

Diane Tavenner: Hey, Michael.

Michael Horn:

Hey, Diane. It is good to see you as we roll through the fall, as I'm traveling around the country talking a lot about my book, [From Reopen to Reinvent](#). And I'll say, Diane, I am struck by how much each conversation I land in actually feels very similar on the ground with educators, and yet through the media, it feels like we're having hundreds of different conversations where we're talking past each other. And I'll be honest, I'm still trying to puzzle my way through all of that.

Tavenner:

Well, Michael, we might be living strangely parallel lives, because as you know, the theme for my organization this year is leading out of crisis and into the future. Reopen to reinvent, some similarities there. And while my experience is that schools writ large, or school writ large, this year is significantly better than last year, which as you know, was the worst year in my experience. It is decidedly not normal, Michael, whatever.... We always put normal in quotation marks, which takes us to why we even launched this podcast, Class Disrupted. When the Pandemic began, you and I don't want school to ever go back to normal. We want it to be reinvented for a future of our collective making. It does so much more than it has historically. And we continue to be optimist. And so I think we both thought that such a massive disruption would catapult the redesign work, but alas, here we are in season floor, still optimist, but also really pragmatic. And I feel like in some ways we've gotten really pragmatic this season, which is influencing our topics and our approach to what we're doing.

Horn:

Yeah, totally, Diane. And I will say, for those who listen to our last episode, we're going to follow this alternating format for the most part of the season, in which one episode we do a deep dive on how a school on the ground can innovate and continue to follow the pilots that you're doing right now, Diane, and you're allowing us to witness as you do on the ground at summit and see how it unfolds. But on the episodes in between, so this one and every other, we're going to zoom back out to a big topic facing schools right now, similar to what we did last year, and try to pull it apart to see if we can't help find a third way, our classic sort of search for a third way, Diane, through the story that gives educators on the ground something useful to clinging onto.

And so today, we're diving into what remains a very hot fraught topic, which is the topic of "the teacher's shortage." This is something we've addressed on the past on the show, but it remains a big topic. And one reason why is that our researcher friends have been digging into the data and showing nationwide that this story isn't as straightforward as teachers are simply leaving the classroom in mass and there are big struggles to replace them. But before we dig in, and Diane, I can see that you're bursting at the seams to dig in, we wanted to welcome a reporter from the 74, which has been our distribution partner since the day we launched Class Disrupted, to help us understand the current storylines around the teacher's shortage. And today we're welcoming Kevin Mahnken from the 74. Kevin's a senior reporter who, among many other topics that he writes about, has followed and reported on this debate around the teacher shortage and really tracked the different data streams that are out there. And so with that as background, Kevin, welcome to Class Disrupted.

Kevin Mahnken: Michael, Diane, thank you very much for having me. It's nice to be on here.

Tavener: We are really happy to be here with you today, Kevin. And we always come from a place of curiosity, so I'm going to start there. I'm really curious for you to help us trace the storyline through the pandemic into now. It seems like initially the stories of teachers struggling and burning out, combined with the great resignation across the nation, had people really projecting that there would be mass resignations and math teach teacher shortages. And then the story has sort of evolved from that. Can you help us understand what's happened, and what are the data points and the research and the stories that have of changed that storyline?

Mahnken:

That's a good question, and I want to preface it by saying that it's really difficult to get timely data about what's going on in the K-12 workforce. These numbers are generated in really, really big samples slowly, and in tiny unrepresented samples in a much more consistent way. So, depending on what data sources you're looking at, you can get a very deceptive picture of who's leaving the profession, who's entering, and what the general trends are. But I guess what I would say is in spring 2020, you started seeing in the educator economy, as well as the workforce more broadly, big, big swings. I want to say the total number of K12 jobs, which we saw in real time because the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows this broken down by category, a drop by something like 9%. And to contextualize that... I mean, that's a huge number. Anyone can see that. But to contextualize it, it's about twice as big as the drop. We saw after the Great Recession, in the depths of the great recession.

When we saw funding just fall off a cliff overnight, you saw a drop of about twice that size. So, that was around the time when reporters me started to write stories like, are we ever going to see teacher staffing levels coming up to where they were previously? I wrote tons of pieces. Some of them look not great now because we didn't realize that hundreds of billions of dollars of relief funding were kind of coming in over the hill. But the point is, after that initial drop, you started to see a leveling off in the full non-farm economy and in the K-12 workforce generally. So, you didn't see so much, I think in 2020, about teacher shortages, although you did see more resignations right in that spring. It was really not until 2021 when the data, which we only have kind of incomplete data, even of 2021, when it started showing a slight uptick.

I mean, a bit of a teacher turnover uptick last year. And you started hearing from people. I was reporting this stuff, so I was calling superintendents, teachers around the country. You started hearing, we've got job vacancies that are proving very difficult to fill, but I want to make this point. Even then, even a year and a half, two years ago, you really heard more about non-teaching, non-credentialed jobs that were difficult to fill. And I can provide numbers about this too, based on economic surveys conducted by various sources. However, you were hearing more about bus drivers than about social studies teachers. For that matter, you were hearing, even within the teaching ranks, you were hearing more about special education teachers than, for instance, you would ever hear about STEM teachers, shortages in STEM teachers, which have always been the hardest subjects to fill.

So, it was more support staff and kind of the non-typical teaching roles that you saw shortages in. And then 2022 came, and all of a sudden, at the beginning of the 2021, 2022 school year, virtually every American student was back in school for the first time. It was first time you could really say that since the pandemic began. And it was at that time, I think, that the national coverage began running pretty hard with a narrative of a national teacher's shortage. And you guys probably remember the headlines the same as I do.

You were reading about it in the major newspapers. I feel like I was home with my parents this summer and we were watching the seven o'clock news on like NBC, which is the only time I ever do that. And so it was like a splash. It was this out of body experience, because I'm an education reporter. And all of a

sudden, it says there's a crippling teacher shortage. And I was thinking, "Wait, is there? Am I wrong about that. Is the researchers I'm talking to my sources, are they totally off?" And when you start to really see it explode, probably the spring of 2022 with these reports.

Horn:

So Kevin, that actually bleeds right into where I want to go, which is how is the coverage perhaps differed between the mainstream media, how places like NBC have reported on this or the New York Times and how the education trades, the 74 Education Week, the Hechinger Institute and so forth, how you all have reported on this story. Have there been daylight in terms of what people have been reading based on the source they've been reading it from?

Mahnken:

Yeah, there's quite a bit of daylight. It's like the long nights in Iceland, actually, that much daylight, 23 hours of daylight. And it's so unfair, I think, to go after whatever it was, like CBS Nightly News or something because they have an education desk, sure, and there are top flight reporters that are working at major newspapers. However, I do think most of the whiffs kind of came from the mainstream news, which unfortunately, in this instance, is what everybody reads and everybody watches. I mean, we get lots of eyeballs at 74, and our esteem competitors, like [inaudible 00:08:55] or Hechinger, as you said, but the narrative was carried in mainstream news. And I think, again, what they saw was a headline, "Massive teachers shortage. Are your kids going to be affected? Are they going to start the 2022 school year in a classroom that's got 35 kids in it because the district has a crippling teacher shortage?"

So, that's kind of what parents believed. And actually, you can see it in surveys. Another thing I report a lot about is the education politics. And among the major concerns you're seeing from parents at the state level, if you look at these state surveys about what people are concerned about, when they talk about education, a lot of them are talking about the shortage of credentialed teachers. And in some states, they actually are seeing shortages of credentialed teachers. You've seen... I feel like in Florida, there was a lot of news around the law saying that that military personnel and their spouses could teach in classrooms. But across the country, it really is a fact that you didn't see a great resignation of teachers. There was no big quit in the K-12 workforce. It didn't happen.

Tavener:

Kevin, this is fascinating, and you're helping to illuminate this sort of schizophrenic world that I live in between these different reporting sources. I mean, what's the debate, or is there a debate right now about this? What are the raging sort of questions that are happening right now as we're in this next school year? What are people talking about now?

Mahnken:

Right now, there is still a question about what happened to teacher turnover in 2021 and in 2022. And the reason for that is because, as I've stated at the top, state education sources, the state departments of education need time to report the quit rates in various districts around their states. That's only going to become available in a year or two. Now, in the meantime, we do have a few states, I think Massachusetts is among them, might be North Carolina, a handful of states have reported data from 2021 about teacher quit rates. And as I said, they do look like they nosed up from 2020, right at the beginning of the pandemic. But the truth is that we were seeing almost record low teacher quit rates and teacher turnover in the summer of 2020. You almost never see teacher quit rates that low. And it

was... I mean, it's conjectural, but probably the reason for that was, all of a sudden, nobody was hiring that first pandemic summer.

And so naturally, people weren't in a rush to quit their jobs. But the early data suggests that by the time the following pandemic year came around, turnover rates did go up a little closer to their historic averages. I think they're still lower than the pre-pandemic average, but they're basically within the band that we're used to seeing. So right now, we're consulting some federal sources, like the Bureau of Labor Statistics. They've got a turnover and job opening survey. The Census Bureau keeps the current population survey. And so we're looking for stuff like that, and the school pulse panel, for instance, to survey schools and district leaders about, for instance, how many vacancies exist per school or how many vacancies they're seeing. And the latest stuff I've seen has shown basically that there are vacancies. There are higher numbers of vacancies in schools, on average, than there were before the pandemic.

But as probably some guests on this show have told you previously, a lot of that has to do with the fact that after a pronounced dip in 2020, hiring really took off in 2021, and still through 2022. I mean, there are school districts and schools that are still putting new jobs out there. They're hiring or attempting to hire at record levels because they're funded with hundreds of billions of dollars of federal aid. And the way they have used it for COVID learning recovery, whether, for good or ill, is to up staffing levels. So for that reason, you will see much higher numbers of vacancies. So, the question for reporters like me or for analysts like you guys, is to determine, well, what does that mean? Does that mean that you're seeing lots of teachers walk off the job? Does it mean you're seeing teachers retire and just not be replaced, for instance, or something else?

Tavener:

Interesting. And it sounds like you have a bit of a hypothesis there, that maybe we're just seeing more jobs available in the sector than we've ever had and we can't fill all of those.

Mahnken:

Well, and I mean, in fact, that's not even a hypothesis. That's simply the case. We know that job openings have skyrocketed since that first pandemic, summer 2020, and it's very difficult to hire from a finite pool of credentialed educators to fill those. So, it kind of depends. Do you define that as a shortage? There's a large number of jobs that no one can fill, but those jobs didn't exist before two years ago. So, it's hard to say whether that would count as a shortage.

Horn:

I was going to say.... Yeah, no, it's a great question. Just one last question as we wrap up, because you're filling in a lot of knowledge for us right now. I'm curious how the reporting and the information has differed perhaps by region. As in, you've said certain states have reported. There's national conversations that are based on samples here and there. Have we seen different regional coverage in the media of what the teacher shortage, or whatever we call it, has looked like, or is it relatively uniform within trades versus national?

Mahnken:

I haven't really seen differences in how this phenomenon is being reported regionally. I wish that I did see more differences, because from what we can tell, teacher shortages are now and have always been dramatically different based on which region of the country you live in. And the proof of that would come from some data that came out in June through the Federal school Pulse panel, which found you

got an average, according to the survey, of 3.4 teacher vacancies per school around the country, 3.4, but it differs by region. So, in the west, I believe their number was something like 2.7 vacancies per school. But in the American South, which has always struggled to fully staff their schools... I mean, long before the pandemic, you would hear stories in teacher shortages in the south, and across the country more broadly in rural areas. But in the American South, there were 4.2 vacancies per school. That's significantly higher than the national averages reported in that survey.

So, there should be differences in local coverage of teacher vacancies and resignations, but we're not really seeing it. I do think to the extent it's being covered, I have seen some really good coverage in some mainstream press. It came a little bit later, but there was a really good story that PBS put out. The Atlantic had a great essay by Derek Thompson, their kind of [inaudible 00:17:01] columnist about the realities of teacher shortages. And usually, they are specific when they say there are some subject matter shortages in really hard to staff subject areas like math, computer science, and there are also regional charges as well. So, I do think there are glimmers of really good coverage out there that you can find.

Horn:

Super helpful, Kevin. I appreciate you coming on, bringing us up to date on the current storylines, and we just appreciate you joining us on Class Disrupted.

Tavener:

Thank you.

Mahnken:

My pleasure. I love your guys' work. Thanks very much.

Horn: All right. Welcome back from a thorough update on the state of teaching, if you will, in this country, at least as it's played out in the media from that perspective that Kevin has offered. And Diane, I want to go to you because you're a school leader on the ground. I would love your take. I don't think you need to react so much to what Kevin said, but you'll probably pull in strands, but more just tell us your own lived experience right now.

Tavener:

Michael, I think where I want to begin is how the conversation we just had with Kevin, and quite frankly, the coverage of the issue of teacher shortage has made me feel.

Horn:

Okay.

Tavener:

And I know people get weird about feeling sometimes, but I think it's really critical. One of the reasons we're having this conversation right now is a few months ago, back in August, before school started, I made a passing remark to you that I was done reading news coverage on the teacher shortage, not teacher shortage, whatever they were writing about. And of course, you were curious, as you always are. And so here we are having the dialogue. The short story is, Michael, my schools are all in regions that due to a variety of factors have been hit incredibly hard by very real teacher shortages. And I will

say it's not because we've increased the number of positions in our schools, we haven't done that. And so that-

Horn:

You've been intentional about that, I know.

Tavener:

Very intentional. So, this calls me back to season one and a conversation we had with Todd Rose and the critical points made in his book, *The End of Average*, which as you know, is one of my sort go-to books on the bookshelf. I think what we have going on here is that national data is being averaged. And as a result, it maybe doesn't look so bad, or there is these explanations of, "Oh, well you just added all of these positions and so maybe you don't need..." I don't know what that whole line of thinking is, but this is the extraordinary danger of averages, because as Todd has shown time and time again, no one is average. And in this case, no school or system is average, but treating people in systems based on the concept of average is not helpful. And I would argue, Michael, in fact, is quite detrimental.

Horn:

Yeah. So, let me chime in off that Diane, and I say I think it's a really important point you're making. And I will play the role of researcher. I don't think it's fully my identity, but of course, it's something I do. So, from a research perspective, I think it's pointing to a few things that researchers themselves ought to be more careful about, if I can say. So, number one is actually the limitations of data, because by definition, data is only backward looking. It only actually tells you about something that has occurred. And frankly, you heard it from Kevin, it's only convincing about the distant past. So, there's a limited number of conclusions we can reach from data because it's always going to be pulling it back from the past, not the present. And I've seen some articles encouraging more real time data around teacher employment and the like.

And I'll just say, yes, given that teacher contracts live in HR systems and the like, and theoretically they're employed for the school year at least, we should be able to do a lot better than we have. But even still, so called real time labor market information is really a misnomer. It still has a lag. We have the Bureau of Labor Statistics, yes, but it's a monthly report and it has lots of imperfections even within that, where the data will be messy. We can't pull apart what's a bus driver from a teacher, from a... And we can't pull these things apart.

And part of it is like it's not always easy to classify. And we are humans categorizing things, and that is difficult. So, that leads me into number two, which is as a school leader on the ground, trying to lead and manage a school and support teachers and students to work in this context, I mean, I'm just going to be brutally honest, Diane, you probably can't wait for the data to be complete because you're reacting and needing to take actions over the summer when we know that there isn't data, by the way, now in the fall and the like where the data's going to be imperfect, no matter what's done. And this is where Clay Christensen comes in, right? You need good theory that, yes, it's built on data, but for it to really be causal, it's got to take in to what Todd Rose writes about, which it's got to be circumstance based. It's got to go beyond the average.

So, it moves beyond best practices or simple statements of if then, and instead says in this circumstance, so in this region where you're operating, Diane, this is what to do. But hey, when you're in maybe the Midwest or the Northeast where I am, this is a very different context, and this is what's needed. And I just say that because it's not a one to one with your point. But I think when you're in a context where you're facing real shortages and not just those in math and science and special ed, where teachers have

always been scarce, and you can see very clearly that teachers are getting attractive opportunities to join, I'm guessing here, but you're in the Bay Area, to join ed tech companies and tutor, or to teach elsewhere or virtually or maybe closer to where they perhaps live and the housing costs are a lot lower than in the Bay Area. Again, I don't know if I'm nailing all your points, but I suspect that's among them. You need to take different actions. Be that trying new human capital models, or I suppose something else. Diane,

Tavener:

Michael, I want to amplify your point about the quality of the data the researchers are working with, and that Kevin, I think was really honest about the quality of the data that he's reporting on. As you now, as far as school systems go, Summit is fairly sophisticated when it comes to data.

Horn:

Yes.

Tavener:

We have a very robust and skilled team, a data team, an information team, and take our use of data very, very seriously. And so when I tell you that I literally can't get good data on our teaching faculty in real time, it might surprise you, because it's not that giant of a system and we're really good at these things, but that is the reality we're living in because we're experiencing things we've never experienced, Michael. Teachers aren't doing what they've done historically, and I don't think that's getting picked up yet. They're not securing a job in the spring and sticking with it for a full year. You mentioned year long contracts and HR system.

Horn:

Theoretical.

Tavener:

That is just not the reality anymore. Last year, we saw a lot of people fleeing for other industries or just deciding they wanted a full life change, and that was driving some mid-year resignations, which was very weird and strange and not something we've historically experienced. This year, we're seeing long COVID cases that are taking people out, the demands of caring for aging and struggling parents, who by the way, after COVID got hit so hard and everything is turned upside down, the mental health aftershocks of COVID and the pandemic continue to reverberate.

And I would add, along with a level of professional coaching that we have literally never seen and continue to impact our ability to retain teachers throughout the school year. All of this is compounded by an environment where we are using strategies, for example, of moving instructional assistance onto teaching pathways via temporary credentialing processes and all sorts of the of best practices that you were referencing. And that means we've got this completely dynamic workforce, which means the data that I'm trying to look at is changing minute by minute and day by day. And if I can't track it, there is no way a researcher can track it, and there is certainly no way we can be tracking this and rolling this up to a national level. And so I just think it's fantasy to think that what actually people are looking at it is real and indicative of what's happening on the ground.

Horn:

Yeah, I think you're exactly right, Diane.

Tavener:

I also love your point that our theory of actions need to be based on those realities in which we're operating. And this leads to a much bigger conversation about education in general. In education, we seem to have an obsession, Michael, with a one size fits all solution. And I think it comes from this place of equity. We can't do it for one student if we don't do it for all of them. And what that leads to is these conversations that I find myself in where we're offering hypotheses for addressing a problem and people say, "Well, that will work because it's not for everyone," or "That will work because how could it possibly be scaled right out of the gate to a national model that's gigantic," which is... That's just silly to think that you start your very first hypothesis thinking about how it could scale to whatever, we have 50 million kids in school.

And so why can't we get real that there are places who don't have a teacher problem and others that do. I mean, that's my simple obvious fact here. And there are places in America where they are fully staffed with credentialed teachers, many of them experience, and that is amazing. And honestly, I am so jealous of those places. And that is in nowhere near my reality. And I bet those places might have issues that we don't have. We should be looking for differentiated approaches to addressing the problems that each of us have that aren't, by definition, the same.

Horn:

Yeah. Gosh, Diane, I obviously agree so much with this and my mind's ticking. I just want to share two things actually, before moving on to another point, off of what you just shared. One, I had this conversation with [inaudible 00:33:05], obviously who is thinks a lot about learning and so forth, but a point he made to me is we seem so obsessed with scale in this country in the same way that we do software, which is to say, you copy and paste a billion times and you've scaled software. And he's like, "What if scale is more civil engineering," which is to say we take the principles of how we build bridges and buildings and whatever else, but we take into account that your topography is on a fault line. And so that means we build different structures than we do in Boston where we've got snow. And that has different implications in Florida, which has hurricanes, and that has different implications.

And so, yeah, the rules sort of scale, but how we implement them differs widely. And I thought that's a much better model for scale than the way I think we often envision it. And then the second thing that I think that makes me think of when you're talking about the move to national overnight is frankly our last episode where we said, start small, people, and be willing to sunset after six weeks if your pilot is not proving your hypotheses true. And so anyway, your points are really good ones, but I guess I don't want to exacerbate you, but I'm curious. Give us a little more context to what the situation is at present for you on the ground and how it compares maybe to pre-COVID.

Tavener:

Totally fair. Happy to do that, Michael. So, this is feeling a little bit like some nice therapy. We should have rolled in a couch for this episode. So, what our lived reality is that for a second year in a row, every single Summit school began the school year without at least one and up to six full-time teachers. And as you know, our middle and high schools are small by most standards. And so that is anywhere from five to 30% of our teaching positions that aren't filled by a teacher at the start of the year. This is unheard of. In my 20 year, we've never ever had this before. This is not been an issue. Last year was the first year we've experienced something like this, and it is continuing into this year. We were better prepared this year over last year, and so it hasn't felt quite as painful. But what does better prepared me?

I mean, it means we secured long term substitutes because we saw this coming in a way that we hadn't the year before. And we used a variety of other strategies to get people to be legally compliant, adults in classrooms, which if you remember last year, we had essentially every single one of our site administrators teaching for some or all of the year because we got so caught off guard. But Michael, a legally compliant adult does not mean a teacher and a mentor who's equipped to facilitate the learning of our students at the levels expected, and most importantly needed. And that's before we even think about the compounding impacts of the COVID has had. And so the reality has implications on literally every single thing we're doing every single day right now. When you're down teachers, I mean that's everything.

That's what we do. And so oftentimes, I get into these conversations and the place people go is towards tactical advice. And so I just sort of want to head that off at the past right now and say, well, I don't want to diminish the importance of tactics and execution in a situation like this. It's not what I think is important that we talk about. Our team is skilled. They've got a list of literally 23 specific tactics they're employing to not only fill positions, but in ways that are best for serving our students. And in some cases, they are literally exhausting all 23 and still have an open position, Michael. That's the part that I really want folks to focus on. In some parts of our country, there are not teachers to teach our children and there are none insight. And that's just a fact. This is not something I've ever experienced in my career. And it's not one or two, it's a lot. And it's not going to magically go away or fix itself. This is a problem that is here to stay.

Horn:

Yeah, I hear you, Diane, and I think you're right. It's not going to go away, which maybe is where I want to go though, which is, given that reality, what are the innovative solutions we can do about it? And given the circumstances you're in and what you can, and frankly can't control, what's available to you or what could be available to you if perhaps there were just some policy and regulatory adjustments that maybe opened up some pathways to you or whatnot. Obviously, I'll just lead in and say that I'm personally in favor, as you know, of looking a lot more at team-based teaching opportunities that doesn't expect a teacher to have all the skill sets in one person, and maybe even leveraging virtual teaching within person teachers to change things up. But I also know that you do a bit of the former, the team teaching pieces already, so I'd love to dig in deeper and hear what you're thinking about and working on.

Tavener:

Well, that is true, Michael, and one of our 23 tactics that we're employing is virtual teachers combined with in person, and it still isn't enough. This is one of the many reasons I appreciate the opportunity to be in conversation with you, Michael, because I'll admit, I haven't been in the head space to really push on the level of innovation that's going to be required, given what I just said. And I'm reflect reflecting real time on what's blocking me, what... You know me. I usually tend to get into that space. So, let me share what's coming up right now, and then see if we can figure out a way to get unstuck. So, I think where I'm getting stuck is the extreme regulation that impacts teaching. And back to an earlier point, I think we're going to not only need different solutions and different geographies, but probably for different subjects.

And as I say that out loud, perhaps subject area expertise is one of the blockers that needs to be reconsidered from a policy and regulatory perspective. But before I jump there and go way down in the weeds, let's talk special education teachers. I think they're really interesting sort of case studies. So, we have the greatest shortage of teachers in special education. This has been true for a long time, as we've

all noted, and we've been working to prepare for that. As just one example, we have our own state authorized teacher credentialing program, and we've just recently been given the authority to credential special education teachers. So, we're going to go grow our own, if you will, as one of many strategies that we're employing. And I will add, it took us seven years to get that authorization. So, that just gives you a little bit of a window into the policy environment.

But in the last year, the shortage, I mean, it's just grown exponentially, Michael. And so let me just lay out some of the constraints, and this is just a small number of them that we're facing on this front. First is, it's against the law to not provide students with an IEP, the services they're entitled to, which begin with case management by a credentialed special education teacher. So, just right out the gate, against the law. Two, our states that we operate in set an absolute limit of 32 students per case manager, period. And if you go above 28, there must be a full time instructional assistant employed alongside your education specialist. So, just think back to what Kevin said, those are a lot of the jobs that are even harder to fill than teacher jobs right now. Let's stay here just for a moment longer. That means that if in a school you have 33 students with an IEP, the only option you have is to have two special education teachers/case managers, because you're one over that limit.

In addition to being against the law, parents and families have extraordinary rights and have significant legal recourse if their child's not provided with the services specified in the IEP, which can cost schools an extraordinary amount of money if you're not following that. So, that's like another pressure coming in. And most collective bargaining agreements also codify similar caseload limits or even lower limits. And this opens the school system to grievances with the union if you're not doing what is in the agreement. That's not nearly all of the pressures, Michael, but I'm just going to stop with those, because I think they're sufficient to understand this very interesting sort of market response, you'll correct me if that's not the right term, that I am honestly dying to get your perspective on, because basically what's happening in this environment is as a school, you have to figure out how to have enough credentialed education specialists. And so you literally will do whatever it takes.

And it turns out that in enterprising staffing companies are taking advantage of this desperation, and they are literally head hunting special education teachers by promising them significantly more pay for less responsibility and more flexibility. And they bring these teachers on as contractors and then bill them out at twice the cost to schools. And schools literally have no choice but to pay that. And the teacher makes more. I mean, that part might be great, but it has a lot of leverage in what they will and won't do. The staffing companies may get a nice profit, and public schools are paying double to just try to stay out of this legal jeopardy. Michael, in a few cases, this literally has meant that a teacher, who we were employing, quit their job in October, went and worked for the staffing company, and then we contracted back for their services at double the cost and less work.

Horn: Wow, you can see my eyes literally bugging out, Diane. It's quite a situation. I think it's fascinating, because on the one hand, I think frankly, this is why I've made such a push historically in my work for policy makers to focus far more on the outcomes we desire rather than the inputs, right? They're creating this market for you rather than what's the progress that each individual student is making and the policies and regulations. And I'm so glad we're having this conversation because I'm learning, real time, just what those regulations, how stringent they are. And on the one hand you might say, "Oh, that makes sense."

But for someone listening, I want them to consider... Suppose you figured out a way for one individual to pair with another who didn't have a special ed license, and then a piece of technology that greatly amplified their productivity, and then these students started soaring, not just academically, but in the development of their habits of success, maybe they even moved to a point where the IEP was less

relevant to them, which the parents might fight back on in some cases. So, all sorts of things happen, but the policy and regulation would say that's not allowed. And so they're, in some ways, both restricting you and creating all these costs, which again, to your point, on the one hand I'm like, yay, entrepreneurs are innovating and creating all these new models. I think that's awesome, but I don't want them to do it based on unintended consequences of input late in regulations.

I want them to do it based on the outcomes that the students need themselves. And I think what's driving me crazy. And so I think where I'm left is in the same way maybe this is helping you to reflect. I just love that you're sharing the depth of what this looks like because I think it helps us pull apart like regulations that's seemingly made sense when they put in place. When you focus on inputs instead of outcomes, they constantly constrain innovation in circumstances where we need innovation right now. There's literally no way to do the work for kids, for kids, to help them make progress, unless you have more freedom.

Tavener:

Yeah, I think you're summing up what I'm so feeling right now, which is so constrained and just handcuffed. We are innovators, we are creative, we do focus on outcomes, we do focus on doing it in different ways. And in this case, we've got a system that is so boxed in. There is literally no space for there to be innovation. And what's interesting, Michael, is by definition, students who qualify for special education need personalization or something different than what the "industrial model" is offering to all students. That's who these students are. And these should be a space where innovation finds root, because ultimately, those are the spaces you go to for innovation.

Horn:

This should be our non-consumption.

Tavener:

Yes.

Horn:

This should be our disruption, right?

Tavener:

But it isn't and it can't be because it's so highly regulated and constrained that there's nowhere for us to go. And in fact, not only that, there's so many disincentives for trying anything new or different. There's so many gotchas that are around every single corner that who can take that risk. And Michael, what I would say is that this has to change. But in my experience, no one's having this conversation. Rather, what we see is people being driven by the fear of the loss, and coming out of the pandemic and doubling down on the same policies and the same accountability that got us to where we are. And I think this is a topic and a theme that's likely going to come up a lot this year as we try to really advance the work of innovating. So, I'll just wrap us up for today, suspecting we're going to revisit, but offering that what got us to where we are is not going to get us to where we need to go.

And wow, that feels like a little bit of a release. I needed that. So, I will thank you for, as always, for your conversation and your thought partnership, and make a little bit of a hard pivot. What are you reading, Michael? What are you listening to? What are you doing outside of our day to day work right now that maybe keeps you a little bit sane?

Horn:

Oh, I don't know if it keeps me sane, Diane, but right now, I'm binge consuming the podcast Gate Crashers, which is the history of Jews in the Ivy League. And it has been so interesting. I may be through five or six episodes so far. I should know because there's eight episodes, eight Ivy League schools. There's some symmetry there. But it's just fascinating for a number of reasons. Obviously, personally it's interesting, but more because a lot of the conversations we were having last season around meritocracy and why elite college admissions and so forth looks the way it does are all artifacts of, in many cases, trying to keep Jews out of Ivy League colleges, everything from the admissions interview to looking at the whole individual to all of these...

They even looked at tests to see if you were outperforming academically your intrinsic ability, in which case you were too hard working, and they said, You must be Jewish. And we don't want you." Just blowing my mind, Diane, and further making me think about things that I've taken for granted and maybe aren't the only way to do it. What about you?

Tavener:

Well, Michael, fascinating. I need to dig in there. I've always appreciated the case study of Stanley Kaplan, who plays a big role in that whole story. And I see you haven't strayed very far from the day to day in what you're offering. And I'll be honest, I'm not going to either, because as you have mentioned here and listeners will know, Summit has a number of pilots that we're running this year, and we are redoubling our efforts on innovation and improvement as we come out of crisis. And so I've returned to what I think is a really foundational text on this, which is Learning To Improve How America's Schools Can Get Better At Getting Better.

It's written by a heavy hitting team, but it's led by Tony [inaudible 00:51:09], who have had the privilege to work with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching for a number of years. And as we talked about last year, Michael, Charter schools are sustaining and not disrupting. Disruptive innovations, that was a moment that we had there when we had that conversation. And so we have to be good at continuous improvement. And that's a nice lead into what we'll talk about on our next podcast.

Horn:

Perfectly said, Diane. And it's something where we want to go to. I will note, colleagues of mine, actually, Bob Moesta and others, got to look at what's the job to be done when we hire continuous improvement? Which was an interesting strand of research as well that they dug into. But to your point, next episode, we're going to get to talk more about what does that look like with you continuing to update the story of your own pilots and innovations over the school year, which I thank you for being that voice in the ground and sharing it with us. And all of you, of course, and Kevin from the 74 for joining us, and all of you for tuning in to this episode of Class Disrupted.