

Making the **Public-Good Case** for **Private Schools**

A discussion with Ashley Berner, Derrell Bradford,
and Ray Pennings, moderated by Anne Snyder

October 8, 2019 | Washington, DC

CARDUS



FOREWORD

All education is public education. Cardus is a leader in helping professionals and the public take a broader view of education, taking into account all contributions to the public good—be they from government-run schools or independent schools. Toward this end, the Cardus Education Survey (CES) has collected data on the social, academic, and spiritual outcomes of a representative sample of over fifteen hundred independent-school graduates over nearly ten years and is now considered one of the most comprehensive surveys of independent-school-sector outcomes in the United States and Canada. CES data makes clear that independent-school communities are often very important cultivators of moral character and civic virtue that can be leveraged more broadly for the common good and the flourishing of society.

Cardus convened a panel of experts in Washington, DC, on the evening of October 8, 2019, to discuss the public-good outcomes of independent schools and the need to reconsider what is meant by “public education.” The evening also marked nearly a decade of research into independent-school-graduate outcomes in the United States and the release of Cardus Education’s most recent report, titled “Cardus Education Survey 2018: Rethinking Public Education.” Anne Snyder, editor-in-chief of Cardus’s *Comment* magazine, moderated a discussion with Cardus co-founder and Executive Vice President Ray Pennings, Cardus Senior Fellow and Deputy Director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy Ashley Berner, and Executive Vice President of 50CAN, Derrell Bradford.

A portion of their conversation is reproduced below, focusing on the need for and value of educational pluralism in the current American context.

*Cardus Education Survey data makes clear that independent-school communities are often **very important cultivators of moral character and civic virtue** that can be leveraged more broadly for the common good and the flourishing of society.*



DISCUSSION

MARISA CASAGRANDE, INTRODUCTION

Senior Researcher, Cardus

ANNE SNYDER, MODERATOR

Editor-in-Chief, *Comment* magazine

ASHLEY BERNER

Deputy Director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy

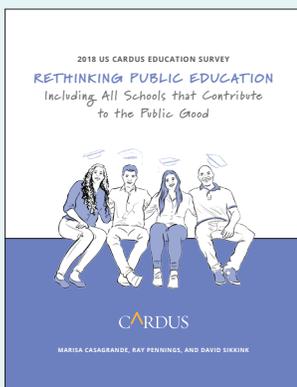
DERRELL BRADFORD

Executive Vice President, 50CAN

RAY PENNINGGS

Executive Vice President, Cardus

MARISA CASAGRANDE: Good evening, and welcome to tonight's event, "Making the Public-Good Case for Private Schools."



carduseducationsurvey.com



My name is Marisa Casagrande, and I'm a Senior Researcher in education at Cardus. This evening, we come together to mark nearly a decade of Cardus research into independent-school-graduate outcomes. This evening we also release our most recent education report, titled "Cardus Education Survey 2018: Rethinking Public Education." The report is now available to view on the Cardus website.

The moderator for this evening's panel discussion, whom some of you may already know, is Ms. Anne Snyder. Ms. Snyder is the editor-in-chief of Cardus's *Comment* magazine, and a writer and convener devoted to questions of class and culture, beauty, and a beatitudinal faith. Her pathbreaking guidebook, *The Fabric of Character: A Wise Giver's Guide to Supporting Social and Moral Renewal*, was published in 2019.

ANNE SNYDER: Thank you, Marisa. It's very good to be here. Welcome. My job here is really simple. I'm just going to be their eye-liner, or their trampoline, whichever metaphor works for you. And, hopefully, get out of the way and have a fun conversation about a study and a paper that I found really fascinating.

Real quick, just brief bios here. Far left, Derrell Bradford is Executive Vice President of 50CAN, a national education-advocacy organization that advocates at the local level for a high-quality education for all kids, regardless of their address. In this national role, Derrell recruits and trains local leaders across the 50CAN network. He previously served as the executive director at Better Education for Kids, where he worked to secure passage of the tenure-reform legislation, TEACH-NJ.

Next we have Dr. Ashley Berner, who is Deputy Director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy and Assistant Professor of education. She previously served as the deputy director of the CUNY Institute for Education Policy and as the director of the Education Program at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia. In 2017, she published a book titled *Pluralism and American Public Education: No One Way to School*, and she is also a Senior Fellow at Cardus.

Ray Pennings here is our fearless leader and Executive Vice President of Cardus. Ray is a respected voice in Canadian politics, contributing as a commentator, pundit, and critic in many of Canada's leading news outlets. He's led many large research projects at Cardus over the years.

As we begin, I thought it would be helpful to make sure we are all on the same page and have a common understanding of terms. Ashley, could you briefly describe what we mean by educational pluralism?

ASHLEY BERNER: Sure. Educational pluralism is simply a way to structure public education differently from how most Americans think of it. A pluralistic school system is one in which the government funds and regulates but doesn't necessarily deliver public education as the exclusive or privileged provider. The Netherlands funds thirty-six different kinds of schools on equal footing. The United Kingdom allows families to help open schools, and the government funds them. Sweden has per capita funding for different kinds of schools. By far, the democratic norm internationally is educational pluralism. It's a very different context than the sort of uniformity we have in the US for local education and for the school-choice movement, in which schools have to ask for exceptions within a uniform system.

ANNE SNYDER: One thing that I found in these results and in the paper was this relationship between public good (or the common good) and pluralism. I'm curious—any one of you can answer this—how exactly do they go hand in hand? How do you do substantive formation in a pluralistic age? This whole paper and these results argue that actually the public good and the common good are dependent on respecting pluralism.

RAY PENNING: I fully echo Ashley's description of pluralism in a structural sense in terms of delivery. The term "pluralism" is often also used or understood as a sociological description of a diverse society: "We live in a pluralistic society." What many people hear with that is that we live in a society with lots of different faith groups, lots of different ethnicities, lots of different

A pluralistic school system is one in which the government funds and regulates but doesn't necessarily deliver public education as the exclusive or privileged provider.

value systems that are evident in a democratic society. We're not as homogeneous as a society as we once were.

Then the question becomes, How does one build an education system that has the common virtues and citizenship? This most recent paper we released was our sixth study since 2011 analysing outcomes for students in both the US and Canada in different cycles.

The *Education Act* in Ontario, for instance, has a wonderful purpose-of-education clause. It says that education exists to develop each individual to their potential, to give them numeracy, literacy, and those sorts of skills. It also exists to cultivate community and citizenship. There is a corporate end to education that is there to develop citizens. The idea behind it is that education isn't just a parental concern for our own kids. It's a communal concern that we have for all the kids in the community, because that's actually necessary.

Usually when I make a presentation, I pull a quote out from the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, which has a similar statement in a US context. It was produced by a commission on education, and it also says what the purpose of education is. The reason I start with that is, regardless of religious background, or school philosophy, or pedagogy, pretty well everyone will agree with that statement as a common starting point. It's a way to get at this notion of the common good. There is a shared understanding of a framework of education. When we begin to fill it out, we obviously go in very different directions, depending not only on our religious or philosophical presuppositions but also on our pedagogical or educational aspirations.

Back in the nineteenth century, Horace Mann argued for the common school, because we had all these denominational differences and we needed to bring everybody together in order to achieve the outcomes. I think our time may require an inverting of that mindset. Given the pluralistic nature of our society, instead of relying on a single, large bureaucracy matched by countervailing unions along the way, relying on them to provide the innovation for education in America, maybe we need to turn that on its head and look to some of the examples that Ashley has pointed out. There may be a different way of delivering education in a pluralistic society. If we truly care about every kid maximizing his or her education, contributing to the common good, maybe we need a diverse system of delivering that education, which would make independent schools not the competitor to public education but part of a system of delivering public education.

ANNE SNYDER: Derrell, do you agree?



Left to Right: Ray Pennings, Anne Snyder, Ashley Berner, Derrell Bradford

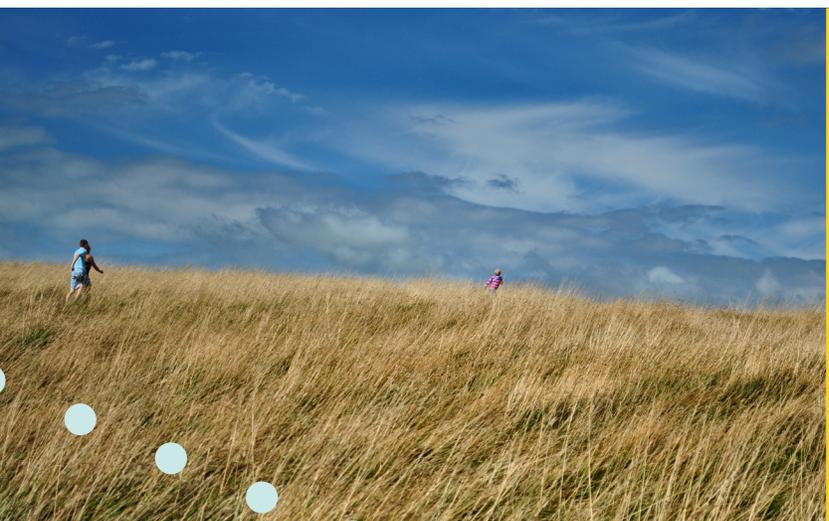
DERRELL BRADFORD: It sounds great! So, just some context. Diane Ravitch, who was a notorious hater of all of these things, offers all the time that 90 percent of the kids are in public schools, and we should be concerned about that. So, if 90 percent of the kids are in public schools, does that mean public schools are responsible for the fact that this is the most divided time in the American experiment, at least as long as I've known it? I think there is a compelling case to be made that the less diverse the delivery is, the more divided we've actually become. I think there's something to the paper; it's counterintuitive but really good. If social media has made us lonelier than we've ever been, and culture and community are what you want most, you are more likely to get that in a diverse environment than in a big monoculture with a million people in it.

The other side of this is the conversation about big system or mono-system versus pluralist system. It's really also about what you want for everybody else's kid, which is normally highly descriptive, and then what you want for your kid, which throws all that stuff out the window. I think everybody is pursuing a pluralist notion of education. But the question is, Do you have enough money to move to a place that is your version of pluralism, or do you not?

It seems like it's harder to diversify in a place with one mode of governance than it is to diversify across places. If you want true diversity in a place, you need multiple modes of governance. You need lots of different people in multiple places, working on shared challenges.

For anybody in here with kids—who has kids? Who has more than one kid? I bet sometimes you look at one of them and you're like, "That one's mine," and you look at the other one and you're like, "I don't know where you came from." The two kids have the same parents who live in the same house. They breathe the same air. They eat the same food. They wake up at the same time. But they need completely different things. It just seems asinine to believe that you could mono-system that out. Not to mention, diversity and innovation are casualties of that.

ANNE SNYDER: Talk a little bit more about this importance of place. Are moral thickness in a community and particular place two sides of the same coin?



While you're looking at public-good contributions from a few different sectors, the homeschooling world, graduates of Protestant schools, graduates of Catholic schools, and graduates of secular private schools. The report says, "The public-good contribution of these school sectors, when broadly viewed, is overwhelmingly positive." But—you don't say "but"; I'm reversing the sentence order—"We can now say with confidence that distinct patterns of thought and behaviour emerge according to where these young adults' high schools were located."

If you could flesh out a little bit more, this notion of place, thick community norms . . .

RAY PENNINGS: In 2011, before we did any of the macro surveys, we surveyed a representative sample of principals, both Catholic and Protestant, and we asked them to prioritize a list of fifteen outcomes of education. In the public mind, Catholic schools and Protestant schools are all religious non-public schools. Yet none of the top four objectives and priorities of the principals were the same.

In the Protestant school, there was an emphasis on spiritual formation and experience, and in the Catholic school, there was a little more social justice, equipping for community, that sort of emphasis. They weren't opposite. They weren't contradictory. But they had a different emphasis. Catholics and Protestants are quite distinct in terms of their desired outcomes.



To a large extent, what the principals told us back in 2011 is in fact what we are finding. If you take the overall results and go to the website, there are forty papers analyzing the results on all different dimensions. I'm not going to try to bore you with data—but generally, Catholic-school students have higher academic achievement. Protestants tend to have more-favourable results on the spiritual side. When it comes to civic engagement, they are at similar levels, but different emphasis. An interesting area, for example, is that Catholic-school graduates are more likely to find occupations in finance and business and such things that are related to STEM. Protestants in the care industry are over-represented on a per capita basis. There are lots of things that you can take a look at that the school system reinforced.

I think what comes out of this is, first, in part, education-sector outcomes tend to reflect their objectives. Second, there is something of a reinforcement, and I think we tried to make this point in the paper. The values of the home combined with those of the school create a particular ecosystem of thought, if you will, that actually reinforces and deepens. That's where one of you mentioned, in terms of social isolation, some of the challenges when you don't have those values. You end up with some of the challenges that we're seeing in our society today.

I'm a big defender of public education. I don't want any of this work to be seen as arguing that independent schools are better than public education. They have different tasks, they serve different communities, and they have different constraints.

Public schools, where you don't necessarily have a home ethos reinforcing a school ethos, have a task that's way more difficult than the task of independent schools. So while I am not answering your question regarding place in a geographic sense, I am saying that the overlap of values between schools and the homes of the students they serve does have a significant impact.

DERRELL BRADFORD: I have a good friend named Robert Pondiscio. He just wrote this book about Success Academy. I'm on the board of Success Academy, so I got both sides of this. I wanted to talk more about this question about the feedback loop of culture.

Success involves lots of things. One thing it really has is an extremely strong culture. We're very proud of it, we're meticulous about it, we're always working on it. The reviews of the book have cited that there is a low-income parent who is ambitious as hell, who matches really strongly with the ethos of the school culture. This has been written about derisively. Like, "How dare those aspiring low-income people match with a place that wants the best for them and wants their kids to go to college and be the best versions of themselves."

A lot of the chatter—particularly among people who I think are more inclined to believe in pluralism, particularly charter [school] people, has been disturbing, because it asks the question, "How much is too much to ask of anyone to build the culture loop, if we think school culture matters?" Is nothing the only amount that is not too much? If nothing is the sweet spot, what does that say? Many of these places were successful because they had a value system that was built on something greater than themselves, because there was a deal made with the kid, and the parent, and the school, that we're all essential to success. I don't think we should be damning that. That seems optimal, not to be optimized against.

ASHLEY BERNER: I think that gets to the structure of a system, because a pluralistic system, by design, aims for a really great understanding between the parent and the school.

A pluralistic system, by design, aims for a really great understanding between the parent and the school.

In the Netherlands, you can decide, "A Montessori pedagogy is best for child number one. Child number two needs an Islamic education, because we're Islamic and that's going to be a good fit for that child." In our country, it seems very odd to think about that kind of match, even though well-resourced families do it all the time.

In my mind, about Robert Pondiscio's book, the answer is not that Success Academy is doing something nefarious but rather that we should expand the options so that more families can find a fit for them. This is how pluralistic systems manage it.

I do also want to say, though, that I don't think Americans have ever had a common notion of what the good life is. And that's really important, that democracy allows people to differ about what the good life is. So when we talk about the common good, at least when I talk about the common good, I'm not necessarily thinking, "These are the value systems that we're all gunning for," but rather, "This is the information that all schools need to provide me."

Let's not forget that pluralistic systems that are successful require a very high bar for academic learning. It can be delivered through different lenses, but there is a coherent knowledge field that's required. This is something that's very difficult for American policy-makers to take on board.

We're not talking about the same moral goals, but we are talking about basic knowledge. I mean, consider the fact that only a third of American adults can name the three branches of government. This is a problem for civic life.

DERRELL BRADFORD: There's no nation that supports schools that don't advance its ideals. And right now we're in a fight over what our ideals are, or who we want to be. And so it is also, I think, useful to examine the public-school delivery thing that we're talking about, redefining, whatever, as an institution that is propagating a religion, essentially. An extremely well thought out, very polarizing set of ideals that you may or may not agree with. But they're being pretty deliberate about it.

ASHLEY BERNER: Well, let me just say one more thing about this. This is that the common-school notion was originally Protestant. Let's not forget that there is no such thing as a neutral educational experience. Everything is selected in some fashion. That's not bad; we just have to be honest about it. The Protestant Anglo-Saxons who built the uniform school system could, with a straight face, pretend that it wasn't sectarian, while they were requiring Protestant prayers and Protestant Bibles. Well, if you're in a minority culture, that was oppressive to you, right? If you're Catholic or Jewish or . . . So now we're mad because the secular public schools are now secularized, not Protestant, but they're still going to take a stand on certain things, and it shouldn't surprise us. We should have opt-out clauses.

RAY PENNINGS: I think the point you make in terms of the civic outcomes and literacy is valid. I'm a Canadian here—if I can, as a friendly outsider, highlight the fact—

DERRELL BRADFORD: That sounded so diplomatic.



RAY PENNINGS: When you have challenges, you either say, "It's lousy, we've got a bunch of lemons," or you say, "It's time to make lemonade." I think you're in the latter case here. You can pick the international standard you want. According to some Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development measures, I think you're twenty-eighth in the world. I'm not used to thinking of the United States saying, "We're number twenty-eight." We live in a global economy, the global standard. Yes, there are things in terms of trade and isolation and all the other things that are happening. But you can't get away from the fact that compared to twenty years ago, there are global competitive pressures on your education outcomes, and it's going to affect your jobs. I was talking to someone today, an IBM executive, who said they're going to hire twenty-three thousand people next

Let's redefine public education to say that all education delivers education for the common good and is in the public interest.

year. They're going to India because they can't find qualified people in the United States.

ASHLEY BERNER: And this is academic and intellectual. It really is. We see this at our institute; we see under-challenging going on in classrooms across this country. It doesn't matter what school sector we're talking about, and this is something all school sectors need to be mindful of.

RAY PENNINGGS: And right now, the reality is that that company is bidding on sixteen-year-olds in India, and they're competing against other countries, and they're incrementing job offers in \$20,000 increments to get the sixteen-year-old kids from India for which they can't find a competitor here in America. That has real economic consequences. Looking at those sorts of outcomes, this is the opportunity to say, "What does a modern, inclusive, pluralistic, diverse education system look like?" And we clearly don't have it today.

Can we be the leaders in reframing the competition not as "public school versus independent school" but lead by saying we are opting out of a system that doesn't work? Let's redefine public education to say that *all* education delivers education for the common good, is in the public interest, and let's find ways the systems are reinforcing and bringing us all into this common endeavour. And at the end of the day we'll have a more civil, a more productive, and a more flourishing society. I think we're well positioned to take the lead and reframe the conversation instead of being defensive and fighting for our rights of exemption.

ASHLEY BERNER: Maybe we could collaborate across school sectors. The fact is, there are a lot of good things going on in district schools that we need to champion and support, and we need to find ways to solve common problems together, like school transportation or parent support. Those are really big issues.

ANNE SNYDER: So on this notion of reframing what public education actually means, which is as much an intellectual think-tank exercise as it is ideal in a whole cultural reckoning: As you look at the landscape now, who and what would you need to ally with to really begin re-conceptualizing that public education is not really so much about inputs, playgrounds, schools, and so on, but it is as much about outcomes. It is intertwined with the public good, and that can happen through any number of avenues. How does this become a mass idea?

RAY PENNINGGS: Well, we're into theories of social change here, but let me just throw out a couple of things. First of all, I don't

think you engineer it. I don't think there is a blueprint that we set up and then say, "Here is the ten-year plan to achieve it," and check the boxes, and you do this, you do that. That's not going to work.

Second, when you take a look at major social movements, I would say this would qualify as something relatively major. This is a fairly significant shift that we're talking about. Often there are catalysts in terms of culminating incidents that are not planned but somehow put the issue on the public radar screen.

The difference between those catalytic moments that actually have transformative effects in the culture and those that don't is often the extent to which the infrastructure and support and thinking has been done in advance to take advantage of it. So with all of our work at Cardus, not just from the education file, I sometimes use a surfing analogy, maybe because I live in Ottawa and it froze there last night. We can look for no snow on the ground again in April.

Surfing seems a good thing to think about, but you have to get ready to ride the wave. You can't predict when the wave is coming, but if you're not on the beach with your surfboard, you're not going to ride the wave. We don't ride waves or surf waves in an office. You've got to be in the right place, you've got to have the surfboard there, and that's about your knowledge of surfing. I don't think it's a manufactured sort of game plan in terms of changing the society, but it is being in the right places, putting the right arguments forward, equipping people, and being ready for catalytic events that we probably can't predict today.

DERRELL BRADFORD: I think about this a lot actually. If what we want to do is change the world, we can imagine the world is down here and there's a lever on it, right? And so you've got to lean really hard on that to get any movement out of it. It's like a seesaw. The things that are furthest away give you the most leverage, and those things are all cultural. So politics—every other thing—is downstream from culture.

If you believe that, which I happen to believe, then two things result. One, you've got to always think about the world not in terms of what you do, but what you let happen or not let happen. Part of the current state of schooling, period, is as much about what has not been allowed to happen as it is about what has happened. Or the rise of the common school, and the perception that your neighbourhood buys you a school and that public governance is the only way to do it, unless you're rich.

All of that is a social construct that grew out of not letting other things happen, right? We're trying to not let other things happen, and at times it was the state trying to eliminate the other things. There's a history of trying to kill the other guy that I think is important and instructive. So if you want to surf, you and a bunch of people have to be out there in the water waiting to catch the next wave.

Here's what I would say. Right now in America, there are five or six states that are optimized for dynamism. And they can just do things without having to ask for them to be done. They're just coming up with it on their own, because those are the things that tend



to spread like wildfire. And then from a policy standpoint, I would just be like, “What are the conditions that build for wildfire?”

Right? Because they’re inherently less prescriptive and more innovative. They carry a little more risk. And that to me is the type of change that we need. To offer a compelling counter-model at scale.

ASHLEY BERNER: What are your favourite states?

DERRELL BRADFORD: In particular, I like Arizona because most of my friends who are charter-authorizing mandarins hate it. And I love it exactly for the reasons they hate it. ‘Cause it’s a risk. It’s a risky environment. It’s an interesting environment. And most importantly I would say Arizona is just using its charter sector because it has other things in place too. They have the financial things largely in place.

Its charter universe is diverse in terms of location, who goes there, and that type of thing. They didn’t come out of an era where chartering, as a power, was only about closing achievement gaps for low-income kids, which is really important. I don’t want to sound like I don’t think that’s important. But they were also like, “Hey, some people want the classical model.” So chartering has a more diverse political constituency, which means they’re not going to go away, because in the end all this is political.

I like Arizona. I like Colorado. I like Florida. I like some homeschool stuff that’s going on off the grid, popping off the grid in Connecticut. If you haven’t checked out Workspace, you should check it out. I like what you’re doing. What’s it called again?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Potter’s School.

DERRELL BRADFORD: Potter’s School. I like that. I’m trying to find things out in the field. In Utah there’s an interesting homeschool/district collaborative, where people get to use district services but they get to do their own thing. That’s an interesting hybridization of the two that I can actually live with. A lot of good stuff is going on in the West.

ASHLEY BERNER: I just want to endorse what you all both said about being ready to ride the wave and having the ideas of a really noble, pluralistic system in the water and already seeping through different organizational structures and different political structures and so forth. The idea of a crisis is not made up; it is exactly what can happen in history. Two examples. The reason we have the common school—Horace Mann articulated this common-school model in the 1830s, and people hated it. A couple of people liked it. His Unitarian buddies loved it, but most people hated it because it was seen as abrogating religious freedom and local control. So his idea wouldn’t have gotten off the ground if it hadn’t

There’s not a manufactured sort of game plan in terms of changing the society, but it is being in the right places, putting the right arguments forward, equipping people, and being ready for catalytic events that we probably can’t predict today.

been for these millions of Catholic immigrants who came to this country and freaked out the Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority, who didn't think Catholics could be good citizens.

That's what enabled the nativist movement to pick up this notion of a common school. It wouldn't have happened otherwise. It would not have gained traction otherwise. Opposite thing happened in the Netherlands. They started out in the nineteenth century with a kind of secular model for a uniform school system as another response to the pluralism in their own country. They were a secular government with lots of refugees from the religious wars and so forth, and they started out by forcing everyone into one kind of school. Well, guess what happened? The southern provinces were Catholic, and they seceded and formed the nation of Belgium in 1830. The Netherlands' political leadership started to take pluralism seriously. So these things can make a difference. And if you have the theory going out in front and you have it seated in intelligent and multifaceted ways, then when those moments come, it's more logical. Isn't that cool? The only country to be founded on educational freedom.

ANNE SNYDER: Are you bringing allies into the realm of public education who are on the cusp of surfing this wave or at least providing the wave? (We should get rid of the metaphoric surfing words, because we're getting into it too much.)

ASHLEY BERNER: I would say at the state level, yes. I think state commissioners are often very open to this notion. John White in Louisiana supports vouchers. You've got a lot of the leadership in all of these states that Derrell mentioned. So state leaders are often very much in favour of this. It's the districts that have a difficult time ceding authority, because there are also funding issues. I think that's a much more difficult conversation.

DERRELL BRADFORD: Again, it's a practical political problem; it's difficult to talk about the future if you know what it looks like. And right now I feel like we struggle for examples that illuminate what we could do for people, or that describe the kind of state that you'd like to be in. It's a policy problem. Lots of different groups are working on different flavours—just check out the variety of initiatives emerging out of the Center for Reinventing Public Education (www.crpe.org). This is actually what homeschooling is now. Which is more interesting and dynamic than you imagined.

This is what the future of equity could be, if you went to a more pluralist, à la carte system. At least, they're engaging on these questions in a way that is more sophisticated than I could have.

ASHLEY BERNER: Political compromise is also important. I think about what Illinois did in their 2017 legislature: they had a bipartisan grand bargain where they redistributed property tax and they



changed their funding formula to give more money to district schools, particularly Chicago and other schools. They passed the first tax-credit program that let low-income kids go to private schools, and they require state assessments, and nobody was happy with it. You read in the press that after that legislation passed, everyone said, “Yeah, we had to give up so much.” But it works. We need to find a way to reward politicians for actually compromising; that is so hard now. How do we do it? I don’t know. I wish I knew. It’s so polarized now.

RAY PENNINGS: I don’t have the familiarity with all the different programs here, but I think that the principle underneath is subsidiarity and pushing decision-making down. Because when you take a look at the data in terms of outcomes, people are searching for different things. Let’s face it: we talked about the common good and idealism. There were some people in the survey who actually, in their school, are looking to be somewhat isolationist, and have a very different conception of the common good that’s often religiously informed. So there are a lot of people, including independent-school people, who would feel threatened by this very discussion.

There is a certain comfort in having something close to a mainstream system and the right to opt out of it. The big argument there is just, Don’t let the government tell me anything to do; I want to do what I want to do; I want freedom. And the challenge of that, of course, is, that’s the very mindset that gave us the common schools. If we’re going to live together in a society, there are certain things we need in terms of civic virtue, some shared sense along the way, and there have to be outcomes.

So how do you create a system that pushes the decision-making down to allow true diversity, which even allows some forms of schooling that I suspect every one of us would say, “That’s not really all that ideal.” You need the space for the bad to be there in order for the good to be as well. That is part of the diversity.

I think here is a state interest in outcomes. I’m not a libertarian. I don’t think the state should have no interest in outcomes whatsoever, but there are going to be failures. And in the sort of system that would decentralize, there are going to be failures as well as successes that are part of the system. That is a challenge. That is going to be a part of the change.

DERRELL BRADFORD: Just to say the other side of that—and hopefully Ashley won’t knife me in the side—I’m on “team accountability.” I don’t want to make bad schools, but an environment that accepts that none can exist is one that is sclerotic and . . . doesn’t allow us to customize.

In the sort of system that would decentralize, there are going to be failures as well as successes that are part of the system. That is a challenge. That is going to be a part of the change.

I think the deal is, you don't want to optimize for failure. You don't want to be like, "I already failed." But somewhere in between "nobody can ever fail" and "we accept that some things aren't going to work out" is where you want to be. The challenge, like so much of education policy, is to build the whole system to make sure that nothing bad ever happens, which means that when something bad does happen you just ignore it. Instead of ignoring it, you'd be like, "All right, something bad happened." Bad things happen because human beings make bad things happen sometimes, even when they're well intentioned. Bad things happen, and we can address that.

RAY PENNINGS: One other question we have, in terms of accountability, is does that necessarily mean the state or the government is always the one to provide that accountability? Do we need the state diploma as the thing that everybody aspires to and that becomes the ticket for accreditation of education, or are there other ways of achieving that? Are there multiple ways of accrediting education by different types of responsible institutions and organizations?

ASHLEY BERNER: You can imagine a system in which there has to be an exit exam of some kind, but you can choose them from a menu of, say, five field-tested, scientifically validated exit exams. But I think we see really bad things happen when the state just takes its hands off. I mean, we can't do that.

RAY PENNINGS: I would agree with you.

ASHLEY BERNER: But to have options that are all robust and then ensure that there is no really bad educational situation is, I think, an appropriate goal.

RAY PENNINGS: Or that the bad educational systems will be exposed.

ASHLEY BERNER: I think that's the premise of charters, right? A good charter law, a good charter system, can close down a bad school. The problem is with teeing something up that doesn't have the conditions for success. To your point, Derrell, we don't want to incentivize bad stuff. And I'll tell you one very clear reason why: because parents do get attached to schools that don't serve their children well. We see this every time an urban superintendent has the guts to close a school that has 4 percent proficiency. There's a hue and cry from parents about their attachment to this school. When the commissioner of education in Tennessee tried to close a failing virtual charter in which 5 percent of the kids could read, the parents wanted to keep the school.



It matters to me that those children can't read. It matters to me, even though they're not my children, and it should matter to all of us because that means they don't have the opportunity we want them to have.

DERRELL BRADFORD: I know we're about to get the hook, but two things. One is on my "team literacy."

DERRELL BRADFORD: That's right. Two, I think one interesting way to address this problem is of size. There are several examples of experimentation in the classroom. You have an idea. You open up your classroom in an existing school, because that's a much less risky proposition than having to get six hundred kids and a building and everything else. It's a huge public enterprise, so this is one way to get a proof of concept earlier in that smaller school.

ASHLEY BERNER: Alberta has that in the alternatives program in their government-run schools, tools, right?

RAY PENNINGS: Yes.

ASHLEY BERNER: That's cool.

ANNE SNYDER: Can I ask one more question? Then we'll send you away to wrap it up. If I were a nine-year-old kid in a suit, say, sitting in this front row, and my mom were here, maybe she's a teacher interested in this discussion. We go home to a pretty rough neighbourhood, and my own educational prospects don't look that great for high school—What, in this conversation and this paper, applies to me?

RAY PENNINGS: I think to some extent all of it, in the sense that this paper provides a framework of hope to say the status quo isn't all there is and that there are ways to think about the challenges that you're facing in a different way. To that nine-year-old who we want to help today, think-tank papers are not going to be the solution. The data that we've collected is from graduates of schools in the nineties and the aughts, but keep in mind that this education data is based on graduate outcomes. So we're looking at people who are twenty-three to thirty-nine years old.

We're actually measuring schooling as it was a decade or two ago and looking at the lessons for today. So I'm not sure this provides the immediate sort of answers, but it does provide a framework. The data provides a compelling case that we don't need to think of the status quo as a given; we can achieve the objectives. As a matter of fact, there are logical arguments to say that the very objectives that set up the common school in the 1830s, if we had that argument today based on today's data we would set up something very different. So let's not just take the history for granted. Let's actually reinvent ourselves to deal with the modern era.

DERRELL BRADFORD: There is a public-policy answer for this. We have a great opportunity. It takes a village to raise any given child. The challenge of a nine-year-old who is zoned into a school that doesn't work for them is one that only a community like a

The harder the circumstance for any child trying to meet their best potential, the more people and institutions need to be involved, not fewer.

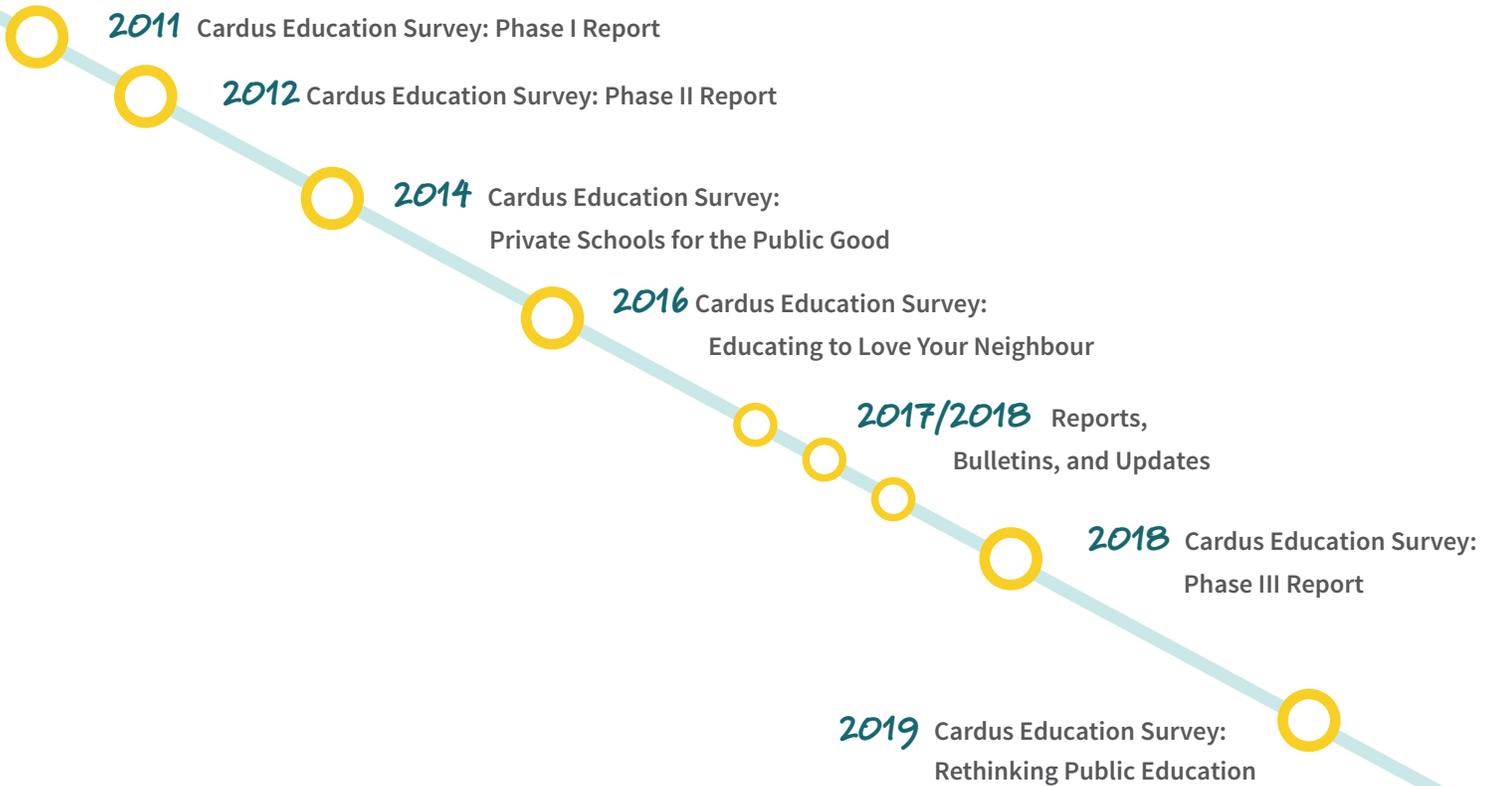
diverse society that cares about its kids can answer, and it would answer it through a variety of institutions. You might get reading help someplace else. Also, the schools let you down. You might have a mentoring program to help you figure out how to get a job outside and how to move forward and all those other things. I think that the harder the circumstance for any child trying to meet their best potential, the more people need to be involved and more institutions need to be involved, not fewer.

ASHLEY BERNER: I would only say that the nine-year-old sitting there, who doesn't have the opportunities that we would like, is the reason that we get up in the morning. I mean, we can't forget about that child as the motivation, and [we need to have] that child in front of us when we're having debates with adults. That's why this conversation is important.

ANNE SNYDER: On that note, please join me in thanking Ray, Ashley, and Darrell.

MARISA CASAGRANDE: At the risk of really overdoing our surfing analogies, Cardus is always trying to ride, or getting ready to ride, that wave, which is why we bring together experts and conversations such as this. We're so grateful to you for your time and your expertise on these complicated topics during these complicated times.





All Cardus Education Survey reports and data packs are available for free download at

carduseducationsurvey.com

CARDUS EDUCATION exists to provide reliable, credible data for non-government types of education.

CARDUS

cardus.ca/research/education

