

Tavener: Hey Michael.

Horn: Hey Diane. I've been thinking and hopefully I'm not jumping into this thought prematurely, given we still have a couple of podcasts left in this season, but I can't believe that the school year is nearing its end. You must have a lot of mixed emotions right now.

Tavener: Well, it's definitely not too early, Michael, and this is the season in the year when it feels as if it's already over because we're planning for next year, even though this one isn't finished yet and it always feels that way. It's a little bit weird for me this time around since, as you know, I don't have another school year in my current role. And so yeah, I'm feeling, I use the feelings app, how we feel, and so I'm trying to think of the right adjectives here. I'm feeling a little bit unmoored.

Horn: That's a good one.

Tavener: Feeling exhilarated, I would say by watching summit's new leaders really plan for the future and also thinking about what I'm going to be doing. So it's super interesting, Michael, because pair that with the fact that we started this podcast in a time of incredible uncertainty and as it turns out at the start of the pandemic, although we didn't realize just how long that would actually be, we thought it would be a lot shorter. And we started this podcast because we both believe that the disruption caused by all that was happening in the world created a real opportunity for all of us to rethink schools in a much more profound way than we had been up to that point. But both of us were, and continue to be striving for more urgency I would say, and boldness in the redesign of schools.

And I think that's why we've continued having conversations and it's why this season we've been toggling between getting really into the weeds about how innovation actually happens in schools and zooming out to the sort of hot topics and issues that are either driving or impeding that change. And I'm pretty sure that one of those hot topics has been nagging you for a bit. I know we've been talking about it for a while and so I think today might be the day. Let's hear it. What do you want to talk about?

Horn: All right, well let's do it. I've been thinking a lot about the so-called reading wars, and this is a topic that it plays a big role frankly in the school interruptions and upheavals of the past few years. And it's something we have mentioned before in the show, but I wanted to dive a bit deeper into it, but from a slightly different angle, from I think where a lot of the coverage has been if you're game.

Tavener: Well, yeah, so I won't bury the headline, Michael. I'm totally game to talk about reading, always game to talk about reading and learning to read and how we teach reading. And quite frankly, everything about reading. I love reading. And in fact, I grew up in a preschool that was literally in my house where tons of kids learned to read and later because... I became a reading teacher during the summers when I wasn't teaching in my schools. And so the only part of this topic that I don't like is the reading wars title and quite frankly, it's just because I'm just tired of having wars in education of any sort and

especially when there really shouldn't be anything to fight about when it comes to reading. And so if you promise we can have a scene conversation that doesn't paint this as a war, let's do it.

Horn: Well, I love to do that and I'm glad we're going to dig in and I will unfortunately frame it a few more times as reading wars, although your point is a very good one. But in essence there has been this tug of war that has gone on for years between... and I'm going to generalize here, two camps, broadly speaking, there's one that wants students to learn how to decode written words on the page through learning phonics and [inaudible 00:04:14] and the like. And historically they were labeled the "phonics people," but more recently they've been called the science of reading people because they aren't just about phonics Diana as you know, although that is a critical piece, phonics is just one piece of this branch of learning how to read and the science of reading is often thought more of a rope where you're braiding together a variety of strands. So you've got phonics, yes, but you've also got things like phonological awareness decoding and the like as part of a branch of this rope that's thought of as word recognition.

And then on the other branch you have language comprehension, which are things like background knowledge, vocabulary, language structure, and the like. And there's actually been some really recent new research. This is timely, this conversation just showcasing how important background knowledge is and when you weave these strands together, you get someone who's able to read and comprehend. Now you as the reading teacher, you're probably sort of saying you're simplifying at the moment, but that's basically the gist of it.

Tavener: It is.

Horn: And so that's one sort of camp if you will. On the other side, you've had the folks who were historically labeled the whole language people, but they were those who wanted to make sure reading was joyful and interesting and they used methods like three cueing, which essentially asks readers to figure out words based on context and nearby images and the like. Now there's a deeper commentary here I think about how we as adults probably shouldn't assume that things that we as adults have automated into long-term memory may be boring to kids. They're genuinely interested in cracking the codes of how adults do work and they want to get their reps in to perfect it. That's not boring to them.

But I actually don't want to go there per se because for a long time I'd argue Diane, that the research has actually been pretty clear that the so-called science of reading camp is the vastly superior way to learn how to read and the whole language camper what's also been called balanced literacy in some quarters because of the approach of one of the acolytes behind the method, it doesn't actually teach kids how to decode and read and it is short-changing them. And the adherence to that whole language method has been almost criminal in terms of how it's shortchanged millions of kids.

And this isn't new, to be clear, Diane, it was clear to me reading the research on this stuff when I got into education before 2010. And as I've spent time in schools, it's been

equally clear to me over the 2010s if you will, that there were an egregious number of classroom using things like Lucy Calkins Units of Study or Fountas & Pinnell's guided reading and the like. Which to be clear, those resources have not been based on the evidence of how individuals learn to read.

Tavener: First of all, I think you did a nice job of summarizing even at the high level, but I think what you've just shared is why I blocked the title reading wars. If this were an actual war or let's take something a little bit less violent, a sports contest of some sort, the game is over. If you check the scoreboard, the learning science phonics team, they won a long time ago. The only thing I would add to your high level summary is that what muddies the water a bit about this is some people are able to learn to read without a phonics or science-based approach, if you will. And as a result, people point to those children or those people as evidence of efficacy of the whole language approach, which is why it's important to highlight that what the evidence shows is that vastly more people are able to learn to read as children when given the phonics based approach versus the whole language method, which makes phonics a far superior choice for a public education system.

Because as a public education system that spends on average, and I'm going to be conservative here, about \$12,000 per student per year, there is no question that with reading as perhaps I would argue the number one goal of the early grades of school, every kid should be able to read by third grade. And that just isn't the case in America. We still have over a third of our students who are not proficient at reading by the time they're entering fourth grade. And as we both know, everything from that point on and in education and learning is dependent upon one's ability to read, which is why people get really, really fired up about this topic because we have the science, we have the money, we have the school time. Why in the world can't all of our children read? It's insane.

Horn: And your point is a really important one also on the nuance about the percentage who learn, frankly not through a whole language approach, but it just seems exposure to books of learning how to read and estimates vary. Somewhere between 30 and 40% can learn that way. I actually will circle back to that nuance because I frankly hate the one size fits all way that we think that there's somehow a best way to educate kids and it sort of plays into the problems I would argue more broadly with education research in our conversations. But even in this conversation, the whole language approach still I think would not make the grade. But like we said, none of this is new per se.

What became new, and this starts to root us in the pandemic is... well, a few years before the pandemic, 2017, Emily Hanford, an NPR reporter, started investigating how children learn to read and she authored a series of pieces and then ultimately put together an incredible podcast series called Sold a Story that brought to light, not just that teachers had been effectively duped and ed schools had been complicit, but also sort of how this all had happened, that these tons of classrooms were not using what the science was showing.

And then we had the pandemic and parents who had been growing concerned about their children not learning to read, got a firsthand view just into how their kids were

being taught in Zoom and so forth, or better said, not taught to read. And they started going to school boards and then groups like the National Parents Union really rose up and started to hold superintendent's feet to the fire. And I think it's fair to say that those efforts, Emily Hanford plus the parents have really started changing the conversation in much of the country around how to teach reading in line with the current evidence.

Tavener: Yeah, Michael and it's not only the conversation, but there's real action that is happening, which sometimes we hear a lot of talk but we don't see action. And what we're seeing on this front is a variety of moves being made in response to what feels like this sort of sustained and growing pressure from the public for something different in their schools.

Horn: Yeah, and this is where I want to start to go, but we should be clear, we still have a long way to go. There's still millions of kids being taught using those materials I referenced earlier but we're seeing progress, you're right. Now there's been a lot of work to train teachers using a variety of programs to undo what the ed schools have taught or didn't teach them and I think we actually have to go farther because there are a lot of adolescents, as you know, that don't know how to read as a result of those misguided teachings. So much so that I think middle and high school teachers, frankly, they probably need to learn some of the science of reading as well so that they can teach it in certain cases. And of course some of the tools will be different. They'll be age appropriate for teens and the like but I think that in many cases they're going to have to help some of those adolescents build these skills to learn how to read so that they can learn all the other material that they're trying to work through.

Tavener: One of the things I find interesting about what you're describing Michael, is how, in some ways what is going on... it just sounds a bit like leadership 101 as we've often... to digress from the reading part a little and to zoom out to the process, as we've talked about education in America, it's totally decentralized. We've repeated that theme multiple times. The federal government actually has very few tools and relatively little power over what happens in states, counties, districts, and ultimately in school buildings and classrooms. And so unlike in other countries like Singapore or China where a federal mandate is handed down and literally the entire system turns on a dime to do whatever is being mandated, in the US, there isn't ever a common initiative or priority.

And I guess the theory was that the federal secretary of education and department could perhaps provide that type of leadership, at least from an inspirational or bully pulpit type perspective but I'm not sure they ever have. And as things get increasingly politically polarized, they just can't because someone's always going to oppose them just to oppose them. And so I find it fascinating that a persistent journalist and parent advocates are somehow in some ways creating enough sustained public pressure to perhaps create a national priority around reading and every child [inaudible 00:13:44] that might drive meaningful action. It's just really interesting to watch.

Horn: Yeah, I completely agree and I'm aware that two episodes in a row now, we're doing a lot of sort of throat clearing before I get to the point but I want to make sure folks are clear about where we're going because what you just described I think is an absolute great thing and I have some concerns, and it's because it's not just frankly that the state

departments of education are reacting and now finally doing something and making significant changes. We're also seeing state legislatures make some significant changes. And again, I want to be clear, according to a recent National Bureau of Economic Research paper by a variety of authors, Clare Halloran, Claire Hug, Rebecca Jack and Emily Oster who everyone knows quite well, I suspect, they identified something really interesting. So the pop quiz for you is, Diane, do you know the only two states to have fully recovered their pandemic learning losses in reading?

Tavener: Yep. Well, setting aside my disdain for the concept of learning loss, but putting in from my passion for reading, Michael, I do know this answer, but I honestly think it's a bit of a rhetorical question for me and I don't want to steal your thunder because this is honestly a bit surprising. So take it away.

Horn: And agree with you, learning losses is not the best phrase, but I think it's the one that's understood. So the two states that have rebounded fully are Mississippi and South Carolina. I'm going to let that sit in there for a moment. Mississippi and South Carolina, and they are perhaps not coincidentally in my view, the two states that in 2013 and 2014 passed science of reading laws. So now what we're seeing Diane is that more states are putting in those laws, not just regulations or guidance to districts, but actual laws to restrict or mandate certain curriculum. And this is happening in a variety of ways throughout the country. There's been a high profile to do around this. For example, in Ohio, the governor there really went to the mat on ending the teaching of reading instruction that doesn't follow the best evidence on how to teach reading. And then unbelievably, the teacher's unions there pushed back against them.

Horn: It's still ongoing as we record this and in Connecticut, the teacher's unions have also pushed back. So it is a swirl right now there. But the question I want to think through with you is this, is enacting policies to ban certain discredited teaching methodologies or mandating the ones where the evidence is strong. Is that a good idea?

Tavener: Whew. It's important to stay here for a beat because you just said some really important things I don't want to skip over and I want to be really clear and start by just apologizing for my sarcasm around the gap closing. Look, I deeply admire what Mississippi and South Carolina have done in terms of serving their students just full stop. And I'm a bit more familiar with the work in Mississippi and in my view, it's not surprising to see the results that they're getting. They have had excellent student-centered leadership aligned with an honesty about where they were in terms of their outcomes and student performance and a vision for where they wanted to go. And they've done the hard work to align things and make real progress. And so I don't want to take anything away from those efforts. And I also don't want to just attribute it to legislation either because there was a whole bunch of other stuff going on there that lined up with it, but maybe legislation was the igniting factor.

And then you made the other comments about teacher union opposition in Ohio and Connecticut, and they're completely relevant because how many times have we seen federal and state policies designed to support students completely fail in their objectives when they have what I will call the classroom door slammed on them and in their face by teachers who aren't alike? And this takes us back to the title of reading

wars. Like it or not, there are a lot of teachers in the US who are not teaching a phonics-based approach or a science-based approach to reading. And that's just a fact. And we need to say that that's why we are where we are. And ultimately this is the thing that will have to change if we want every child in America to read. And I feel very confident that state's policies alone aren't going to magically change that, they will not magically get teachers to do these things. So now I'm just going to do a hard pivot and I think be nervous with you on top of all of it, I get very, very, very nervous about state policies mandating curriculum.

Horn: Yeah, and we've talked about this before, of course, back in season three, we had a couple episodes that we'll link to, early on in the season about who decides what curriculum gets taught and some of the food fights around banning certain books and materials and such. And we were both skeptical then that having legislators weigh in on these sorts of things was a good idea. So we are nothing if not consistent I suppose, but here I'll acknowledge it's trickier because there's been so much harm done to so many students, kids have really been screwed. And so I am sympathetic to folks like the National Parents Union or ExceInEd that are going around pushing hard for laws to mandate the "science of reading." If your kids are the ones that have been failed by the system, I think you'll do anything almost to reverse this and put an end to it. And there are some great intentions behind it. And I found the arguments by the teachers unions against the practice really troubling to be candid, Diane.

Tavener: Yeah, this is such an important point and there are others I know you will uncover, but this one deserves a moment. I would argue that one of the biggest challenges we have in our education system right now, and quite frankly in our country, Michael, is that people are so angry and frustrated and righteous about how government is doing things wrong, that they feel the only solution is to vote in sort of their people and put them in government and then to have those people mandate the views that they hold and their perspectives and their approaches and their beliefs in law. And I agree, this can feel tempting when kids have been so misserved and continue to be misserved. And when there are people in powerful government positions making decisions that we believe are doing harm to children, it's natural to want to just replace them with someone who will just make the decision that we want them to make, that we believe in, and the type of legislation we're talking about, which dictates very specific content to be taught or very specific methods to be used is autocratic.

There's just no way around it. And it requires penalties to enforce these approaches and it inevitably will be legally challenged and subverted. And my point being is it leads to war, it leads to the title of this whole thing. And perhaps the biggest barrier to our schools serving our children is the adults and the adults being at war with one another. I know this isn't the only reason to be uncomfortable with state level legislation, that's this level of prescription, but I just think it's worth us all pausing and asking ourselves if we feel comfortable with the idea that government can mandate exactly what is taught and how it is taught in every classroom, knowing that the people in government change and they're not always going to align with your personal views and values. So I just think that that's something we should all be thinking about.

Horn: No, and I think it's a really good set of points, Diane, and that we should hold seriously and people who want to legislate or mandate or regulate whatever thing should hold that... four years later, there's going to be someone else there and they're going to do the exact opposite and we create this pendulum that's I think very unhealthy for society. And I think on top of that, when you mandate specific curricula or ban certain content, you have one other set of problems that I'll add on top of the ones that you just listed, which I think are all correct. And it's this, which is science is not a static field. By definition, science is a learning process. We observe phenomena in the world, we do our best as humans to categorize them and then we do research to figure out what correlates with what, we create theories from hypotheses we've tested.

And then ideally, we all too often don't do this because of our egos, but we observe anomalies to our theories which allows us to make them better. And these anomalies are the things that our theories can't explain. And by using them over time, we move to understanding causality, like what factors actually cause the outcomes we desire, and then we can really start to strengthen the theory when we start to understand how different conditions or circumstances call for different approaches or actions because they're different in some fundamental way. And you sort of highlighted this, that there's a group of students who learn more, it seems through exposure than direct instruction. It seems that they don't get harmed by direct instruction on phonics, but they can learn to read through exposure to books and words. Todd Rose actually talked to us about this in season one when he said that they're essentially broadly speaking three dominant pathways to teaching reading based on a learner's profile.

But here's the thing, science is dynamic and so theoretically legislation can be as well, you just described how it could change, but in reality, as we know, it takes a long time for legislators to catch up with what's emerging. I'm going to step outside of K-12 for a moment. We had the reauthorization there, the Every Student Succeeds Act, it's now called in 2015, that was way overdue. Higher ed, I think the last time it was reauthorized was 2008 and we're way overdue. So in these polarized times, legislation can be stultifying and very, very static, which is the opposite of that dynamic nature of science. And so I'm just not a huge fan of creating blunt policies frankly, as a matter of principle, that inhibits schools from taking the right steps for each child as their understanding on the ground improves and we see what each individual needs to make progress.

Tavener: Michael, this is a totally different reason to dislike the legislative mandate, but I would argue an equally important one. It flies in the face of continuous improvement, which is something we talk about all the time here. And legislation by definition is slow. It was designed that way. And what we need to be doing in schools right now is moving fast to continuously improve. And it's crazy to think that a policy that will likely never go away because they just don't go away and probably won't be changed for many, many years can stay relevant given how fast things can and should move in terms of what we're learning about learning, it doesn't make sense.

Horn: Yeah, I think that's right. And frankly with AI and stuff like that, the insights we might gather could even just magnify significantly over the years ahead. So I think that leaves us with the question of what do we do? And I like the moves where states and commissioners of education in Mississippi have undertaken these multi-year efforts to

really work with their educators on the latest in the science and improve the understanding on the ground of the evidence about how to teach reading. I love that they're focused on implementation and operationalizing not just curriculum but building capacity really. And I love when districts put a firm stance on the ground that we're not going to teach the junk that hasn't worked anymore.

Tavener: I really like these moves as well, Michael. And I think they are attuned to the reality of the situation. If school leaders and teachers do not understand and believe that teaching, a science-based approach to reading will first enable all of their students to read and second make them better teachers and schools, then they're not going to change their practice. It's just not going to happen. And so rather than fighting them, we need to respectfully meet them where they are and figure out how to change their hearts, minds and practices.

And I will say on the other side, teachers unions and teachers themselves can't be a obstructionist about this, which I'm sad to say they often are. There are these longstanding sayings and approaches among teachers that I learned as a teacher like this too shall pass and just close your door and teach, which represent far too many teacher mindsets about an unwillingness to be on an improvement journey or in any way change their practice. And that mindset that what I do is good and right and it can't be improved unless I decide it, it's just not acceptable. And I think that we have to figure out ways to change that.

Horn: Yeah, and then they should be modeling learning for their students also. To go back to the policy perspective then more broadly rather than mandating the inputs, I would love policy that focused on outcomes, as in policy that should be very clear what you said earlier, which is that all students should master how to read and they can't move fully on until they do. I quite like in concept anyway, what Florida did back in the day with a clear, can you read mastery bar for moving on after third grade, and my recollection is that didn't stand, didn't pass muster. And I do think in today's worlds there are other ways you could do that. You can keep a child with their peers while still making sure they're learning at the level right for them, and we don't let them pass those, such a critical subject is basic reading, meaning decoding, fluency and so forth without real demonstrated mastery.

And we should put some real teeth into this and I'd like to see some real choice alongside it so that families who are trapped in options that aren't working have other options and can create some accountability on the system so that they can go to places where their children can make meaningful progress. And I guess my theory, at least for the policy, Diane, is that if we're strict on the outcomes, reading in this case, then we can free up schools to figure out the best ways to serve the individual students so long as the departments of education and elsewhere in the ecosystem are really building capacity in lockstep with the science of what we're learning but I love your take on this.

Tavener: Okay, well I wasn't with you and then I was with you and then maybe I wasn't which is to say good policy is ridiculously hard to write and I'm very respectful of that fact. My fear, which comes from deep personal experience about a policy that makes reading absolute in that it turns into finding flaws in kids and doing harm to them versus

incentivizing adults to do whatever it takes to find the ways that all kids can meet that reading bar because they sound so good on paper but in practice it's been a pretty horrible to a ton of kids. That said, I'm with you in believing that we should all get clear and aligned on what I truly think is the most obvious, literally the number one most clear objective of public education and that is that every child should be a proficient reader before they are 10.

So what I like about what you're saying is let's all decide that that's going to be true, period. Every child in America is going to read and then give more freedom for how that happens. And I say that cautiously because we know we want the freedom to be within science, but with clarity that failure is not an option. And now you know why I'm not a policymaker because can you imagine a build titled like failure is not an option, create your own pathway there.

Horn: We'll have a different course on naming policies I guess for both of us. But I guess my last reflection off that is maybe that's one of the reasons why giving families more choice is the accountability measure that maybe I'm most comfortable with against that backdrop, because it's a less heavy-handed way or a less one size fits all way of creating that accountability alongside clear reports of here's how your kid is doing and progressing on the path to mastery of reading. We have to be clear not to blame or label but to empower. And I think that's the big focus where we're both be aligned is my guess.

Tavenner: Most certainly. The day I get a clear report on an assessment, I will jump for joy. We could spend a whole episode on that, but for now I think we might leave it there. But let's turn to what are you reading, watching, listening to lately, Michael, as we wrap up?

Horn: Yeah, so I've got to read a couple books that are in pre-print on education stuff that have been fun, but I'm going to go a different direction. My wife and I went to the movie theater the other day. We were the only two people in the theater. It was so sad. And we watched the movie Air, which is the story of Michael Jordan signing with Nike back in the day. And such great act actors and particularly actress. I'm a huge Viola Davis fan, but I will say the movie was good not great, Diane, but I enjoyed the time nonetheless. What about you?

Tavenner: Your time and your private screening, it sounds like. Well, Michael, at the risk of being way too trendy, which is uncomfortable territory for me because I'm never there. We have started watching The Diplomat on Netflix and while we're only two episodes in, I do see what all of the chatter is about and why everyone says you must watch this. It's quite compelling and a really good watch. So highly recommended.

Horn: Awesome. Well once we get through Lasso that's next step on our queue, so we will be right with you Diane. And with that, thanks to all of you for tuning in for this conversation and we'll see you next time on Class Disrupted.