

Diane Tavenner [00:00:12]:

Hey, Michael.

Michael Horn [00:00:13]:

Hey, Diane.

Diane Tavenner [00:00:14]:

We got to spend a lot of time together last week in person, which is always so much fun, and on a panel together, which made me feel like we're at a good launching place to dive into some really meaty issues this season as we're back.

Michael Horn [00:00:30]:

Indeed, and we raised a little havoc together, which is sort of our norm, if you will. When we started this podcast back in COVID, we really wanted to help parents and educators rethink some of the fundamental tenets of education as they were scrambling to do all forms of virtual and hybrid learning and then moving forward, really continue to question some of the holy grails of the education system and present some third ways through it. So, it continues to be interesting. And last week, with you in person, was a heck of a lot of fun to push the audience as well.

Diane Tavenner [00:01:01]:

It really was. And we talk about this, but I kind of can't believe we're in our fifth season already, but super excited this season to be going back and talking about topics that really impact K-12, but not just K-12. I think we might do a little bit of expansion this year. We want to talk about schools that are reinventing and doing great, sort of innovative type of things, but we also want to get into some of the thorny issues, like we always do because we like to be a little bit provocative, but we want to bring our classic third way approach to those things. And we're also going to focus a lot on how K-12 sits in a bigger ecosystem. Our job is to prepare people for life. And so, what does that mean and how does that intersect with the world and work and college and more?

Michael Horn [00:02:01]:

Yeah, well, you wrote an entire book, of course, about preparing people not just for school, but for actual life called *Prepared*. And so, in that theme, I think it fits right in with what we've sort of always been doing. But we're also planning, as folks know, to have a lot more guests this year. And to that end, longtime listeners may recall that in season one, in the height of the pandemic, we welcomed to the podcast early on, Todd Rose. And Todd helped introduce this framework of helping move the education system really from a zero-sum one to a positive sum

one. Frankly, I ripped that off shamelessly, gave him credit, but ripped it off shamelessly in my book *From Reopen to Reinvent*. And then we followed it up last season, of course, by really dissecting the question of what is a meritocracy, what is the goal? And a big conclusion, I think we both came away with from those conversations was that the goal of the education system can't be the single destination point or a single metric. Individuals and their goals and their circumstances, they are way too varied for that sort of simplicity.

Michael Horn [00:03:09]:

And that's a good thing, actually. And one conclusion that came out of that was that this college for all goal that the system has really come to embrace over the previous few decades was not setting up large numbers of individuals for success. It wasn't helping them build their passions, fulfill their potential, live a life of purpose. But I've had a question out of that, which is we, you and I and maybe some of our listeners, may have concluded that this college for all goal doesn't make sense. But has the general populace at large, Diane?

Diane Tavenner [00:03:44]:

Well, Michael, this is a very good reason to bring Todd back to the show because he's got some real insights there and we're about to dive into them. But for those who don't know, Todd's, the co-founder and CEO of Populace. He's a bestselling author. And you have heard me say multiple times that if you have not read his books, drop everything, run out, and read them. Specifically, *The End of Average*, which I think is just mind blowing. And there's *Collective Illusions* as well. And what we're really going to focus on today is a new study that has come out from Populace titled "Americans Reject Fame, Fortune, and Higher Ed as Markers of Success, Seek Community and Financial Security." And we will link that in the show notes. But as part of that study, they have released a success index, which really helps to distill what Americans really think success is. And I personally am just so excited about this conversation. Todd is a dear friend and mentor, and I'm so excited to talk about this. So, welcome. We're thrilled to have you here with us again and hoping you can just tell us a little bit about this study.

Todd Rose [00:05:13]:

Yeah, well, great to be back and good to see the two of you. You said this earlier, at the end of the day, thinking about the kind of lives people want to live. We entered this study mainly because I have another pet peeve. I have a bunch of pet peeves, as you know. So, I'm trying to go after all of them, which is, I think we've lost the plot on the American Dream and people of good faith have turned it into economic mobility as the definition. Certainly, you know, economic mobility matters in the sense that the absence of it is certainly a barrier to The American Dream. But we got a little worried when you start thinking removing the barrier is the same as achieving the dream, we might be in trouble. James Russell Adams, who coined the term, The American Dream, during the Great Depression, actually was clear about it. It's about being able to aspire to a view of success that you define and feel like you have a fair shot at achieving, not held back by arbitrary obstacles. First of all, we were interested in how does the

American public think about the American dream. And what we found is, overwhelmingly, the majority of Americans still see it as achieving on their definition of success, but they think everybody thinks it's just about economic mobility. So, it's like, okay, well if it's about achieving your view of success, then we need to know more about what you mean by a successful life. And as you know, we use these private opinion methods that get around social desirability effects but also tradeoffs. When you say something like a successful life, you can't have everything. Just like in education, you can't be everything to everybody. What are your priorities? And so, we use the methodologies that force real world complex tradeoffs. Pretty excited about that. Here's what I was shocked by: so, we had 61 tradeoff priorities for what people could mean by a successful life. And, private opinion, I've been surprised a number of times, but in this one I just could not believe a number of things. So, we can kind of dig in. First, when you think about letting people define for themselves what a successful life is, I think some of us get worried like "Oh, people are going to be selfish, it's going to be this free for all. Like everybody goes after their own. No one cares about community, no one cares about each other." Well, that's just not what you find in private. For example, in the top ten tradeoff priorities, so much of it is about a meaningful life and that meaningful life involves other people. For example, the number one tradeoff priority was wanting to do work that has a positive impact on other people. When left to your own devices, you care about having an impact on other people. There are things like financial security in there, but of course financial security is not the same thing as economic mobility. They want to be able to have kids, they want to have a secure retirement, they want to do a number of things that don't require that they go out of state to chase a job and get out of community. So, the couple of things like that, the broader focus on meaning and purpose and community. The other thing that will kind of blow your mind is, in private, the role of character. It was just remarkable. Every single character attribute, every single one ranked significantly higher than all status attributes. Things like being a decent person, it just matters to people for their view success. And yet everything that signals status is a bottom dweller - everything. But then when we ask people, well, what do you think most people would say? You get a completely different picture. They think everyone cares about status, no one cares about character. So, we're under these collective illusions. But I have some other things that are, I think, worth talking about. But let's get to the education piece because this was probably the most surprising thing to me because again, this is about the life you want to live, not specifically about education. Well, we had in there the sort of traditional things that you could go after, like skilled trade, four-year college diploma, advanced degree, things like that. The college diploma, which if you think about it, was really one of the three markers of the American dream for probably the last 50, 60, 70 years.

Diane Tavenner [00:10:04]:

Literally the golden ticket that people want

Todd Rose [00:10:08]:

Yeah. It has plummeted now. It is now ranked 54th out of 61 in tradeoff priorities for a successful life. And you'd think, well, maybe it's just because college is not as valuable and now

you got to go get even more education, but even getting an advanced degree is only ranked two spots higher. What I thought was the funniest thing is that this idea of a skilled trade, plumber HVAC stuff like this where you make good money and you do good work and actually do help people, was, in private, ranked 15th. So, in private now, the idea of having a skilled trade is viewed as a better marker of a successful life than a college diploma. Now, what I thought was hilarious is even people like me that have these fancy advanced degrees, even people with advanced degrees would rank getting a certificate in a skilled trade as an indicator of success more than going to college. Nobody thinks that this is a marker of success anymore.

Michael Horn [00:11:28]:

Wow, it says a lot, Todd, about sort of the change of what desirability is. I mean, I think a lot of people in K-12 schools are struggling with this reality of like, "Oh, but if I say college isn't your destination, am I somehow giving something less desirable?" And what the research is suggesting is, "No, this is actually prestigious and these other pathways have real merit and value."

Todd Rose [00:11:52]:

Well, this is the thing you think about where K-12 is right now. We care a lot about sort of paradigms and paradigm shifts in society, and education is smack dab in a paradigm crisis where you think about what's being upended simultaneously, not only the process by which we educate - getting away from the standardized stuff which we've talked about - but the very purpose of education itself is up for grabs. And it's hard. I feel really badly for teachers who are doing the best they can in an institution that is no longer delivering the kind of outcomes that people privately desire, and they're not even doing a very good job of delivering the things we don't want because of the process by which we do it. So, it's very tricky. But if you think about it, it's like recognizing that we're leaving an era of what I would call the end of compliance culture. We've been living under a paradigm of paternalism ever since Frederick Taylor. And as you all know, that's my nemesis. He did more damage to American democracy than anybody, I think. But we gave up self-determination, more bottom-up approaches, where people had more control over their lives, for top-down efficiency. And look, we definitely got something for it. That's for sure. But I think what you're seeing in the American public is the sort of rebirth of the desire to claim that self-determination, that they want control of their lives back. They just do. And some of that's manifesting very destructively. And I think that people that care about education realize that the days of telling people what a good education is and forcing them into your vision for that, that's over. You think about our job; it's to help cultivate young people to live meaningful lives, make a contribution, have a credible next step, as Diane always talks about. It's not rocket science. It's not easy, but what I worry about, and I don't mean to sound too hyperbolic, but when people no longer want the outcome of an institution, they don't trust it, they will not fight for it. And I worry that unless we recognize what's really going on here and start responding to what people want, I think we are putting at risk the very concept of public education. Like, why should I care? Why should I let my tax money go to these things when I don't even want it?

Michael Horn [00:14:39]:

Yeah, I want to circle back to that implication because I think there's a lot we could pull apart there about a lot of the assumptions underpinning what we've been doing, frankly, and what we should move to and so forth. I want you to just back up just a little bit and talk about the methodology a bit more behind the study because you mentioned these tradeoffs. You know our mutual friend Bob Moesta, who we have in common, famously showed that a lot of surveys sort of miss the underlying complexity of what's going on in people's lives. First, because, frankly, they use language that means one thing to the surveyors and means something totally different to the respondents. But second, that people will say one thing, "Oh, I want this over that in a vacuum," But when you observe actual behavior, it tells us something different. So, I'd love you to unpack how you attempt to get around that because your methodology is different.

Todd Rose [00:15:32]:

Yeah, this is great. Nobody lets me talk about the methodology, so thank you. And we didn't invent it, so I can praise it since it's not ours. In this case, to your point, there are a couple of things that we do to get what I believe is a pretty accurate view of people's private priorities. The first, to Bob's point about language, it really does matter. Like in this one, 61 different attributes that comes from focus groups, interviews, desk, research of what goes into a successful life. And then each one of those attributes, well, how do you talk about it? Well, we will actually build, for each one, there'll be five or six ways that it's talked about, and then we do a separate survey where we will say, "Do you care about this? If so, which of these do you prefer?" Like, which one do you think best captures it? And we bias every single attribute to its most aspirational version. And that's one way to not put your finger on the scale or your thumb on the scale of ways you talk about it. We also test for loadedness and stuff like that. Okay, so beyond that, with no tradeoffs, people say yes to everything. "Are you kidding me? I'll take everything." So, the way this methodology works, which is really clever, and by the way, same methodology Apple uses to decide the combination of features that go into an iPhone. If I just ask you, do you want an OLED screen? Of course I do. But do you want that more than a cheaper phone? Do you want that more than a longer battery life? Then that's a little more complicated. And most people don't get to see the full range of tradeoffs that they could make, whether it's in education or their life. So this methodology is pretty clever. So you take those 61 attributes and rather than just directly asking you about any one of them, when you're taking the survey, what you'll see on the screen is "Hey, there's two people: person A, person B. Which one of these two people is closer to your view of a successful person?" And what it does is randomly grabs five or six attributes from the pool for person A, randomly grabs, say, six attributes for person B. That's all you know, and you're like, "Well, this person's rich, but this person does stuff that has a positive impact on people. I'll choose person B." And you do it over and over again. And what's nice about that is over time, we're going to trade off every attribute against every other attribute. But any one time, you don't really know. Like, let's say you're like, "Oh, I shouldn't say I like being rich," but sometimes being rich will be paired with being a good person or being engaged in your community. And so, you can't really game it. And so, what you

get as a result is this rank order trade off priorities. And not just rank order, but we can allocate what's called share of preference. Like, let's say being rich was the most important thing to you. Well, out of 100%, how much does that eat up of your view of success? So, we do that, and then we always ask them to build the same answers for what they think most Americans think. So, we're building a personal tradeoff priority for you and also your perception of the majority of Americans. And then finally, after we're done with that, we go through every attribute and ask people whether they believe they're currently achieving that attribute or not. So, we can also just see what do you aspire to? What are you succeeding at, what are we struggling with?

Diane Tavenner [00:19:00]:

Fascinating. Can I jump in here, Michael because a couple things are happening for me? One, you're saying some mind-blowing things that have real impacts for people: teachers, school leaders, parents, students, etc. And two, I think you're making the case that we should trust what you're saying, that there's good methodology here and so we should not just dismiss this even though there are some potentially uncomfortable truths for those of us who are in the system and leading schools innovating on schools, etc. And so, I want to turn to those folks for a moment because I think what you're sharing about the system, Todd, is illuminating what a lot of people are feeling and experiencing right now. Schools are really angsty places to be. It was horrible during COVID as we all know, but even as we move a little bit further away from that, there are still places where people are fighting a lot and they're angry and they're frustrated and kids aren't engaged. And there are all these battles about "Do we do away with social media or phones?" or "How do we get them to be back engaged when, in reality, they're just really bored?" And what I think you're saying is that they know that what we're offering them isn't purposeful and meaningful and meeting their needs. They know it somewhere inside and so they're not bought into it. And I think the same goes with parents. If you talk privately with school leaders and teachers, they're going to tell you right now the parents are literally killing them. And it's not all the parents, but it's a sizable number. And I think maybe we're getting to the motivations of these folks right now and the experience they're having. Does that resonate? Does that make sense based on what you're seeing? What do you think about that?

Todd Rose [00:21:01]:

Yeah, it does. And the thing is, it's like just recognize this isn't going away, and that's okay. Look, it's not bad that people want to aspire to something more than the materialism that was promised in the industrial age, right? It's not bad that what they want is their child to have a life of meaning and purpose, to be happy, not just be successful by society's standards. And as Michael said earlier, it's not bad that we want different things. And in the success index, we found that no two people are the same. It's just crazy how individual we are. And that's not bad because the truth is, back to the zero-sum stuff, if we narrow success down to the same exact thing that's not shareable that we all can't participate in, then we are truly competitors with each other. And so, you can talk all you want about a cooperative, collaborative society, but that's just not true. Somebody has to lose. The mere fact that our ultimate aspirations differ means that we can carve out our paths and make contributions, and that individuality can be a

source of genuine benefit for everybody. We're just not used to dealing with it. And I would say my biggest concern is that once people want something different and they're not getting it, and, at the same time, the sort of paternalism at the heart of all of our institutions - but including education - is already wrinkling them, We've got some stuff coming, just to jump around, next year on resentment in America. it is shocking how resentful we are, and it's largely about being controlled. And so, I think education, if it doesn't wake up and realize what's changing, risks further becoming the lightning rod for all of this angst and failed aspiration. And that's why I said I worry that it puts at risk the very concept of public education. The flip side is we don't have to have every answer right now, but if parents and the public believe that they're being listened to, really believe that where I drop my kid off, they might not be perfect, but they are actually trying to get this right, then they will give you a lot of leeway because even people that want something different still would much prefer that the public education system as they know it respond. It's scary when you have to start doing it on your own. So they would love that. You have a huge advantage if you get this right.

Todd Rose [00:23:51]:

But the other thing is that right now, parents in general, they're under a massive collective illusion. They don't realize that other people want the same things that they want now. So, they tend to think I'll just be frustrated over here, if I have the money, I'll go get it in a private solution. But that doesn't last for very long. Second biggest problem is even when they know other people want it, they have a hard time connecting the dots. Where are the exemplars? What do I point to? We need a lot more of those summits, these things where it's like "I shouldn't have to know every detail about what goes into preparing my kid for the life that I want them to live if I can point to the brand, if I can point to things..." so I feel like we either get to be on the side of the American public and say you deserve to have an education system that realizes your highest aspirations or we will be the people literally standing between them and their child's future. That is not a good place to be.

Michael Horn [00:24:54]:

No. I'm curious, Todd, I think this points to something that Diane and I ended last season on about the importance of listening with deep empathy when parents are coming into the school head's office and having all manner of pressure complaints, rudeness, whatever it might be, but deep empathy and listening. But I guess I want to go into what I think is a natural implication of some of what you're saying and push us because when Diane and I were on this panel last week together - I was moderating, she was actually providing content of interest - but one of the tensions that I think broke out into this, it was a big conversation about the rise of education savings accounts and micro-schools and the next frontier, if you will, of school choice beyond charter schools that had been the last few decades. And one of the big conversations that was being pushed is "Well, what's the marker of quality? How do we know that we're not leaving kids behind?" And I know you, like us, have pointed out lots of problems with the standardized test regime, if you will, but I guess the version of the question - I won't name their names - but that a couple of people came up to me and Diane afterwards and were like, "How do I ensure

that this group of kids are getting screwed, in effect, because they're not getting what they deserve, and they're actually getting these chances at opportunity?" And so, I'm just sort of curious, where do you feel like this pulls us? I think Diane and I feel like it pulls us to a level of pluralism we haven't actually seen before. But how do we think about value and quality against that, number one. And number two, how does that shift your definition, or does it shift your definition, of what is public education?

Todd Rose [00:26:50]:

Yeah, so first of all, to that question, it certainly does. I think we've made a mistake. Look, I think public education may be the single greatest achievement of democracy. Seriously, the commitment to the mass education of children and what that unlocked, we should not underestimate just how valuable that has been and take it for granted. So, we don't want to lose that: the commitment of the public to educate children. Because I do not want to go back to a place where only rich people get a good education. I don't see education as a strictly private matter, but there are democracies all around the world where pluralism is the name of the game. We have confused government schools with public education. That's one way to do it, but it is not the only way. And I would say, from my view, I try to stay as agnostic as possible in terms of how we get this done. And I think what I'm not willing to compromise on is: I believe that in a democracy, institutions serve the people. The people do not serve the institution. And so, it is incumbent on the education system to understand the needs of its consumer. Frankly, I don't mean to make that free market. Look, parents have a right to have a say in what their kid learns and what it's for. It's absurd that we think that that's not true. And there are other stakeholders too. But at the end of the day, I think it's fair to say, "Well, wait, there might be some bad options." Well, yeah, that definitely happens. Two things to that: Let's not pretend that the incumbent system is doing a whiz bang job right now. I mean, come on, I won't beat that. Second, there are ways to make sure. There's almost malfeasance, like Trump University or something like that. Fraud is one thing, but I think what's lurking behind a lot of those questions, even if they're well intended, is the sense that I still know best. I still know best what's good for you and your kid and what happens if you choose something that I don't approve of. And I think that every parent wants their kid to have the basics academically. So it's not like suddenly most parents are like, "We don't care if my kid learns to read." So, it's not like they're not going to want that. I would say this, you're going to get a long way in pluralism when you realize we're not calling for a lack of accountability. It's just the fundamental question is "To whom is the system accountable?" And the incumbent system is accountable upwards. Schools are accountable to the superintendent. I could care less about that. That is the wrong kind of accountability. I believe that the system is accountable to parents. It is accountable to the taxpayer to deliver on the things that they want in the way that they want it done. And if you think about that, then it's like, okay, great. I think every parent cares their kids learning basic academics. How do we measure that? How do we put that? Fine. Will some people make choices you don't like? Yes. Will some even make bad choices? Probably. What we should be doing is ensuring we create the feedback loops that make those, number one, those decisions not fatal to the kid's education. And second, that we all learn, right? So, when we thought something might work, and it didn't really work, that knowledge gets infused into the system,

so we all learn from that mistake. Right? And so, I just feel like we should take these ideas seriously. We should be worried about it, so it doesn't become a free for all. But that should never be something that stops us from realizing what the public actually wants. And work in service of delivering that.

Diane Tavenner [00:31:17]:

I could talk to you for two more hours right now, so I might have to come and visit and/or you'll come back a couple of times. What I know Michael and I are going to do this season is take so many of the nuggets you have just given us and blow them out and think about them bigger. So, I'm going to control myself right now and not dive into all the million things going through my head, which is like I've shifted seats, as you know now, and moved out of a system seat and into developing a tool and a product that is directly serving students and parents. And that mindset shift is tremendous. It's a fundamentally different way of looking at things and I think it's what you're talking about here. The system actually needs to completely shift their mindset about who they're serving and why, and it has to focus on the students and the parents and listen to them and hear what they're saying because they're yelling pretty loud, and I don't think they feel like we're hearing them yet, and I think for good reason. And so, Michael, I don't know if you want to...

Michael Horn [00:32:36]:

No, I think that's a good place to sort of wrap up the thoughts. But, Todd, one thing we do in the show before we let people go is we ask just for a book advice or a TV show that you've watched recently. We're totally putting you on the spot. And I'll totally admit that I'm doing this because I haven't finished any books since I last talked to Diane. So, I need you to fill something in. But it can be outside of education, outside of your work, just something that you've read recently

Todd Rose [00:33:02]:

Well, I'm pulling up my Kindle on my phone so I can tell you what I'm reading.

Michael Horn [00:33:07]:

That is perfect. And then you'll add to all of our reading lists.

Todd Rose [00:33:12]:

I read multiple books at the same time because I get bored too easily. I'm going to try to pull up the ones that aren't the wonky ones that no one's going to care about. I think this is probably a little too topical, but that *Peace to End All Peace*, which is about the creation of the Middle East. If you just want to have a deep understanding of how we got here, that's been pretty profound. And in terms of TV, I've gone back to British television, which I just love, and I've been

rewatching The Thick of It. So, it's the guy that produced Veep and it was the original one. So, it's about British policy. So funny.

Diane Tavenner [00:34:11]:

I'm just going to let you know that you originally were pestering me to watch The Bear, which was good, rightfully so. I just recently finished the second season of The Bear, which is, in my view, extraordinary TV. Like some of the best hours of TV. And I will just say quickly that there is an episode, I think it's called The Holiday or something like that, and it's an hour long, one of the most intense hours of TV. And for my husband and I, it was like our experiences brought to life in a really intense and somewhat therapeutic way to learn that we weren't alone. So I will just tie this back to collective illusions. It's interesting what we keep to ourselves versus what we share. And I personally believe that if we could all just be a little bit more honest and open and vulnerable with the people around us that we would be moving towards a better world. And so, I hope, Todd, that that's one thing that you do is help people realize "Don't keep it secret what you're feeling, because collectively, if we know about it, we can actually do something about it and find community and resonance with each other."

Todd Rose [00:35:29]:

I'll just say to that point, odds are they actually agree with you. And so, we're keeping quiet for no reason. The last thing I just want to say in closing is, if you look at the tradeoff priorities the American public has, one of the things that blew my mind and something we can do something about is that the idea of being actively engaged in your community was a top ten priority for every single demographic, every single one. It's also the lowest achieved attribute of all top ten attributes. More people reported being debt free than engaged in their community at the level they want to. So, we have this sense of our civil society sort of breaking down and that maybe people just don't care anymore, and it's not true. They want to be engaged in their communities. And I think that as we think about, for me, where we're headed, as we go to the 250th anniversary of our country, thinking not just about these esoteric ideas, but actually back to our roots, what it means to be American is to get in the game, to do work in your community, so we've got a lot of work coming on that, and I just think those kind of things will get us back into conversation, back into being honest with each other. And I think it's not the solution to everything, but I just don't see how we solve our problems when we're keeping quiet about the things that matter most to us.

Michael Horn [00:36:59]:

Todd it's a wonderful place to leave it. Thank you so much for joining us. Thank you so much for shedding light on the fact that to use another book reference, we don't want to be bowling alone anymore. Just deeply appreciate the work that you continue to do. We'll continue to follow, and we would like to have you back on at some point. So, thank you for joining us and for all of you listening, thanks for joining us on Class Disrupted.