

Post Pandemic K-12 Education: Why We Don't Want a Return to "Normal" Episode 84

Speaker 1:

Welcome to the [Bill Walton Show](#), featuring conversations with leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, and thinkers. Fresh perspectives on money, culture, politics, and human flourishing. Interesting people, interesting things.

Bill Walton:

Welcome to the Bill Walton Show. We're all talking, wondering, thinking about what comes next when we emerge from the corona-19 virus and what normal is going to be like? Will we get back to what we used to be? Or will the future be something quite different? Well, in some areas, I don't think in some systems, in some industries, we don't want to go back to the old normal. We want to go something forward to the new normal and education is particularly one of those industries or institutions that I think could use a lot of fixing up. If you listen to Walter Williams talk about what we've done with education today in America, in eighth grade, only 24% of students perform at or above proficient level in civics, only 15% at or above proficient in American history, and almost nobody's proficient in geography.

Bill Walton:

The opportunities to make education better are abundant. And with me to dig into this, is somebody who's been pioneering and working in the education field for almost three decades, Jeanne Allen, founder and CEO of the Center for Education Reform, who has just published a new report called the Future of School Students, Not Systems. Jeanne, welcome.

Jeanne Allen:

Hey Bill, how are you?

Bill Walton:

Hey, good to see you again.

Jeanne Allen:

You too.

Bill Walton:

Well, I opened this up with, I never quite know how to tackle education because it's such a big, big thing and some schools are doing okay and some are doing terribly. And I know you've been laboring in the vineyards to make things better. Where are we today? And how should we start thinking about what the future looks like for schools in America?

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. Probably were in more vineyards than we should be these days of COVID, so to speak. Thanks for having me. And thanks for asking the question.

Bill Walton:

I Forgot that, you're an expert in wine as well.

Jeanne Allen:

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Yeah, right exactly. Exactly vineyards kind of piqued my curiosity. But no, you're absolutely right. This is, it's a unique opportunity born out of a challenge. And I forget who said it, but you never want to waste a crisis. And so despite that we, and I personally feel so bad.

Bill Walton:

Actually, the first person that said that was Machiavelli.

Jeanne Allen:

Was it Machiavelli? Okay.

Bill Walton:

And then picked up Rahm Emanuel.

Jeanne Allen:

There you go. Put me in the bucket with Machiavelli. But I feel so bad for the students out there, the teachers, the parents who are going through this and most people just kind of say, "Oh my gosh, I can't wait till school, we go back. I can't wait till everything just goes back to normal." And you're absolutely right in your opening, we can't go back to normal. Not only physically can't we go back to normal, but going back to normal suggests that we like those 15% proficient in geography and history and civics and all the other things. And so we kind of looked around the minute this crisis happened, Bill, and said, "What are we doing through the work at the Center for Education Reform that could be instructive for how we take the nation back to school?" And we realized through lots of conversations, that school is actually a verb. It's not a place.

Bill Walton:

Okay. Yeah. To school.

Jeanne Allen:

It's a verb and you should be schooling. And so schooling doesn't necessarily need a brick and mortar institution. You need, people want, and that's okay. And might prefer that students be together. Yes, there are great things we benefit from there, but it doesn't mean you have to be in the same rows with the same kind of curriculum, with the same kind of instruction, with the same top down stuff that's impeded our progress all these years.

Bill Walton:

Well, we've got an experiment going on right now. Most of the schools have been shut in America for what? Six weeks. Kids have been sent home. The school year is over. And there's a lot of concern about some kids like eighth graders that might be falling way behind and are going to start struggling when they get to high school. But there are also a lot of experimentation with what's now homeschooling and online learning. Is this where, what are the early reports from how people are feeling about having their kids home and trying to make up for what is or isn't happening in the schools?

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. It's interesting. I put it in two buckets. Homeschooling suggests that a parent is doing something themselves, that they have collected the program, the curriculum. That they're guiding it. What's really

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happening in most places is digital or remote learning. Depending on who you're talking to. And they're kind of one in the same right now. Digital learning transcends what we're going through here. It means that there's programs and curriculum and basically just teaching and learning going on in this way or through your computer or self paced. We might download a booklet. You might work in hand in hand, you might go online to do an assessment. You may have a synchronous conversation with the teacher. You might get a phone call. You might also be in kind of that Brady Bunch Zoom thing that we've now all gotten used to.

Jeanne Allen:

And remote learning is a little bit of the same. Some are doing high tech where all day, all hours of the day, students and teachers are pretty much interacting with each other to face or interacting on and through a device. Downloading programs, assessments, et cetera. And others, low tech again have recorded these workbooks. We talked to someone the other day at the head of National Heritage Academies, some 50 schools or so across the country, maybe a few more founded by J.C. Huizenga, good friend of us all, they printed out 350,000 workbooks and sent them to school.

Jeanne Allen:

What we're seeing is when that's happening, I'm bringing that up because homeschooling or digital learning, teachers are still or could be depending on if they're doing it right, in charge. And so mom and dad, or guardian or grandparent, doesn't have to be sitting there because you are helping me get through my math lesson. Mom and dad can be in the other room doing work. Yes, you check in. Yes, it's hard. I get it. But for the most part, those that are doing it really well are schools that are delivering this remote education and keeping me engaged like I am right now with you.

Bill Walton:

Well, but that's not universally true. Aren't there some school districts that are saying they don't really want teachers to spend much time doing what we're doing with Zoom and the unions have gotten involved and said, "We got to rethink how they're going to spend their time." And so it's not happening everywhere.

Jeanne Allen:

Nope. It's not. And that's exactly right. What I was just mentioning, is where it does happen right, you're seeing a lot of this from small schools and some innovative school districts to charter networks, to schools that are in the independent sector. And then you have the big fat school districts, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Seattle that came out of the gate and said, "Oh, we better not start doing this kind of teaching, that ain't teaching." Because we, the first thing they said was, "We don't know that everybody has a device or access to the internet." Which is kind of like saying we don't have enough lifeboats so let's not save anybody. Once that, people started getting over that, then the unions, of course, sharpened their pencils and came at school districts to renegotiate contracts and said, for example in LA, "We don't want teachers required to do any face to face learning."

Jeanne Allen:

What an awful thing to say when you've got so many students for whom this is a benefit. This is communication for them, Bill. Philadelphia took weeks to even distribute devices that have been contributed and then kind of left it up to individual schools to figure out. And they're still not fully online. Fairfax County, which is wealthy, had this huge blow up, hundreds of millions of dollars wasted

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where they could barely get people online. And then when they did, there were hackers. And unions are saying, "You know what? We don't want our teachers to have to go through this." And when they go back, they're saying, "We want requirements that they have equipment, that there's guarantees of safety." The controls that they're going to come back with are even more than we deal with now.

Bill Walton:

Are the schools going to reopen, I can't say that everywhere in every place, but what's the body language now among educators about reopening schools in August, September, is that going to happen?

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. Most leaders, districts, pundits, whoever talking about this a lot right now, as you know, you heard the president the other night saying you want schools to go back. Education Secretary DeVos was on Fox News recently saying the same thing. But to her credit, she's saying what we've been saying for a while as well, it's got to be different. What we're hearing is two things. One is schools will open, but probably have a number of different arrangements. Maybe they will have, you can choose a couple of hours a day to go and you can pick what works best for you. Maybe it's just two or three days a week. We're hoping and pushing the idea of innovations where you might decide that it's okay for your children, Bill with my kids but we want them actually in the YMCA or the library in small group sessions, not with hundreds of kids and teachers the rest of the day.

Jeanne Allen:

I think there's going to be a lot more appreciation for competency. We've talked about that before, when I was on your show, this idea that we should have our students mastering and becoming competent and not worry about how long they're at a seat. And so that's what this is really driving. The conversations now I would say are 25% innovative. The idea of may bring kids back in different hybrid arrangements, maybe taking advantage of some virtual online schooling programs and partnerships. We have to get a 100% innovative.

Bill Walton:

Well, you've talked about the Carnegie seat time and the unit of instruction being a school year. And you've also talked about the fact that school districts don't necessarily need to be the primary entity that organizes where kids go to school. The barriers to changing that were enormous until two months ago, and now everybody's taking a fresh look. What barriers that you have been up against the school districts, the unions, et cetera, do you see coming down somewhat because of what's happening?

Jeanne Allen:

Such a good question. Bill, what I was just describing is the way schools, school districts, and some leaders are thinking through this process now. They're going very logically. They're looking at it kind of like the governors are looking at opening the economy. We're in Maryland and they finally said, you can go recreational boat. There's these baby steps. To your question, what we shouldn't be doing is saying money follows the student. In the future of school report, we just put out, we are recommending that the nation think about this concept of a virtual backpack. First of all, it addresses the access problem. That it's not just about money, but if that virtual backpack for every student.

Bill Walton:

Virtual backpack filled with cash.

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Jeanne Allen:

Cash.

Bill Walton:

Not actual cash, a voucher. The money would attach to each student and they could take that money and go to the school of their choice.

Jeanne Allen:

But it also has a device. We also make sure they have an internet. We also make sure this is what they carry. But the idea is it's not even just going to the school of choice now. It's not really about that. It's that mom and dad decide, we want you to go to this school, but we only really want to sign up for two hours a day. And they are able to direct their funds to just that portion of the school that maybe is going to meet the needs of their child. Maybe they found out that there's a class for 10 students that does something extraordinary for their students. And that's the day they want them learning at home or learning in their community.

Bill Walton:

You might go to school, one school for science and another school for math.

Jeanne Allen:

Why not?

Bill Walton:

Is this being tried anywhere? Are we still in the future?

Jeanne Allen:

I think we're still in the future. There are little bits and pieces. When you think about parents who are homeschooling, parents who are using education savings accounts in a handful of states, but this is, and I don't think it's too far in the future. Let me give you an example real quick. I had a call the other night from a colleague and friend who was very, very committed to the traditional public education system. She's a committed educator. She's married to a committed superintendent. She and I used to spar all the time about whether choice was really a good thing to do. She was going to take traditional public schools to her grave. And she called and she said, "I'm not sending my kids back. Do you know of any great virtual tools that I can send them to?"

Bill Walton:

She didn't want to send them back because of the risk of the virus? Or she didn't want to send them back for some other reason?

Jeanne Allen:

She was outraged that her district could not deliver remote and digital learning at a time when her kids most needed it. She said, "A lot happened."

Bill Walton:

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Got it. Yeah. She's beginning to see that there's other ways to get these things done. Now there's some pushback. I have friends with kids and they said, "Well, I love them, but it's all day long and I'm not equipped to do this homeschooling thing." And there are a lot of people that don't like it, although they seem to be learning. And there was a very cute essay in fact, I can't remember the magazine online, it was a fast company, editor's daughter, third grader. And the title is Homeschooling Desperately Needs a Redesign, I would know I'm in Third Grade. And there's a learning curve here and she complains about Google Classroom. And of course I have the same issues with Google Doc. I really hate it, but maybe that's just me, but I've got a, I've got a third grader who joins me and she goes on to some other apps. We talk about the beauty of online being able to communicate via Zoom, but the reality can be pretty different.

Jeanne Allen:

Oh yeah, absolutely. I've got a great charter school leader friend, who also said to me the other day, "It's not working for us. We want to get kids back in school." That's okay. This is the point. There's going to be a variety of different arrangements, hybrids, if you will. It just doesn't have to be all the same. And so look, I have four kids. I can't imagine having them home all the time and not wanting at this point in this crisis to send them back to school. But what I'm realizing, and of course we've known this for awhile, we've never engaged parents to actually be thought partners in how to develop what school looks like. We just sent our kids out the door. We moved to a nice community. We bought a private school. Maybe we're lucky enough to have had charters. And so there's not an either or.

Bill Walton:

Well, of course the other side of that is the schools didn't much want the parents involved.

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah, exactly.

Bill Walton:

That gets to the other thing about the ideological barriers to this kind of innovation. I think you saw the article in Harvard Magazine about the dangers of homeschooling and that led to child abuse. And I think, but cutting through it, it looks like they just feared they were losing their ability to indoctrinate students. Did you?

Jeanne Allen:

Absolutely. It's so interesting in the very beginning, maybe week two, it feels like it's been obviously months and months for us. There was a Pennsylvania school, a person who represented Pennsylvania school administrators, who actually said, because the governor of Pennsylvania actually said, "No more online schooling," even for charters who were already open doing online. Imagine telling an online school who could take hundreds more people to shut down. Anyway, his reaction to that, this administrators guy representative was, "Well, we don't want more people going to those schools because they basically, they might like it." He actually said that. You might like it.

Jeanne Allen:

And you know what? That's true. And so I want to, but I want to go back to this point, you made. Because you said, it may not be working for everybody. It doesn't have to be online or in your local Benjamin Banneker School. It could be a variety of things. It could be that you just want that traditional

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Catholic school with the 30 kids in a rows or 20 and the great teachers and whatever, and a playground. It may also be that Catholic school says, "You know what? We're going to split school up into four different units and we're going to offer this and we're going to partner with a public school down the street and we're going to have digital." That's what we need. Right now, this is the opportunity to say, "How do we educate kids first of all, and accomplish that, competency? And then how do we organize it so that we can be respectful and thoughtful about teacher safety, student safety, parent safety, comfort?"

Bill Walton:

Well, you and I have always been interested in innovating so that kids could be taught to what they know and what they're interested in and to their skills and having a highly individualized education experience, instructional experience. And the online, the whatever, we can get there with this system, but it's not one size fits all. And a lot of families can't, if they get two people working, they can't have the kids at home. Of course we're all suffering from that during the last two months of the shutdown. Let me, that's more of an observation.

Bill Walton:

My question though, gets to something else, school budgets and people ability to pay for private schools. Now, the prep schools, I'm sure it will be just fine, but the Catholic schools, you mentioned, the parents that are sending their kids to those schools, even those smaller amounts they pay. They've got to be looking at their budgets differently because of the economic recession, depression we're in, at the moment. In New York City, the public schools, New York City's budget's supposed to be down about \$10 billion in the next year. And about a third of that goes to schools. All of a sudden, you can't really say we're going to be back to normal because you're going to be having a lot less money to run a school. What are you saying?

Jeanne Allen:

And you're going to need to have that money to pay for people to deliver education, not pay for a lot of the trappings, if you will. And so this calls into question, expensive buildings, expensive transportation, all the services that are delivered onsite. It's not that people don't need those services out there. I'm not some ogre. And I don't think that particular poor kids don't need the supports and the health and the whatever, but that can be done differently and more streamlined. Look, there are virtual and programs that aren't virtual, delivering school in different ways for different budgets across the country. And so Bill, this is where I come back to your comment that the parents at home may not be able to deal with it because they're working. Yes, absolutely. But if there are a variety of different ways to spend money that are made more efficient and effective by this crisis, we cannot keep asking the federal government to give more billions of dollars to education.

Bill Walton:

What'd they chip in? 13 billion so far? 16 billion?

Jeanne Allen:

Billion. And now the education establishment is asking for 250 billion more. Where's that coming from? We don't even have it. This is the problem. The idea of budget has to where the students go. If we keep coming back, people think it's radical, people who actually just really believe in limited government, no. Think about it. If you don't get, that school isn't chosen, that program isn't chosen, it doesn't get paid

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for. It's as simple as that. But think about the opportunity for those parents who do need jobs today, where the people do need jobs to be able to doing things in different ways. Online, remotely, or a few hours in place, a few hours a week.

Bill Walton:

Well, that's where we've got enormous pushback against charters with a fear that, well, if you've let people send their kids or kids choose to go to charters, that's going to suck money from the other public schools. And those public schools are going to get hurt. That argument still exists, and that argument's going to be made more because there's going to be less money to pay for all these things. How are the battle lines lining up in May of 2020 as we look at the next school year?

Jeanne Allen:

For a reform issue or an idea that was under serious attack during the campaign that kind of died with COVID, charter schools are really being shown to have so many of the answers. People are talking about where the schools, where the programs that are doing the best job, those institutions that have freedom and flexibility. Charters are going to get hit just like everybody else, monetarily, but they have more flexibility and control over their budgets to make changes they have to.

Bill Walton:

This is proving the point that we've been making, that they're more adaptable, more innovative, more willing to try new technologies, willing to rethink things and deliver results for kids. And that's, we're seeing that now.

Jeanne Allen:

We're absolutely seeing that now. We ask them week after week when we're having conversations. And we've been coalescing people across the country in our own Zoom webinars. And we've been asking them, "How are the budgets? How is the money? What are you doing?" And many of them are like, "We are switching this way. We bought devices, where center social workers or support staff are calling home to parents in very poor communities. Some have begun to go visit." They are using the resources that come directly to the school site. This is the idea. This could happen anywhere. It's directly to the school site to decide how to use those resources and how to support their students.

Bill Walton:

One of the things I admire about you is you're not just doing this on your own. You lead coalitions to bring about change. And you've also in your website, Center for Education Reform website, have got some resources. I think you've got something you call the essential database. What's that?

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. We put together right out of the gate. We put together all the free resources at every level, primary through higher ed. And just even for the workforce, that were available. We are curating it daily. We're adding more, there's over 200 resources in there, searchable that you can access.

Bill Walton:

The people listening and viewing this, if you've got kids, you're interested in your schools, you can go to the CER website and find a treasure trove of ideas and experts about how this works or should work.

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Jeanne Allen:

Absolutely. And we're also beginning to list actually, schools that are making their programs available to others. And people start looking toward the fall, we're hoping to have a slew of well curated organizations that will be helping you figure out where best to send your kids back to school.

Bill Walton:

The argument that parents don't really have the knowledge to decide where their kids go to school, you're solving that knowledge problem. You're setting up resources so that they've got, they're armed with what they need to know to make a good decision.

Jeanne Allen:

And there's tons of resources like that out there. We're just, we're sort of curating the curators and saying, "Here's where you go one, stop shopping." I'll tell you what, Bill. I've never seen so much generous, and I don't mean by giving away free stuff, generous interaction of people saying, "We will work with you to solve this problem with your superintendent, a teacher, a parent, a governor, whoever it is." This is a time that we realize we actually have a lot of the answers in education. We have them, what we have to do is deploy them on behalf of kids in different ways.

Bill Walton:

I was joking about our third grader complaining about Google Docs, but there are a lot of online resources, a lot of apps that are quite good. And you've got something on your website called Virtual Ed Innovation Series. Is that another resource? What's that?

Jeanne Allen:

Thanks for asking about that. That is our weekly virtual webinar that we're having. Each week we're highlighting two change makers from public, private, charter and other to engage like this, in interactive with hundreds of people who are joining us to learn what they can do. It's fantastic. Because people are joining and they're saying, "I need that. Or let me tell you what I'm offering." And so we create a community of thousands of people who want to work together to advance changes.

Bill Walton:

And so that's a weekly webinar. I think it's Tuesday at 11:00 o'clock?

Jeanne Allen:

Yes, sir.

Bill Walton:

East Coast?

Jeanne Allen:

Yes.

Bill Walton:

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And who is on that? Are these parents? Are they educators? Are the kids? Are they school administrators? Who participates? Yes, all of it.

Jeanne Allen:

Well, the people that we have that are speaking, who lead, are people like CEOs of different networks, school district superintendents that we think are innovative, private school people, online organizations. People who are running school well digitally. And then those who are participating our heads of other school organizations, media, foundations, some teachers, parents, and people like you and I who are interested in making something happen.

Bill Walton:

Do you think with this pressure on school budgets, we've talked about the administrative bloat in public schools and the fact the number of teachers has not risen nearly as fast as the budgets have gone up. And that means they're spending money in a lot of administrative activities, which may or may not be critical to education. Do we think there's an opportunity for schools to begin trimming some of that?

Jeanne Allen:

Absolutely. Look, no one wants to take anyone's job these days, but there is absolutely no reason for us to have more administrative staff than instructional staff. And that's where we are today. And again, if you change the way school looks and make school a verb, you don't need these enormous buildings. Think about it. Districts are actually, it's real estate brokers at this point in time. You think about the hundreds of thousands of acres and institutions and the people who have to manage those institutions, you can have these broken up, you can have these much more civically and community driven. That creates jobs, but those jobs are purposeful and those jobs are where they should be.

Bill Walton:

Well, this is where I see silver linings in this crisis because it's hard to make change. I had a couple of education businesses and learned that there are about six or seven million people in the education establishment in America with big, big budgets and things like that. And for them, everything's been just fine. And you come in and you say, "I'm an innovator, I've got a great new curriculum. I can do it better, cheaper, faster." And they sort of look at you and say, "Well, that's nice, but we're okay." And you don't make a big sale. Now I think, we may see some openings here where schools are going to be forced to do things better, cheaper, faster, because that's what you can do with a lot of this technology and online learning.

Jeanne Allen:

Absolutely. And there's so much we're learning also about assessments. We've been having, you and I talked about this lots of times in the past, this whole notion testing and whether we like it and high stakes, and is it not high stakes. The kinds of assessments you can do in real time when a student is learning, if they have access to good technology, is phenomenal. And so why have these enormous expensive end of year course tests, if you could be assessing students on a regular basis? Maybe students go from, maybe they're nine and they're in the equivalent of fifth grade math. Maybe they're a fifth grade and their equivalent of third grade. It doesn't matter. As long as the student's learning and making progress.

Bill Walton:

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Is any of this technology, this curriculum, coming out of the military? Because I was in the army and I went through basic training and they called it AIT, advanced individual training, relearn your specialty. And the thing about the army is if you had a military specialty, you weren't allowed to flunk. You had to learn everything. And so to be a specialist and I was trained to be a clerk. That was what they wanted me to do. But the curriculum was designed so it was all self paced and you had to learn everything and you could go as fast as you wanted to learn that and get your proficiency level. And I always thought the military for decades has been doing a good job educating everyone that comes in. Are you seeing any of that bleed into instruction that is in public schools or private schools today?

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. I've heard that before, Bill, and it is amazing model. What's happening now is there's an awful lot of tech companies that are creating hard skill and soft skill online assessments that schools are partnering with to help not only deliver it. They're not doing the education piece, but they're coming in and saying, "If you want to go into this as a career, here's some of the skills you need." And they can take an online assessment and the school can route them into the courses they need to become a scientist. Maybe they want to become a teacher. Maybe they don't know what they want and the system helps them assess. Probably in the way that you were routed to being a clerk, were then taught how to go through it, are some of the same programs that we're seeing in the career area. Not so much in the curriculum, not so much with the testing. I think that's a great connection for us to begin to think about and make for people.

Bill Walton:

Well, we've got a couple minutes left. I love the idea of making school, emphasizing that it's a verb. And it seems like there is an opportunity in this crisis. Sort of your final thoughts about a call to action and how people can support what you're doing?

Jeanne Allen:

Yeah. Let me end with an important set of policy prescriptions, because a lot of people forget that and it's kind of boring, but we can't do any of this unless we loosen up the rules for schools and districts in how they spend money. Right now, we have unprecedented flexibility because the Congress and federal government did this with most rules and regulations to allow states and districts to teach any way they needed to right now. They waived certification requirements for teachers. They've waived all sorts of rules other than special ed, safety and health. We have to deal with health right now. What if those waivers stay in place? In other words, allow money, not just to follow kids, but to go beyond borders, to go even beyond state borders. Why do I have to go to a school in Maryland with my Maryland tax dollars if there's a school that suits me better in Florida, or in Virginia? We need full stop, full waivers that monies are located and accounted for at the local level.

Bill Walton:

You'd argue for the continuation of the waivers, make them not temporary, make them permanent.

Jeanne Allen:

Yep. Make the money flow, make the waivers permanent and talk local legislators, governors and certainly petition Congress for those things. People have to be speaking out. That's my kind of spiel. Go to edreform.com, get involved in what we're doing. We're trying to make all of these great ideas across country, bring them to life and sprinkle them everywhere.

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Bill Walton:

Jeanne Allen, thank you. As always. I hope you'll be coming back at the next critical point then in our war to improve education. And thank you for joining me on today's show. I hope you learned a bit about what's at stake. And as we go forward with education change, you can also learn more about Jeanne Allen and her work on a new website that we're going to be releasing in a couple of weeks. We have something called an interesting people page. And she's one of the more interesting people I know. Also you'll be able to subscribe to the show and give me your comments and feedback and suggest future guests and topics in upcoming shows. Anyway, thanks for joining and I'll see you soon.

Speaker 1:

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