

[The Bill Walton Show](#)

Fixing Our Education System with Jeanne Allen

Speaker 1:

=Welcome to Common Ground with Bill Walton, featuring conversations with leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, and thinkers, fresh perspectives on money, culture, politics, and human flourishing, interesting people, interesting things.

Bill Walton:

Today, I want to talk about some of the ways we can improve K through 12 education in America. We have a new administration in town and fresh opportunities for change. So what can be done now at the federal level, the national level, to bring about much need improvements in the way our nation's school educate our kids?

Bill Walton:

While the federal role in education is somewhat limited and much education policy is decided at the state and local levels, the federal role in education is still vast and growing from funding, mandates, testing requirements, school lunches to 2015's Every Student Succeeds Act.

Bill Walton:

The question I want to explore today is whether this federal involvement has done much at all to drive innovation and improve educational outcomes. And if not, what should we be doing? With me today to talk about this and many other related issues is Jeanne Allen whose entire career has been devoted to education reform and the nationwide fight to ensure that the bedrock of US schooling is innovation, freedom, and flexibility. Jeanne is the founder and CEO of the Center for Education Reform and has been on the front lines of education policy development and innovation for more than 30 years.

Bill Walton:

She served for five years at the Department of Education during the Reagan administration and following that, she developed the Heritage Foundation Education Policy Program. She also launched Town Hall one of the earliest online social networks. She founded CER in 1993 and has become a leader in a wide variety of efforts to innovate and improve education at all levels and across all learning venues. Jeanne, welcome.

Jeanne Allen:

Thank you, Bill.

Bill Walton:

So education. Let's narrow this down. We've got a 1.3 trillion dollar, [inaudible 00:02:20] it's hard to say trillion, it's just a big number, industry second only to healthcare. We've got 100,000 public schools. We've got 30,000 private schools. We now have 4,000 charters. It employs six or seven million people. Where are we today with this massive industry and where should we be going with it? Big question we'll drill into in detail [inaudible 00:02:47].

Jeanne Allen:

Yes. Well, where we are with this massive industry is not very far, sadly, it is an industry. It's this great big behemoth, monopoly, whatever you want to call it. And it hasn't moved very much as you said in your intro from the 19th century. And the problem is even though we've made a lot of progress in many ways, there's sort of Catch 22, we all envision our local schools as a local issue or it's a state issue. And so when it comes to saying, "How can we really manage and push and change things?" Nobody knows where to start.

Jeanne Allen:

It's probably the most diffuse if you will industry if you will, ecosystem, of any other issue. What other issue area policy has people from the federal to state to local to intermediary organization [crosstalk 00:03:37]?

Bill Walton:

And the reason we want to drive change is it's really not working very well. It's working for some Americans but not many or maybe most Americans. I mean, I think you gave me some statistics last month on educational attainment, how are kids doing?

Jeanne Allen:

Oh my gosh. Well, well over 70 percent of our kids are not reading, writing, doing civics nor history, science at what we consider proficient. So we have a nation's report card and national assessments every couple of years and we make these small, little inch strides with a couple of points here and there and that's it.

Bill Walton:

And you pointed what you called the traditionally factory style model school, what's a traditional factory style model school?

Jeanne Allen:

It's just like the traditional factory where everything goes the way it always has in kind of down an assembly line. So you have kids in seats with the same number of desks, give or take a few, in a building that looks relatively the same from the very beginning, maybe a little bigger, maybe longer, maybe there's more of them but for the most part-

Bill Walton:

1910 classroom looks about what it does today.

Jeanne Allen:

Yes. Well, look at the factory line.

Bill Walton:

So even factories today don't really look like that.

Jeanne Allen:

No.

Bill Walton:

They've changed as productivity improvements have occurred in the product sector.

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. In fact, factories actually have more technology that they're utilizing. Factories actually measure output in real time.

Bill Walton:

Well I think, we talk about innovation, one of the things that we've talked about before is that there's really been no productivity growth over a century in education. By that I mean, if you want to increase output, you hire more people. And that's about it. There's not been a big R&D budget in education, so therefore, if you could measure output in education, if you wanted X amount of education, you put Y amount of input. If you want 2X, you put 2Y input in and you end up just spending more money and getting the same outcome.

Jeanne Allen:

Right. And so the question also is, part of that is a lot of people disagree on what education is for. And there's a lot of differences of opinion. Some people believe that there should be classical education, those rows are good. Some people believe that it should be about helping someone achieve their own, individual, unique potential. So we've been debating this for decades. At least we've been debating it. Prior to a couple of decades ago, no one was debating it which is where you and I first met.

Jeanne Allen:

And at least we've been debating it but the reality is, why are we trying to come up with one answer?

Bill Walton:

Right. There are hundreds if not thousands of different markets for different types of educational experiences. Well, what should the federal government role be? And I know you've been a major advocate and you've spent time with the Secretary of Education and the president. You've written a book, a pamphlet called The First 100 Days. We're a little bit past that, although looking at the boldness of this agenda, it might take the first hundred months, but it's a great start.

Jeanne Allen:

Yes, indeed, well thank you. And in fact, we're going to reissuing it, giving the administration an extension. And we've decided in very much keeping in league with what our discussion is that rather than give the seat time, this 100 days, it should be competency based model. When we achieve it, so competency based model, is you move ahead or basically you succeed or you're declared done when you've accomplished and mastered something.

Bill Walton:

Now what do you mean by seat time? That's the factory model we were talking about. What's seat time?

Jeanne Allen:

So seat time is how, so all states measure schools in large part by how long a student is in their seat, from the time they arrive until they leave on an annual basis. From the time they arrive during the day until they leave, so seat time is how many hours in a day, how many days in a year, how many years until you have a completion, you have a degree, you have a diploma. And so that is what drives us to have that system that looks exactly the way we have today because that's how schools are measured.

Jeanne Allen:

Different you have kids there for least 180 days? When some states will expand the number of days their kids are in seats, that's how you get paid. And if you don't do that, you don't get paid for those kids.

Bill Walton:

And you write that this model was designed in the 19th century by about eight men sitting in a room and they created something called the Carnegie Unit and it was the wisdom that occurred in 1880 that we're still living with today?

Jeanne Allen:

Right. And the idea was we need to make sure that every student is in a place where they can be educated, so we should be measure it by whether or not they've had a certain amount of units in science and math and back then it probably included surveying and all sorts of other things. And so it was important to get students in seats because they weren't in seats, not all of them were, at least not the immigrants and the people like my people who were coming to this country.

Jeanne Allen:

So go to competency based, the idea of competency based which sounds so basic, it's what we do with everything else. Did you accomplish what we wanted you to accomplish? Did you master the math? Did you master science?

Bill Walton:

Well, how do you measure competency? Is it test taking or something else?

Jeanne Allen:

This is the big rub. This is what's everyone's debating.

Bill Walton:

Because we had this big debate about testing, teaching to the test, and everybody hated that, I think, I don't know. But it caused a problem. How do we measure competency?

Jeanne Allen:

The answer is it's got to be by the individual, by the school, and we've got to change the way we measure. So if your school, if your grade, the grade you're in, expects you to be able to, let's say, achieve calculus by a certain grade, if it expects you to know multiplication tables by the end of the second grade, if you master the multiplication tables before the end of the second grade, you're done. You

should move on. Why do we have these fixed ideas of second, third, fourth, fifth grade? We take, in this country, we assume that there was some science behind that every grade has a different kind of math.

Bill Walton:

So we not only have seat time, we created the grade system.

Jeanne Allen:

Right.

Bill Walton:

And isn't the Montessori school based on not having grades?

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. I think they still, in some cases, they still have to have the grades in order to get the money, right, but-

Bill Walton:

Well, yeah, because-

Jeanne Allen:

But technically, there's more of sort of inter-age groupings. You hear about inter-age or ability groupings. They still have to check that box but they've got a little bit more leeway and flexibility. And after all, the whole idea of the charter model, those some 7,000 schools out there, the whole idea of the model was to give people the ability to do exactly this, to violate if you will, the old fashioned seat time. And then what we did is we put them back in the box because we started passing state and then federal laws that said, "But you still have to have this outcome at the end of the first, second, third, fourth, fifth grade," and that forces people to behave differently.

Jeanne Allen:

So our feeling is rather than require people, the same numbers of people, the same kind of programs, the same kind of measurement of when did you arrive, when did you leave, what are you taking? Let's allow educators and leaders to provide education based on competency.

Bill Walton:

Well that's incredibly radical.

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. Pretty much.

Bill Walton:

How do you manage that?

Jeanne Allen:

There's a couple of things that we can actually do. You asked about sort of federal imprint, I actually think there's some hope, it's modest hope, that we might be able to have the leadership from Washington to spark this change. Even though education is by and large a state and local issue, the federal imprimatura, the conversation, the bully pulpit let's and pushes people to do things that they might never do. They feel safe doing different things, for example, during the Obama administration, it was clear they didn't like school choice, school choice did not get enacted nearly as much as it could have.

Jeanne Allen:

Now it's back on the rise because there's someone in Washington who says it's okay. So on the theory that leadership at the national level, forget about federal government, leadership at the national level can spark change, why not un-silo the programs, the funding that exists, no additional money, disconnect all the lines in between all the programs from pre-K through higher ed, and allow school district schools to use those funds in radically different ways.

Bill Walton:

So the existing system is federal dollars going to school districts or states to fund specific type programs based on specific rules and you're saying, "Let's get rid of that. Let's just send the money and have people figure out how to create good outcomes in students, competencies."

Jeanne Allen:

Right. And that's really ambitious. So we think about it incrementally. That would be ideal.

Bill Walton:

Well let me come back just a bit though to explain where we are. I mean right now we've got funding in accreditation. You basically, to be a school you need to be accredited, you need to have certified teachers, you need to have state approved text books. What are some of the other requirements you have to be that are all based on input?

Jeanne Allen:

So with some states, you have to have state approved text books, a lot of places it's more district driven. So you have to abide by state standards, health, civil rights, safety, discrimination. You have to abide by academic standards and demonstrate proficiency or success on the state metric. You have to administer tests as indicated. You have to have your kids in schools a certain amount of days. You have to and you're required to offer everything from remedial education students who aren't succeeding, you have to have programs for the poor, for the hungry, you have to programs for kids with special needs and you have to demonstrate what you're doing. You have to have certain professional development programs. You have to abide by contracts that labor gives you, even in right to work states, a lot of people, conservatives in particular, think, "Oh, right to work states, they have more freedom." There are still master contracts between teachers associations and state legislatures.

Jeanne Allen:

There are uniform pay scales that you have to follow. There are contractual requirements for everything from custodians to phys ed teachers. There are language requirements. There are diploma requirements on and on and on. So those things happen, have been adopted by and large at the local and state level,

and the federal government funds programs that actually subsidize for the poor or augment those existing programs.

Bill Walton:

What does the Every Student Succeeds Act say or do about this?

Jeanne Allen:

So it did a couple of things.

Bill Walton:

And when was that passed, that was?

Jeanne Allen:

Just end of 2014.

Bill Walton:

Okay. So we have a new law in place that supersedes Every Child Left Behind.

Jeanne Allen:

Right.

Bill Walton:

Or No Child Left Behind.

Jeanne Allen:

Yes.

Bill Walton:

Right. Right. Every Child Left Behind.

Jeanne Allen:

Actually it was '15. Yeah. Yeah.

Bill Walton:

Okay so what does that do? Do you like that?

Jeanne Allen:

So I like it. It's a step in the right direction to this notion of flexibility. So we believe the tenants of better education for everyone are opportunity, freedom, flexibility, and innovation. When there's more flexibility in federal funding, there are fewer guardrails if you will. No Child Left Behind put a lot of very specific requirements on testing and that, by the way might sound strange for someone who loves flexibility and lots of autonomy. It wasn't entirely a bad thing. It was the first time the federal government ever held districts or states accountable for how they spent federal money.

Jeanne Allen:

The problem was like everything in education, when there are requirements to do certain things, they're easily manipulated. So what it did is it turned into a testing frenzy. Rather than, "Oh, let's use this to show people how great we're doing," superintendents, school districts, individual principals added on. And they piled on big when it comes to testing.

Bill Walton:

Well one of our themes here is innovation, productivity, growth, human flourishing. And it seems like you list all these requirements, it seems like innovating inside of that model is pretty tough.

Jeanne Allen:

It's very tough and so you ask about the Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA, that was an attempt to actually release some of those restrictions on testing. You still have to test. You still have to report. But no longer is the federal government going to require you to demonstrate your success in order to achieve federal money. You have to post. So there was about transparency but it wasn't about the federal government saying, "Did you hold Johnny accountable for the money you received to help him read? Right?"

Jeanne Allen:

So it's better but innovation, right, to have innovation, just like in any private sector endeavor, to have innovation, people need the freedom to be able to change what they're doing, to fail and fail fast, to correct their mistakes, to introduce new programs. Maybe you figured out that what you're teaching in terms of multiplication, division isn't working and you want to adopt a wholly new different way of doing it. There's Kahn Academy out there for example, there's online courses at the higher ed level.

Jeanne Allen:

Your average educator, while there's nothing preventing them from introducing those programs into their classroom, they cannot change the lock step of how they're doing it and their sequence.

Bill Walton:

Well what do you do about parents that say, "Well, innovation and experimentation is great but not with my kid. Is that a-?"

Jeanne Allen:

You know. I don't know that most parents really believe that if it's done well. Parents actually-

Bill Walton:

I know I don't, but I-

Jeanne Allen:

No. Most parents might say that if you talk to them about it. But when they see excellence, when they see success happening in schools. So what you have to do is you have to give them options. There's no one size fits all, right? So the idea here is you don't mandate it in the District of Columbia Public Schools, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, Ohio, or Maryland schools. You allow those things to be options.

Jeanne Allen:

This is why choice is so essential to any reforms or efforts to transform education. Because there may be parents that simply say, "I like the old way. It works for me." I suspect given the options, they may not do that. But why don't you give them a change to actually make that determination? I'll never forget, there's a woman, everybody talks about their favorite educator stories. This is favorite educator of one of my kids stories.

Jeanne Allen:

It's a woman who is retiring this year. She was teaching for 30 years. She had my son in second grade. He sat next to her desk for the first six months of school. It was a private school because she needed to keep her thumb on him. He just needed a lot more care and feeding and discipline than the rest of the class. I'm fine with that. It actually worked out. He's a fantastic 28 year old today. But the point is, she had a very structured class. My second son needed a lot more flexibility. Lot more hands on environment. We should be letting parents help make that decision but we should be providing the opportunity for schools and educators to create those different environments.

Bill Walton:

One of the big ideas that you have that I love is that the federal ought to be to make innovation a mandate from Washington with no strings. How do you mandate innovation? I like it.

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. No absolutely. It should be their focus. They should say, "Use these funds, connect them, combine them, and demonstrate what you can do. We'll be the R&D holder. You tell us what you're doing, we will post your best accomplishments. We will celebrate them. Who knows? The president might show up in your school and talk about it." But mandate that people use the funds flexibly.

Bill Walton:

So we'd have rose garden ceremonies celebrating an innovative school or outcome.

Jeanne Allen:

Absolutely. As opposed to just, and I say this with all due respect to great educators, as opposed to just celebrating teachers. If you think about it and this is heresy and someone will probably write me off a letter, teachers coming to the rose garden, right?

Bill Walton:

I suspect you get a lot of letters.

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. I do. People coming-

Bill Walton:

Or emails.

Jeanne Allen:

But people coming to the rose garden is a great thing for a ceremony because we're celebrating teachers. Are we celebrating what they really did and what they were allowed to accomplish? Because we gave them the flexibility to do it? That's the rose garden ceremony for teachers should be about.

Bill Walton:

And you also have called for creating congressional committees that people come and testify about local education leaders most needs to be done in Washington. That sounds like a terrific idea. Has anybody taken that one up?

Jeanne Allen:

No not yet. We're working on it. I mean, I think we need a pause. I'll tell you. Members of Congress love this idea. They love to have the opportunity to bring people from their districts who are telling them they're doing great things to Washington. Congressman Will Herd from Texas shared with us recently that their school district or school in his school district that is using drones to go out and collect data on what's happening on farms and agriculture and with water and bringing that information back and then students are using that to do science experiments. Let them come and tell. Have that happen. What do they need? What do they want to use funds? Don't come ask for more money. Is there anything preventing them from doing more of that? Come to DC, tell us, and by the way, publicize it, report it, instead, we're still in this very traditional, we have to have a hearing, it has to be about a specific bill. That should not be federal world.

Bill Walton:

The four things, four pillars that you talk about in your first 100 days are spending, teaching, higher education, and educational choice. We drilled in a bit on spending. Have we covered everything there? I mean you can't cover everything, but is it, anything else-

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. I think the only other thing I'd add about spending is that even the people in the US Department of Education have been there for years. And obviously whenever new people come, don't quite realize, how much money the specific money allocated drives regulation and rules and drives behavior. We recommended to Secretary DeVos that actually one of the first things she could do is like a plumber. Go through and kind of plumb out all of the rules and guidance that are out there that are connected to spending.

Jeanne Allen:

So that's the first, it doesn't need legislation. What are the rules connected to spending, that's the first anchor to getting innovation done.

Bill Walton:

And then let's talk about the teaching part. You have a lot of great ideas there.

Jeanne Allen:

So this is probably the most misunderstood aspect of federal policy. It's not about how much money the federal government spends or sends to school districts to spend for teachers on teachers. Obviously we want teachers to be well resourced. But the reality is, we force schools and school districts to have to

demonstrate that teachers are certified, when certification really isn't a barometer of quality. We force them to report how many teachers they have in the classroom. We force them to have subjects connected to teachers. There might be schools that have teachers that could teach any variety of subjects and we have a huge pipeline issue. We simply don't have teachers coming back into the classroom enough.

Bill Walton:

So this is the old Don Graham story. He's the publisher of the Washington Post and he had a history degree from Harvard and wasn't allowed to teach in the Washington public schools because he didn't have a certificate.

Jeanne Allen:

Right. Absolutely. So those are state ideas. Those are state laws. But the federal government rewards or basically sends their money to follow. So when No Child Left Behind and even under ESSA, you have to demonstrate that you have highly qualified teachers and the default for states for that is certification.

Jeanne Allen:

The federal government should say, "Actually you're not going to get any money for that. We don't really care what the [inaudible 00:23:47] is."

Bill Walton:

And I'd be interested in your comment on this. My understand is that getting a teaching certificate is not that much about classroom instruction or hands on education. It's more about theory and other aspects of education and so it doesn't really translate into going into an inner city school and teaching history.

Jeanne Allen:

Right. But you could and learn, I mean it's important to learn classroom behavior. It's important to learn procedures, those really, really good things out there. There are phenomenal models of how you engage a student. You have to learn about the trauma the students come with. There's fantastic things but why can't you do that in a business course?

Bill Walton:

Yeah.

Jeanne Allen:

Or online?

Bill Walton:

You can create a smaller program that's not a four year teaching certificate program.

Jeanne Allen:

Exactly.

Bill Walton:

That gets you the same skills for a classroom.

Jeanne Allen:

Absolutely.

Bill Walton:

Interesting. So how do we bring that one about? I mean who has the federal government helped make that a reality?

Jeanne Allen:

I think one of the biggest impediments, I know one of the biggest impediments, because there's survey and there's research on this is the fact that most people don't want to become a teacher because of the quality of the environment because it exactly goes back to the regulations and the requirements we're talking about. It's not just a financial, financial is important, it's not just a financial issue. It's a quality of environment issue. They don't have the flexibility, they're not going to want to be there.

Bill Walton:

There's something out there about there's a big teacher shortage now. Want to talk about the teacher shortage?

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. So there's a shortage of people willing to teach or that are certified, shortage of people who have the current requirements under their belt for teaching in the current old fashioned construct. There's not a shortage of people who want to teach. 42 percent of sophomores in high school say they want to actually become teachers. By the time they become sophomores in college, it's down to 11 percent. Meanwhile, if you survey military people retired folks and retirement now is like 60 is the new 40. These people are young, they are smart, they have a lifetime of experience, the barrier entry in education even in states that have what we call alternative certification is enormous. And then there are union contracts that actually discourage school districts from hiring anyone who doesn't have your traditional certification and requirements.

Bill Walton:

So we've got millions of people that would be terrific.

Jeanne Allen:

Terrific, qualified, ready.

Bill Walton:

But they don't have the certificate, so if you we could set up some sort of sub certification where we had, if you take these three or four classes in classroom management and educational outcomes, you could end up getting these qualified and ready to go.

Jeanne Allen:

Absolutely. And so why not have the federal government launch that conversation, talk about, bring the teachers in, what can we do to help make your life better without additional funds, where can we use

funds better, how can we give you more flexibility, how can we encourage your states to give more flexibility?

Bill Walton:

And one thing you mentioned, you've talked about, is the idea that why necessarily have a teacher in a classroom? Why not take advantage of the online world and have teachers that are specialists in something that may be in a different school, different university, maybe even another country.

Jeanne Allen:

Right. Why can't you have exactly, so there's lots of ideas and there's lots of schools beginning to try this, have more personalization but imagine a classroom where you walk in and you get a playlist. This is actually happening in a few schools around the country including Summit Public Charter Schools in California. You walk in and there's a playlist on the wall, you just have to accomplish all eight playlists by the end of the week. You have your devices, maybe it's your own, maybe it's something the school took in. And rather than have to have although these school still have to have a qualified math instructor, maybe your math could be from Sal Kahn who created Kahn Academies.

Jeanne Allen:

Maybe he could be from sort of a professor in the middle of Singapore that created Singapore math. Maybe it could be from my uncle who was a Bell Lab scientist who couldn't get into New Jersey Public Schools to teach math even though he's a crazy math guy. Maybe it could be from any number of those people who are sanctioned in some other field. And so you could taking your course online, you could be then finishing or mastering, demonstrating mastery through a number of assessments and quizzes and you could move on. Might also spark you to want to do more with math. Maybe you want to get an engineering course but there's not an engineer.

Bill Walton:

Well there is a company called The Great Courses Teaching Company and I've taken a lot of classes through that and they have an ex head of engineering instructor at West Point who teaches a class on everyday engineering.

Jeanne Allen:

Oh, that's fantastic.

Bill Walton:

And so I finally know a toilet works.

Jeanne Allen:

Exactly.

Bill Walton:

But he's the best in the world at teaching how mechanical things work, internal combustion engine, you'd be hard pressed to find your local whomever to come in and teach that class.

Jeanne Allen:

I'll tell you what, the best math course I've ever taken was a year ago, Wharton University of Pennsylvania Wharton professors online through [Coursera 00:28:43] which is the [inaudible 00:28:46] open online courses, the MOOCs that are out there. And it's part of our Masters Program. We also had to take online courses. And I actually, it was a business course, but the kind of math instruction that I got in six weeks on my own online surpassed anything that I'd ever taken.

Bill Walton:

So we can take science online. We can go do hands on things at the local museums if we want to do something in natural history for example or art or things like that or go to see the museum, or not the museum, the orchestra for music. What happens to the classroom teacher if we've got all these other sources of instruction and learning?

Jeanne Allen:

Oh, their role becomes even more important. We need teachers even more than before but we need them in a different way. We need them as coaches. We need them to enable these open education resources and help explore. We need them to guide. We need them to respond, to answer questions, then they actually really can take on that role as a leader as opposed to simply, I mean knowledge, one of colleagues says, "Knowledge is a commodity." Right? You can Google knowledge.

Jeanne Allen:

So you want to be able to explain-

Bill Walton:

Or at least information.

Jeanne Allen:

Right. You can Google information and then you can learn knowledge. Maybe they can actually then set up and structure conversations. But what you can do that's extraordinary once you allow teachers to be freed from open ourselves to page eight today and go to bullet four and let's talk about what just happened in the civil war. Imagine if you could construct a battle or an argument.

Bill Walton:

Well the barrier I always thought to this was the NEA and AFT, the teachers unions that didn't want anything in that supplant the teacher but what you're describing ought to be extremely welcome to them because it makes their job a lot more interesting. Wouldn't you rather be in a room where you've got this great curriculum and that great computer program or whatever and you're helping facilitate all that? It seems like your level of interest in what's going on would rise dramatically.

Jeanne Allen:

And your salary would rise dramatically because suddenly-

Bill Walton:

There you go.

Jeanne Allen:

You don't have to buy all those resources.

Bill Walton:

Yeah.

Jeanne Allen:

Okay? And so the unions have-

Bill Walton:

How does the money substitution work here? I'm interested.

Jeanne Allen:

Well you're not buying, you don't have to have a contract with a text book publisher even if they've got great digital online programs. You don't have to have professional development funds. You free them up to do other things. Now they can also take on additional responsibilities. One of the things union contracts do is it keeps teachers in a traditional educator box. You can't go into the cafeteria and work with students in the middle of the day. You can't stay after school unless it's allowed by your contract, unless you get X, Y, Z sign offs. But imagine the educator. And this is a model that folks like Milken Family Foundation have created and others, imagine an educator says, "I have six hours a day to give you because otherwise I need to be home with my children or I'm consulting or I'm a media specialist." And imagine if a teacher says, "I have 12 hours a day. I would like to teach. I would like to help lead the organization. I would like to help lead the music program. I want to stay after. Pay me 150,000 dollars and I will do all those things."

Jeanne Allen:

Money becomes much more fungible. So unions don't like this because they think that by nature, it's kind of Locke versus Hobbs. We're Locke, they're Hobbs. They think all men are bad. Human nature is bad and if you allow that to happen-

Bill Walton:

That would be Hobbes.

Jeanne Allen:

Right. We're Locke. They're Hobbes.

Bill Walton:

We're all in the, what is it, state of nature?

Jeanne Allen:

Right. Exactly. Exactly. And bad things will happen if we don't actually require that we pay them a certain salary to prevent them from being taken advantage of. But individuals left up to their own devices do great things in their self interest, that's Locke.

Bill Walton:

You know it's funny I was president of the symphony here in Washington and we had a contract with a union that was designed in the thirties. I felt like it was written by Walter Reuther. It was sort of read like the musicians didn't want to play music and they would have all these hours they could do it or not rehearse or rehearse and it certainly didn't stimulate a lot of innovation in the orchestra.

Jeanne Allen:

Oh, well they were looking for a trumpet player at one point in time and my husband wasn't allowed to substitute in one of the orchestras in Washington because he was not part of the union. But they needed him and he was the only one available that night.

Bill Walton:

What's his instrument?

Jeanne Allen:

Trumpet voice.

Bill Walton:

Great. So they went without the trumpet?

Jeanne Allen:

They went without the trumpet. It's the same thing with teachers. It's ridiculous.

Bill Walton:

Yeah. Let's talk about educational choice because as I hear about this innovation, I think about the differing roles of the teachers, the different ways we can deliver learning. It certainly raises the issue about charter schools and vouchers. And what I think you're talking about is something different. I mean if we've got charter schools that look just like public schools even though they're funded differently and maybe have different leadership structure, you're not going to get that much different from a public school. So you really need to, your charter schools need to be able to innovate along the lines of what you're talking about.

Jeanne Allen:

Exactly. The choice aspect is necessary but not sufficient. And I used to say it the opposite way. And why I say that is because we've seen that the over regulation and the overreach of regulation with government funding which public charter schools have to have in order to stay in business also hamstring their educators. They tend to be more innovative. They can do a lot more. They can be a lot more challenging, depends on the state because every state creates charter schools in different ways. And watches them in different ways and monitors them in different ways. There's still the laboratory of innovation where the traditional public school system and many people have copied what they've done.

Jeanne Allen:

However, they also still pretty much, for the most part, have a box, have to have kids in seats a certain amount of days, have to report on certain hours, have to have certain standardized tests. And so they would benefit more quickly in the exact same kind of removal of the constraints we're talking about.

Bill Walton:

So even though you're a charter, you still have the same input requirements that you have if you're a public school.

Jeanne Allen:

In large part, you do. You may be measured differently. You may be able to take kids by choice. You may have less regulation overall. And may be able to be more productive which most of them are. But by and large, getting to that point depends on your city, state and then the national requirements. Private schools and private school choice, so we believe, look, opportunity, everyone should have the opportunity to send their student to the learning environment, not school, learning environment that best meets their needs to help them achieve what they need.

Jeanne Allen:

It could be an all day art school where you also learn math and science, whatever. Public, private, charter, home, online, whatever it is. And that money should follow the kids to the school of choice. We know that if we had that system, the innovations we're talking about would happen because the money would follow kids, money would be at the local level. Now you take 100 kids times 10,000 dollars and say, "Bill, we're gonna ahead and let you get what you need to do. You respond by telling us what you've done, great." That's not going to happen now and overnight. We can move towards that. What we have to do is as we're creating that appetite, we need to be loosening the strings to show people how powerful that can be.

Bill Walton:

So choice without loosening the strings isn't gonna get us much.

Jeanne Allen:

Exactly.

Bill Walton:

But choice will drive the innovation.

Jeanne Allen:

Yes. Absolutely. It always does.

Bill Walton:

Because as you compete with other schools for kids, you want to do new things.

Jeanne Allen:

Right. But right now we also have school districts and there are lots of kids in those school districts and they're rural, urban, suburban, and there are educators who are digital natives, who have grown up in an era of technology who understand that one size fits all doesn't work, that get the fact that there's new brain science that shows that we all learn differently and at different times. We know lots about what works in other enterprises that were never really available to districts and schools and school leaders when we're all dependent on the library to tell us what we know.

Jeanne Allen:

So we need to give them the flexibility and freedom to understand how powerful this can be. And they want it, a lot of them.

Bill Walton:

Well there a lot of people inside the existing schools that would love the kinds of things you're talking about. It'd make their life a lot more interesting and as you point out, they could make more money. Political barriers, where are we on choice? I mean we've got 36 or 37 Republican governorships and roughly the same proportion of legislatures. Republicans have been traditionally pro-choice. How's that doing?

Jeanne Allen:

It's still such a battle. Just right now as we talk, Texas has been fighting off and on for the last two months. It's run by a Republican governor, Republican legislature, and it could die any minute. I mean it's silly. Kentucky, we fought to get a charter school law there. There was nothing on the books. Nth hour, something very modest got passed. It's ridiculous the fight. So traditional Republicans don't really understand why it's important and they have their constituents, their superintendents, and teachers just like the rest of them, in this case, they happen to be people in their homes. Their wives, their husbands, their cousin Ken is the superintendent, right? And so what we have not done is powerfully articulate and demonstrate why education freedom in and of itself is a good thing no matter what kind of district you have.

Jeanne Allen:

So they're up against the same political barriers that everybody else is. They tend to be more supportive on the right. But it's not safe guard. It's no guarantee that you're gonna have an educational choice program. So every year, there's a little progress. There are programs, scholarship programs, voucher programs for special needs kids, an education savings accounts which is a great idea that was just passed in Arizona that allows you to spend your money any way you want for education. There's progress being made in a very short time and considering how old the traditional school system is, it's fantastic. We have to be doing more on lots of different fronts.

Bill Walton:

What about the current Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos or DeVos?

Jeanne Allen:

DeVos.

Bill Walton:

DeVos. Where is she on this and is she going to be an effective advocate?

Jeanne Allen:

She really believes that like you that the traditional education system is old, archaic, that we need to start over, even higher ed, we're gonna reauthorize the higher ed act? Why are going to reauthorize anything? Why don't we start fresh? She's a firm believer in innovation, in educational choice and freedom, and I think that she is a very strong spokesperson to be able to talk about it and help get this

conversation off the ground. But as you can imagine, she's up against a big fight and she's constantly criticized every time something comes out of her mouth about not really appreciating the traditional system.

Jeanne Allen:

And so the media is critical, being able to articulate to get rank and file people why this is so important, so Betsy DeVos will be a great ally in this effort. It's just we have to be fighting at every single level.

Bill Walton:

What you're advocating and what both you and I want to bring out seems to be good for almost every American, ordinary people, rich, poor, whatever, if we could bring these things about, good things would happen. Who are the political enemies of this? Who is block these things?

Jeanne Allen:

So I would say there are two enemies. And I'll start with the big one. I used to say unions and the education establishment. There are literally hundreds of what we affectionately have called over the years the education blob.

Bill Walton:

The blob, yeah.

Jeanne Allen:

It's school boards. It's administrators. Unions, organizations, it's all those groups. And yes, they have full time staff, full time buildings in Washington, in every state capital, and for-

Bill Walton:

NEA building is beautiful.

Jeanne Allen:

Oh, yeah, gorgeous. Cost 16 million, tax exempt. It's awesome. So they actually have a huge leg up on all of us because they're there every day and they have money because it comes actually out of the public till. Because the money that they have because the public funds schools. So school board dues go into a school board association, become lobbyists, they hang out on capital hill, they hang out in state capitals. So they are probably the largest single impediment. I would say though equally is lack of awareness, apathy, I mean the enemy really sometimes, with that old cartoon, the enemy is us. In a way, the only reason they can succeed is because there's not an equal amount of awareness and understanding on the part of the people they're talking to. Because if you showed up in my office and I was a congressperson or I was a governors and you said, "We have to have it this way," and I don't know where those Carnegie Units came from. Those eight men in a room in 1880, and I don't realize that there's actually zero objective science behind why our classroom is formulated, of course you're gonna make a compelling case to me about why we have to do it the same way.

Jeanne Allen:

So we need to make a better case. Those of us who believe it has to be changed and then we have to change the system and make sure money stops flowing through those groups. So we're basically funding the enemy every day.

Bill Walton:

Well CER's got about, what, 100,000 people in your network that are out in states advocating?

Jeanne Allen:

Absolutely. And have multiplier effects of thousands more. So we're at it every day. Lots of groups are at it every day. There's a collective, pretty strong movement for educational change. We have lots of different shades of gray, who wants some federal role, no federal role, but we're bigger and better and stronger than we used to be in the education I'll say opportunity. I used to say, "Just reform the education opportunity arena."

Bill Walton:

Those sounds like final words for this. This has been terrific. We've been talking with Jeanne Allen about education in America, federal role in education, and hope for innovation and change. And we've got a good ideas and I'm pretty confident that with Jeanne's energy and intelligence, we're gonna see some of this happen and hopefully not within maybe 100 days but certainly, I don't know 100 weeks, there we go.

Jeanne Allen:

I'll take it.

Bill Walton:

All right. Thanks Jeanne.

Jeanne Allen:

Thanks so much, Bill.

Speaker 1:

Thanks for listening. Want more? Be sure to subscribe to Common Ground with Bill Walton on iTunes.