting. But I do think if it does set up to be a red state, blue state thing. We're going to see more families making choices and decisions on where they live based on how they can influence their children's education.

Larry Bernstein:

What did you do for your kids' education?

Betsy DeVos:

When my oldest son was about to start kindergarten and I was looking around to see where we were going to send him. I found this school down in the heart of our city, Grand Rapids Michigan, and it's a little Christian school that serves the families in that neighborhood, almost all minority, low-income families. It was founded by a group of students from the college I went to. And yet today they have to raise 90%+ of the operating funds for that school from benefactors in the broader community because those families can only afford about 10% of what it takes to operate that school. I realized that for every family that had a child in that school, there were 10 or 20 other families in that immediate vicinity that would've loved to have their children in a place like the Potters House. And that's what really set me off on this now 35-year journey of advocating for these families because the policies have not supported them. The policies have supported a system that's geared around adult issues and adult interests, not geared around what's right for kids.

Larry Bernstein:

Betsy, what are you optimistic about?

Betsy DeVos:

I am very optimistic about the future for K-12 learning and education because of the momentum around policies that are supporting parents making these decisions and choices for their kids around education freedom. The future is bright because we've got lots of creative people who can now deploy their creativity and entrepreneurial skills in an area that has been closed to them for so many years and so many decades. I'm very optimistic about what that will mean ultimately for our country's future.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Betsy. We're now going to turn to the second part of this episode. We're here with the What Happens Next Film Critic Darren Schwartz. Welcome back to the show.

Darren Schwartz:

Hey, Larry. Thanks for having me.

Larry Bernstein:

I wanted to pursue the role of education in Hollywood films and documentaries. Let's start with the documentary *Waiting for Superman*. This is a 2010 documentary about charter schools. Tell us about it.

Darren Schwartz:

Well, it's a movie by Davis Guggenheim, who was an Academy Award-winning director who directed *Training Day*. And he tackles the disaster of public school in the inner city and the

opportunity of charter schools to change the game. And how the teachers' union really is this ankle weight that holds the whole system down. There are a few people that have actually made progress, but it has been difficult and ultimately the system is really failing millions and millions of kids.

Larry Bernstein:

The hero of the movie is Geoffrey Canada. He runs the Harlem Academy. Right. Tell us about our hero.

Darren Schwartz:

He's a great hero. grew up in a single parent home in the projects. The title of the movie comes from when his mom told him when he was five, I think, said, honey, there's no Superman. And he was devastated and he freaked out. And he said, it wasn't like when he was told there wasn't a Santa Clause. He was sad because it meant nobody was coming to save him. Like he knew even at five, like "Hey man, this is bad stuff. I need someone to save us." And, he became kind of the Superman. He said, we're going to fix it. Ultimately, he chose the 97 worst blocks in Harlem and said, we're going to do education a different way. We're going to have a commitment. We're going to have kids live on campus. There'll be longer hours work, you know, Saturday. And they got tremendous results.

Larry Bernstein:

What's unusual here is we have all sorts of buy-in. We have the buy-in of the students. Yeah. We have buy-in by the parents, and we buy-in by the teachers. Yeah. And they're committed that these kids are going to go to college. Right now, it's not a broad spectrum, so it's sort of a unique group. These people have applied to a special institution, were accepted. If they misbehave, I presume they can get tossed. And so that threat, both the carrot and the stick are much more in play than would be available at public schools. Right. So, it may not be replicable for the entire city, but it could be replicable for tens of thousands of kids.

What did you notice in the classrooms between these charter schools in New York and the public schools?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, the kids in the charter schools, they were just eager, they were alert, they were paying attention, they were raising their hands, and they were participating. And the teachers were vibrant. They were engaged. You can tell, you look at someone in the eyes, you can tell if they're engaged or they're not. Like, I'm looking in your eyes right now. You are engaged.

Larry Bernstein:

I'm a hundred percent.

Darren Schwartz:

You're here. I'm all in. Do people know we're doing face-to-face for the first time? Love it. It's amazing. In the public school, there was a lot of mishigas or not and it was just like a zoo and the teachers weren't engaged and there were some like secret recordings that people did, and like, the teachers were sleeping or not paying attention or playing cards and people were just playing craps. So, the difference was pretty stark.

Larry Bernstein:

Dr. Evil. Yeah. In *Waiting for Superman*. Yeah. It was Randi Weingarten the head of the American Teachers Union? Yeah. Tell us about Dr. Evil.

Darren Schwartz:

Let me just first say this. I'm the *What Happens Next* Movie Critic. I'm a sales guy. I'm an author, I'm a musician.

Larry Bernstein

You're a creative.

Darren Schwartz:

I'm a creative guy with those last few things have massive asterisks. What I saw in the movie, and I'm certainly not an expert in education, but she does come off as someone who controls this massive lobby, this massive union who don't want change. And education is on a massive decline. She is the person who has control over people that want to have change. And, it's like a veto. Anything that wants to be different or any change to tenure, they've said no.

Larry Bernstein:

We just called you a creative. But I also think you're a businessman.

Darren Schwartz:

I'm a businessman too.

Larry Bernstein:

You are absolutely a businessman. Okay. So, in business, when someone's not doing the job, what do we do?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, ultimately you fire them, you fire their ass, but you certainly there's a plan, "Hey, let's put together a plan. If you don't do this." But ultimately you can't do it. Get out. Good luck.

Larry Bernstein:

Could they do that in public schools?

Darren Schwartz:

So, here's the thing that's crazy, and again, I didn't know any of this. So, you for the most part, can't really fire. You're a teacher, once you have tenure, which only takes two years to get. And so, they have what's called this in some school districts, the dance of the lemons. At the end of the year, teachers are evaluated in the bottom group. They say, okay, you're going from this school, school A, you're going to go to school B. And the school B says, okay, we're going to take our lemons and take 'em to school C. And you just shift it around, you shift all the crap around and just hope they're going to do better at another school. And it, it just never works. And in New York, this is the best story of how horrible this is. If you are deemed a poor teacher, excessively late, if you've been charged with sexual abuse, you go to something called the Reassignment Center.

Larry Bernstein:

What goes on there?

Darren Schwartz:

It sounds very Orwellian, but you go, you sit in a room for seven hours amongst your other peers who are really bad at their job, and you can play cards, you can sleep, you can do whatever you want. You, and you get paid a hundred percent of your salary while your case is being determined. And guess how long it takes for your case to be determined?

Larry Bernstein:

A lifetime?

Darren Schwartz:

Three years.

Larry Bernstein:

Okay

Darren Schwartz:

And this costs the State of New York, a hundred million dollars a year,

Larry Bernstein:

Betsy DeVos was saying that this movie showed the problems of public schools Yeah. But didn't really provide a solution. Do you agree?

Darren Schwartz:

I don't agree. I mean, I think the purpose of the movie showed what a big problem there is, but it also showed, here's how you can get out of it with success stories like KIPP Academy and Harlem Academy. And then it also showed that that progress butts up against the teacher's union. So there is a path, but there's also is the Dr. Evil union. That's what you're shown in the movie.

Larry Bernstein:

There was another hero of the film, and that was Michelle Rhee, the Chancellor of Washington DC Schools Yeah. Tell us what the movie told us about that.

Darren Schwartz:

Well, they certainly made her look like a star. She came in, she was given broad sweeping powers over the school system, and she came in like a fireball, and she immediately fired 266 teachers. She fired 20% of the principals. She even fired the principal of her daughter's school.

Larry Bernstein:

Take me through that conversation.

Darren Schwartz:

I don't know what it was. Probably something like, um, mommy, where did Principal Smith go? Um, well, sorry, honey. Principal Smith wasn't doing his job, so I had to, can his ass, go to bed. <laugh>. But she was a badass. And she got results, but people were continually pushing back, you know, it was like 14% achievement, 17% achievement, you know, math and in English. And then her big plan, she rolled out, she said, okay, everybody, we want, teachers are underpaid. So, you can keep the same system where you have tenure, where it's kind of hard to fire you. And we'll give you a bump from let's say 50 to 60,000. Or you can go with the big plan and you get rid of tenure, but we're going to pay you \$130,000. It was this massive jump finally saying, we appreciate and understand and value teachers. And the union said, "Nope, we're not going to talk about it." We're not even going to vote about it. People were yelling and screaming in these meetings, but she literally was trying to follow the plan that had worked elsewhere, and she got shut out.

Larry Bernstein:

What did she say she realized from that experience?

Darren Schwartz:

She said that she realized that the school was being run for the adults and not for the kids.

Larry Bernstein:

There was a lot of facts in this film *Waiting for Superman*. What statistics did you find most fascinating?

Darren Schwartz:

There was a lot of good stuff in there and because it really helps to put it in perspective versus anecdotal information. So, one of the charts compared the top 29 countries, their top 5% of the students within each country. And at the top was Belgium, Japan, Korea, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. And the US was 23rd ahead of only Spain, Italy, Turkey, Portugal, Greece and Mexico. And apparently what we have in common with all those countries is that our kids are idiots.

Larry Bernstein:

A famous Stanford Professor Eric Hanushek who did an analysis, and he said that what was holding us back were the worst five to 10% of the teachers.

Larry Bernstein:

If we got rid of them, we could be even Steven. Yeah. With the Belgians and the Finns. Right. What do we need to do to get rid of these guys?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, I think the theme of the movie is that the union has too much power and you just are not able to get rid of a teacher. You remember that one scene with a guy? Walk through the process to put a teacher on notice. There are 30 things. You got to fill it out. You got to have five people meeting with someone for a week, and then you, and it's just almost impossible. There's just no incentive to do that. The energy to even participate in that. It seems overwhelming. So it's got to be connected to funding and money. I have no idea what it is, but it certainly seems like the union and the current status of tenure is a problem.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's move on to other great Hollywood films to help us better understand K-12 education. Let me throw some movies at you. We're currently in Glencoe Illinois. And this is the New Trier school district where I went to high school. John Hughes grew up and was raised in this community, and he made many films, *16 candles*, *Breakfast Club*, *Ferris Buehler's Day Off*, *Home Alone*, *Uncle Buck* all set in this lovely community.

Darren Schwartz:

Did he make *Uncle Buck* really?

Larry Bernstein:
He made Uncle Buck. Have you seen Uncle Buck?

Darren Schwartz:
A couple times.

Larry Bernstein:
What did you make of Breakfast Club and what does it tell us about the state of suburban schools 40 years ago?

Darren Schwartz:
Well, I, first of all, I remember getting a winning free ticket to see the Breakfast Club Premiere at the Town Theater in Southfield, Michigan, Greenfield Road near 11 Mile. My friend Craig Lipton called in and won free tickets. And, we all went and it really bothered me.

Larry Bernstein:
In what way?

Darren Schwartz:
It was in one room, right, for the most part. And I just felt suffocated. I don't know what it was.

Larry Bernstein:
Sure, the kids felt suffocated. They spent the whole day there.

Darren Schwartz:
Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:
Judd Nelson. Did he belong in that room?

Darren Schwartz:
For sure. Totally. Super angry, but again, what's going on at home that kind of comes out.

Larry Bernstein:
Overbearing father.

Darren Schwartz:
Yeah. And the girl Ally Sheedy with the hair and the what's going on there? I didn't know that there was something really called the Breakfast Club in real life.

Larry Bernstein:

Yeah. That was a New Trier thing. You act up, you misbehaved. Guess what?

Darren Schwartz:

Breakfast Room.

Larry Bernstein:

Breakfast Club.

Darren Schwartz:

Breakfast Club. Right.

Larry Bernstein:

When we sat down to think about this program Yeah. You said, we got to include other great teenage angst films. Right. And I said, "Like what?" You said Superbad.

I said, I haven't seen it. You said Impossible. I said, no, I haven't seen it. You said this was one of most important films of the century. Tell us about Superbad.

Darren Schwartz:

Well, to clarify, again, I'm not an expert at education on either side of the aisle as a student or as a teacher.

I am expert at Teenage Angst. So, the biggest connection I saw was that they both had the word Super in the movie, Waiting for Superman. So, we're Superman and Superbad Right. And that, that was really how I kind of worked.

Larry Bernstein:

It ties it together.

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah. So, I think one of the all-time funny movies about being in high school and Jonah Hill and Michael Cera were hysterical.

Emma Stone was in it. And she was fantastic. And whatever, i don't think there's any connection, anything, any parallels we could draw from Superbad which is funny. And the education disaster that is pointed out in Waiting for Superman.

Larry Bernstein:

Certainly, these seniors were not taking school very seriously.

Darren Schwartz:

But they all got into college anyways. They already got in.

Larry Bernstein:

Yeah. Michael's character had gotten into Dartmouth. As had McLovin. What was your favorite scene in the movie?

Darren Schwartz:

I mean, there's just things you can't talk. I'll say that the Jonah Hill's artistic endeavors, his drawing, his prolific drawing of some of the male organ. Well, we can't even say that on here. Right? I think we can. Okay, fine. Yeah. It's, it's, it's from a movie. It was hysterical. He actually did, and I haven't looked it up. He said that, you know, 8% of kids draw the male organ.

Larry Bernstein:

I don't believe that's true. So that was a made-up statistic that I've never heard of it before.

Darren Schwartz:

That was an amazing stat. I loved all the interactions between the cops and McLovin.

Larry Bernstein:

My mother doesn't know who McLovin is. Who is he?

Darren Schwartz:

McLovin was his fake ID name, his real name was Fogell, right? And he's the kid that they entrusted to go get his fake id. He got his fake ID that showed his driver's license was from Hawaii, his address, and his name was just McLovin.

Larry Bernstein:

There's no first name.

Darren Schwartz:

He made no sense. But it was amazing.

Larry Bernstein:

Darren, you're a parent.

Darren Schwartz:

Yes. Well, I mean, it's not like I just had a kid. Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

I'll tell you about my situation. We get the mail. And I open it up and its chopsticks. So, I put it on the counter. I say, "who ordered the chopsticks?" I asked my wife, "did you want these chopsticks? She says, "No. It just garbage."

Darren Schwartz:

I want to clarify when you say chopsticks, you mean chopsticks that you would eat food with chopsticks? Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

So, it was like ornamental chopsticks.

Darren Schwartz:

Got it. Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

So, Julie decides she's going to throw it away, but on the way to the garbage can, Julie somehow drops the chopsticks and out spills four fake IDs. Two for Hannah.

Darren Schwartz:

Amazing.

Larry Bernstein:

Two for her best friend Elizabeth. And Hannah used her full name Hannah Bernstein on the fake id. And Julie got angry and said, you can't have your own name. This is the road to disaster. It should be something like McLovin. What was your experience?

Darren Schwartz:

In terms of fake IDs? Yeah. Well, I'll give you a story from my growing up. Okay. I was with a friend of mine and we were in a car and we got pulled over. And I'm just cut to the chase here. That I had fake id. My college roommate, or at the time we were in college, we were 18. He changed the number seven. Cause I was born in 67 to a two. And this guy was a genius. Okay. he's an artist. And, but I had two ideas. I had my normal one, and then a fake one. And my friend Mike, he just had one.

It said he was born in 1962. For whatever reason, whatever mishigas happened, we were in the back of the cop car. They say, guys, come on. Give us your ID. I give him my ID. They say, okay, give us your ID to my friend. And I know now he's screwed because he's got two options. You can say, listen, I was born in 1962 and I'm 23. I'm hanging out with this 18-year-old.

Everything's fine. Nothing weird here, <laugh>. Or say, listen, it's a fake id. I'm sorry. You know, I admit it. So, he gives him the ID. He's just pouring sweat. And he looks, I mean, he's like a deer in a headlight. Like I've never seen. He's just pale white and just desperate. And they look at his ID, they pass it back and forth, kind of like they did with McLovin. Yeah, yeah. Almost. Exactly. And they say, okay, um, Mr. So-and-so, what year were you born? He's got two options, Larry. They're 67 or 62. Right. 1963. <laugh> and all the three of us. Cuz that was a team, me and the two cops, and were dying. And he looked, I mean, he looks like he's just trying to get out of there. That's my story.

Larry Bernstein:

Even in Superbad with McLovin. The cops knew all along that the ID was a fake.

Darren Schwartz:

They loved him.

Larry Bernstein:

There are these ridiculous, arbitrary parts of growing up, making things illegal that shouldn't be.

Darren Schwartz:

Like murder.

Larry Bernstein:

You've recommended Easy A, this is the Emma Stone film.

Darren Schwartz:

I did not, I agreed to watch it.

Larry Bernstein:

Why are we watching Easy A as part of this podcast?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, primarily because you said, I said Superbad. It's the same as Superman. And you said Easy A I said, well that makes sense. So, we watched it.

Larry Bernstein:

It's a cute romantic comedy.

Darren Schwartz:

Yes. Fine. I thought Emma Stone was fantastic. Crushed it. It was based on *The Scarlett Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. It was interesting. I mean it covered the nastiness of kids in high school and gossiping. There's zero reason we should even include this in the podcast.

Larry Bernstein:

Well, what I thought was interesting is I did a call with the interns of *What Happens Next* for preparation for this podcast, we had two males and two females. Both females had seen *Easy A* and loved it. But had not seen *Superbad*. And the two males had not seen *Easy A* but had seen *Superbad* and thought *Superbad* was one of the great films of all time. They both loved McLovin who was their favorite character. I'm surprised because my favorite character was Jonah Hill.

Darren Schwartz:

They were just all so good. I mean, Jonah Hill, I'd have to say that, I mean, maybe a slightly ahead would be Jonah Hill, then Michael Cera, and Christopher Mintz-Plasse as McLovin. I mean it was amazing. They're all great.

Larry Bernstein:

Who was the real genius behind this *Superbad*?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, I like writers. I'd say Seth Rogan and Evan Goldberg.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you feel about Seth Rogan also being one of the police officers in the film?

Darren Schwartz:

He's great. I mean, he's great across the board. Genius.

Larry Bernstein:

How do films help us better understand our lives?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, I don't know, but I certainly think that sometimes it is just escape.

Larry Bernstein:

You are the film critic for *What Happens Next*. Yeah. It's a big responsibility. You know that, right?

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah.

I don't think Dances with Wolves helps me define or figure out my life. I mean, sometimes they just are in no way connected. I think sometimes it's an escape. But if you connect with a character, because of how they're thinking or feeling. I think that gives you a way to experience something else.

Larry Bernstein:

Who did you connect with in Superbad?

Darren Schwartz:

Michael Cera.

Larry Bernstein:

Who did you connect with in Easy A?

Darren Schwartz:

My first instinct would be to say the woodchuck guy. The guy that was a mascot, but I think probably Stanley Tucci, Emma Stone's father.

Larry Bernstein:

I don't feel like you've answered this question. How can these films help us better understand the crisis in American education today?

Darren Schwartz:

I don't think Superbad or Easy A can help us understand anything regarding the crisis in America.

What did you think of Animal House?

Larry Bernstein:

Loved it. And I think one of the things about Animal House I found most relevant is that today the faculty and the administration think that the problem with universities relate to failures on the part of the administrators.

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

But the thought that the administrator in Animal House, what was his name?

Darren Schwartz:

Dean Wormer.

Larry Bernstein:

The thought that Dean Wormer was going to somehow persuade any of those students to do anything is a joke.

Darren Schwartz:

Right.

Larry Bernstein:

It's on the kids.

Darren Schwartz:

I'll give you one Risky Business.

Larry Bernstein:

Loved it.

Princeton needs someone like Joel. When I went to Penn, President Hackney said, I think the author's got it wrong. Wharton needs a kid like Joel.

Did you send your children to public school?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, interestingly enough, we sent my younger son to private school because he was not doing well in public school. So midway through his freshman year, we sent him to a private school downtown Chicago. And that actually helped. It worked out. But you're paying a lot of money for teachers who are paid enough to really care and who are also good enough to get those jobs. And I think that's an opportunity that most people don't have.

Larry Bernstein:

Darren, did you go to private school?

Darren Schwartz:

I totally forgot that I went to a private school for first and second grade, but I was reminded that I attended Roper in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. I looked it up on their website and it says right on the masthead, a school for gifted children.

Larry Bernstein:

Darren, I've always viewed you as gifted. What happened?

Darren Schwartz:

I don't think that I'm gifted. I talked to them recently to get research on a book that I am writing and they mailed me my file, like my interview and all this stuff.

Larry Bernstein:

What'd you find out?

Darren Schwartz:

They'd probably be surprised how it turned out. They thought I was very bright.

Larry Bernstein:

And who let you down? Was it you or was it the schooling?

Darren Schwartz:

Who? What?

Larry Bernstein:

Who let you down?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, I mean, it was one of those schools where they give you a lot of leeway. I went there first and second grade. And second grade they gave me a math book and I walked up, I said, "Hey I know how to do this already.

They said, "Oh, you know what? If you know how to do things, just go x out those pages." I crossed out the entire book out <laugh>. The next year I go to public school. I was so far behind every other third grader there. They're like, what happened to this kid?

Larry Bernstein:

Darren. What are you optimistic about?

Darren Schwartz:

As it relates to the education, I would say that the fact that people like Geoffrey Canada exist and people are doing that kind of work is pretty amazing because the proof is there.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Betsy and Darren for joining us today. If you missed last week's show, check it out. The topic was Getting Robbed in Midtown.

Two Fridays ago, my wife was out of town, and I went out for dinner at the restaurant Flemings by Bilboquet on 62nd and Madison in NYC. I dined with very close friends, a married couple and the husband is the president of a major public company.

As we left the restaurant, 3 guys on motorcycles raced towards us and attacked us. I was thrown into the street and my friend was robbed of his expensive watch. The three motorcyclists jumped on their bikes and rode off into the night.

Our speaker was Arnette Heintze who worked for the US Secret Service protecting Presidents Bush and Clinton and later ran his own private security and investigative firm. Arnette suspects that the attack might have been an inside job where a restaurant employee worked with professional thieves to make the hit.

I now want to make a plug for next week's show with Annie Abrams who is the author of the new book entitled Shortchanged: How Advanced Placement Cheats Students.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website whathappensnextin6minutes.com.

Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining me, good-bye.