

Giving Done Right, Season 5, Episode 10 – Building Better Schools: David McKinney on Why Student Voice Matters

David McKinney What is an education system that is only preparing individual students for individual gains such that they can feel socioeconomic mobility? That is really, really important but that can't be the be all end all. It also has to include principles and values standpoint, a sense of the collective, a sense the we and not I, a sense that what has been poured into me by way of my education, is actually part of a community that has invested in my success and I too want to invest. I too, want to give back."

Grace [00:00:28] Welcome to Giving Done Right, I'm Grace Nicolette.

Phil [00:00:31] And I'm Phil Buchanan.

Grace [00:00:39] Today, our guest is David McKinney, Vice President of Youth Truth and a colleague of Phil and mine. Almost a year ago, David came to Youth Truth with over 25 years of experience, advancing equity and opportunity for young people and communities. Previously, he was the Executive Director of Youth Leadership at the Aspen Institute and Executive Vice President of Public Affairs at the New Teacher Project. David led various efforts to improve and empower students' experiences in K to 12 schools. David, we're so glad you're at CEP and at Youth Truth and thanks so much for joining us today. Welcome.

David McKinney [00:01:09] Thank you so much, Grace. It's great to be with you all.

Phil [00:01:09] David, great to see you and to have this opportunity to chat. And because Grace and I work closely with you, we know that you're a smart, talented guy who could be doing any number of things in your life and with your career, but you've really spent the bulk of your career focused on young people. Why?

David McKinney [00:01:30] Ah, the short answer is because I hadn't always felt smart and talented. I was a young person, Phil and Grace, and we've had some of this conversation. I was the young person who never quite felt a sense of myself, a sense my voice, a sense agency. It took me a long time to kind of come into my own and a lot of that, after finding some success and reflecting and getting access to mentors and people who helped me find my way, a lot of that had to do with the places where I was intentionally welcomed in school, in community, through extracurriculars as a young person, but also some of the places where I wasn't. Some of places where... I would say unconsciously I was not welcomed, and in some cases quite consciously and intentionally, largely because of race and racism, I was told that I wasn't a part of what was going on either in school or in my neighborhood or in some of the other places that played a role in helping me come of age. So I have tried throughout my career to... pursue a sense of vocation that wasn't just about giving back and being altruistic, although that is the case for me, but it's also recognizing that our systems can do a better job of supporting all young people irrespective of their backgrounds, irrespective of where they come from, irrespective of their zip codes and life circumstances, none of which, by the way, they asked for, they were born into. So yes, altruism, but also in many ways, despite, and boy, you say 25 years and that really ages me, Grace, but despite the fact that I've had some amazing career opportunities, it really is about recognizing that at some level I am still that boy who wants to be affirmed in his agency as early and as frequently as possible such that... Other boys can feel the same and all young people can feel that as well.

Phil [00:03:50] I really appreciate that, David, and I wonder, is there an example of a kind of formative moment where you felt like, aha, I am feeling a sense of inclusion in a way that maybe I hadn't before?

David McKinney [00:04:06] I would say, Phil, there's probably a long chain of many moments throughout my life where adults took me aside and said, David, you aren't just a victim of your circumstances, you have something to offer, you have a voice, you have the ability to change things. Upon reflection, I think about being a young teenager who was racially profiled and harassed by the cops in my neighborhood. And I harbored a great deal of resentment and anger. And as a young black kid, I didn't know what to do with the rage. And I was fortunate enough and privileged enough to have a stable family home, parents who really cared, and parents who were connected to a community of other caring adults who affirmed for me that despite the fact that I saw racial profiling and harassment happening, not just to me, but to my peers, they affirm for me, that that shouldn't happen. And it's not a given that that affirmation happens, by the way. And so when that affirmations happened for me, to be clear, there was a process of healing and kind of processing what had happened. And through that process and through the loving community that I was a part of, I was able to process that in a way that said, you know what, I'm not just a victim of circumstances, that thing happened, you have enough resource and support around you to be of service, to not just heal personally, but we're gonna connect you to some resources that help you develop a bit of an analysis about what happened to you, to take the personal experience and connect it to what's happening at a systems level. I think about having access to, as a young 22 year old, having access to a service and leadership program called Public Allies, which helped me develop an analysis about community issues, helped me identify what is going well in my community and the assets that are available to me, to my peers, to other young people, to families, and to take us through a process where we would build some skills about how to engage and tap into those assets, such that whatever issue we cared about, for me at the time, it was racial profiling, police harassment, such that those issues we would engage in them, we would talk about them, we would try to build bridges across divides and not just let those issues kind of take place and throw our hands up and say, well, that's the way it's going to be. So I'm not describing it all that well, Phil, but many moments where adults and peers who really kind of operated from a value system that is about helping everybody become better, become more connected, engage across lines of social and political difference. All of that very much was inculcated in me early on as a young person and I feel quite privileged from a career standpoint that I've been able to connect with organizations like CEP and you mentioned Aspen Institute, TNTP, Grace, others that I've truly felt privileged to work in and to contribute to really important missions.

Grace [00:07:42] That's great. It seems like there's a dovetailing of the work that you've done, but also your own personal experience and stories into a calling of sorts. Listeners may be familiar with our work at CEP, but they may be less familiar with Youth Truth, which is an initiative of CEP which started in 2008. And so can you give us an overview of what Youth Truth is and what you guys do?

David McKinney [00:08:04] Absolutely, Grace. I would say that at its heart, and as you both know, Youth Truth is really an idea. It's an idea that starts with the voices of young people, their opinions, their experiences, their hopes, dreams, aspirations and it asks what could be possible if we adults took seriously those insights to improve the systems that intersect with their lives. As you say practically speaking, Youth Truth is also an initiative that I have the privilege of leading here at CEP. As you mentioned, Grace, we were founded about 17 years ago when leaders in philanthropy and education came together

during a time when consumer feedback practices in the private sector were really gaining hold in the social sector. And when CEP's work around foundation and grant-making effectiveness was all really becoming more mainstream, due in large part to the leadership of the hosts of this podcast, I might add. But as those ideas and practices were gaining more traction in philanthropy and government and healthcare spaces, the question was asked, well, what about education? And more specifically, what if teachers and administrators, school boards, parents, everyone who cares about youth and education, what if they had access to and were using student experience data just as much as they were using other types of data to understand whether kids are getting a good education, whether they're attending a good school, whether they are truly on pathways to success? So not just things like test scores or attendance data, graduation rates, kind of these conventional measures that are really important, but also things like levels of engagement. What do young people say about that? What do they say about the level of academic challenge they have access to, the quality of their relationships in school? So Youth Truth really takes seriously listening to young people and collecting data, not just at one or two classrooms, but at a level of scale that enables the data to inform policy at a governance level, at a school level in terms of cultures that we build in schools. At a classroom level in terms of the instructional practices of educators. And I would say at a community level as well in terms how we think about community partnerships that are responsive to what students are saying they really need. So absolutely, you're right it is part of my vocation, Grace, to draw that throughline a little bit. And over 17 years, we've really built Youth Truth into an initiative that has now heard from over three million young people. We've worked in... 41 US states. And increasingly we're hearing not just from young people but also from parents and caregivers, from other family members and from school staff as well. The vision and the idea is to really embed student voice practices and data such that education in this country is much more responsive to the people who should be at the center of the system and that is young people themselves.

Grace [00:11:23] And specifically, how do you do that? It's with surveys, but is it just surveys?

David McKinney [00:11:28] Yeah, the process starts with administering a third-party validated survey instrument that young people take up in their schools, but it just starts there we then partner with principals, teachers, district leaders, and young people themselves to work with the data, to analyze the results, to figure out what's meaningful in their local context, to set some goals and targets, and then implementing strategies to make measurable improvements. And I should say along that way. When it really works, the engagement of those various groups, young people themselves, community partners, teachers, school leaders, districts, administrators, all of that deepens such that it's not just a one-off survey, kind of this transactional thing, but it really becomes a process of incorporating and inculcating youth voice data into how we make everyday decisions. In schools and in districts.

Grace [00:12:30] I love how there is that involvement piece. I imagine that educators also just love the opportunity that students can have to work with survey data and to present trends and themes to their classmates and to their teachers so I love that part about what Youth Truth does.

Phil [00:12:48] When we were trying to get support for Youth Truth, even the idea that you would listen systematically in this way to young people was like, it wasn't really received all that well. I've told this story before, hopefully not on this podcast, of being in a meeting with a CEO of a big foundation that eventually funded Youth Truth, which I'm very grateful for

but at the time, the particular CEO of this foundation was like super skeptical. And Valerie Threlfall, who was the first leader of Youth Truth and I, and I think Fay Twersky, who helped conceive of Youth truth, who's now at the Blank Family Foundation, may have been in the room as well. And we're making the case that student perceptions really matter. And this is in the era when, everyone's obsessing about test scores and graduation rates and test scores, test scores test scores. And the CEO of the foundation says, well, I believe that. Student perceptions are orthogonal to impact. And I was like, what does orthogonal mean? And so I'm Googling it under the table. And I'm like, it means statistically independent, unrelated. He's saying it doesn't matter to the things that he cares about. And not only did that annoy me because I thought, of course how students are experiencing their schools matters just because it matters because their experience matters. But also, I believe that there probably was a connection to these other outcomes. And over time through research that we commissioned, but also through research that others have done, it's become well established that there is a link between how young people feel and how they're experiencing their schools, and of course there is, and then how they do academically. But I just tell that story to say like, there was actually like a fair amount of hostility to the concept in the early days among some of the sort of establishment education funders, which I'm not trying to like say, oh, we were right. But we were right. And it's so nice to see now that we're in a somewhat different context in which there's more appreciation. Although now I worry there's a bit of a backlash and we're going backward again on the idea of people caring about what young people think.

Grace [00:15:12] Well, isn't there like studies that show that students actually have a really good sense of whether or not their curriculum is serving them, whether or they're safe in school, like all of that. I mean, it's so interesting because I feel like the evidence seems to really bear it out.

David McKinney [00:15:29] Absolutely, and sorry for the pause. I was just writing down the word orthogonal. But yeah, so there is now a whole body of research that says that student perception data actually matters to student outcomes, student engagement, and whether they feel like it's worth it matters as well. And so if you ask them whether it's worth it, it sends quite an important and positive and affirming signal that you students are not some bystander in your education process. We expect you to be engaged. We want you to engage. We invite you to get engaged. So sending that message is really, really important. Now listen, there've been education debates and there's still those out there who would say no, young people actually should be bystanders. The goal, the purpose of education is simply to get through the coursework, achieve the metrics and the benchmarks, get the good grades, graduate, and then pursue a fairly individualistic life of socioeconomic growth and mobility and prosperity. That movement has been alive in this country and we certainly won't do any victory laps in terms of the body of research that is about student perception data and the effectiveness of that. We certainly won't do any victory laps when we look at the state of democracy. And so there's very much an important and alive conversation about repurposing or coming back to a purposing of education that has to uphold democracy, the collective, and not just schooling for individual gains. And so I think very much about student data, student perception data, those practices that really invite, collect data, make meaning, close the feedback loop, apply the data in terms of change strategies and in increasing opportunity in ways that are connected to helping young people find themselves in an institution that is their school or their district or dare I say their community. I feel passionately, it can't just be about or maybe I'll phrase it this way, Phil and Grace. What is an education system that is only preparing individual students for individual gains such that they can feel socioeconomic mobility? That is really, really important but that can't be the be all end all. It also has to include principles and values

standpoint, a sense of the collective, a sense the we and not I, a sense that what has been poured into me by way of my education, public, private or otherwise, is actually part of a community that has invested in my success and I too want to invest. I too, want to give back. I too want to be a part of my community. I too want to contribute to democracy in some kind of whole that is greater than just the sum of our individual parts.

Phil [00:18:58] So David, what you just talked about makes me think of the work you're doing about civic engagement and schools as civic spaces where I guess you're looking across our aggregate data set. Can you say a little bit about what that project is?

David McKinney [00:19:11] Yeah, well, one of the things that actually really attracted me to CEP and Youth Truth was the research that Youth Truth published in late summer, early fall of 2024 preceding most recent presidential election around who feels civically empowered in schools. We called it the Civic Empowerment Report and we were specifically looking at what young people had to say about the extent to which school did or did not facilitate and develop civic dispositions, civic skills and civic actions. And one of the big findings of that report was that most high school students want to help others. They want to work across lines of difference to improve society. They want to engage in their communities but fewer than half reported learning those skills and having those opportunities in school. I think it was like 50% reported learning civic skills in school and fewer than a third were actually given any opportunity to work towards positive change in their communities. So there's a real disconnect there in terms of the aspirations of young people and what was happening in their school experiences to really live up to those aspirations. We dug a little bit deeper and we also talked about in that report, students describing academic work as totally disconnected from public life. So young people were basically saying, school's not really about this community stuff. It's not really about service. It's not really about democracy in any sense. I'm just there to get the grades, man. I'm just there to do my thing. I know what this is about. This is about GPA. Yeah, I care about extracurriculars and in some places I find a deeper sense of meaning through sports or art or whatever it might be, but there was a real disconnect between academic experience and how young people perceive that and then civic experience, community engagements, practicing democracy. And I count myself amongst folks who have come to a real reckoning and realization about this. In so many ways, we thought we had through intentional diversity practices, equity work, inclusion work almost fostered a sense of now if we can just get the socioeconomic piece right, if we can get the economic mobility stuff right and focus there, the democracy stuff will follow. Every time I read a headline, I'm reminded of how flawed that thinking is. That there's really a false binary that I think we've gotten ourselves into in education. Around economic mobility and kind of the preconditions that support that from a school outcome standpoint and community engagement, family engagement, practicing democracy, teaching civics, which we have completely disinvested in over the past 20, 30 years. I think our work ahead is to really uphold both of those things. Not that it's a binary. And I come back to really the work of inviting young people in rigorous and systematic ways to actually find agency in their schooling, in their education.

Grace [00:22:49] More after the break.

BREAK

Grace David, I'm wondering, can you share some examples of how schools or districts that have worked with Youth Truth have used the information to make change?

David McKinney [00:23:11] One example, Grace, comes from a consortium of districts that we work with in Colorado as part of a project called Youth Connections, which aims to improve student wellbeing across the state. And this project was jumpstarted by the Caring for Colorado Foundation. One of the districts in the initiative, a rural system, surveyed with us and found that their ninth graders were showing a disproportionately lower sense of belonging than other students. It's not a huge surprise. Freshman year can be rocky for many students. But in this case, the district actually had data. And so they asked high school freshmen for suggestions on what the district could be doing by way of doing a better job of welcoming them. Students were feeling the school environment wasn't warm enough. It wasn't inviting enough. They weren't really relating to adults at the school. And so, they used the feedback to develop a mentorship program that paired ninth graders, incoming freshmen with upperclassmen. So now, older students are helping to lead ninth graders' orientation. They are organizing events like ice cream socials, the movie nights to help foster community. That's a quick example of how districts use Youth Truth data to target resources to students who need them most. However, in this case, not only did the ninth graders receive the mentorship that they asked for, but older students also felt a deeper sense of belonging and ownership in their community as leaders, as folks who were giving back and kind of showing younger people the ropes. So that's one example. A second one comes from a county-wide initiative in California. You guys might remember back in 2017 in Sonoma County, there were some pretty devastating wildfires. They took the lives of over two dozen people, burned more than 5,000 homes. Which meant that hundreds of students also lost their homes and they also had schools that were damaged or destroyed. As part of the rebuilding process, leaders there wanted to understand how those experiences were affecting students. And so, local community foundation, the community foundation of Sonoma County, which was, at the time, really at the forefront of the disaster response, stepped up to help the county begin collecting data from young people. We started with just a couple of schools in 2018, but by 2020, nearly 60 schools in 10 districts across the county were utilizing Youth Truth data to gauge how both the fires and then, of course, 2020, the COVID pandemic, were affecting students' mental health. And that data really gave county-level leaders and school district leaders valuable insight about the schools where students were struggling the most. Mental health was a dominant theme coming out of that data. And so, county teams visited campuses where students are reporting higher rates of depression, of stress and anxiety, and it helped the county identify schools that would benefit from additional support. This example I really love because that data has become so valuable, not just to the county and to the districts, but to community partners as well. So, the county began a partnership with Kaiser Permanente, which used the data to gain a better understanding of youth mental health in the county, and it began informing their youth counseling and mental health staffing strategies. They also began issuing wellness grants to schools, giving students a chance to participate in specialized learning that incorporated mental health and wellness strategies. And really provided a space for young people to talk, to be open with each other about depression and anxiety. And maybe the last thing I'll say about this example, our colleagues at Sonoma County Office of Education were also telling us that there began to emerge kind of a bit of a stereotype or presumption about young people during that time. Again, they had just come out of devastating wildfires. They were coming out of the pandemic. And so the presumption amongst many adults was that young people had already quote unquote, been through so much, or they've already quote, unquote, been through enough that we shouldn't challenge them with more rigorous coursework. And so what they found in the data was that really the opposite was true. The data showed that students in the county

weren't quite feeling prepared for college and career compared to students nationally. And it let the teachers know that they actually could and should increase classroom rigor without jeopardizing students' wellbeing. So students were actually calling for more, but teachers wouldn't know that. They wouldn't necessarily have the conversation at a school level, a district level. And in this case, what's so powerful is it's countywide. They wouldn't necessarily have that conversation if they didn't have good data to work with. Absent that data, it becomes kind of an individual teacher to student or individual kind of teacher to classroom or teacher to a small group of parents, but that's the power of the data. You can actually compare your individual experiences as a teacher, as an administrator to what's going on in a broader system. So I love that story. It says a lot about kind of the leaders on the ground in Sonoma County who've taken this work quite seriously and have now systematically used it for seven, eight years now.

Phil [00:28:54] You also did some analysis, your team did some analyzes recently and put out a report on bullying in schools. And I wonder if you could just tell us, what did we learn when we looked across the data set and explored that issue?

David McKinney [00:29:10] Yeah, so last year, Phil, we surveyed 200,000 students across the country and we wanted to better understand the issue of bullying from a student experience perspective. It gave us some really interesting findings. We learned that elementary students who feel like they belong in school and are academically challenged are significantly less likely to report being bullied, which is great. However, only about a third, 34% of elementary students consistently feel like an important part of their school.

Phil Wow.

Grace That's really low.

David McKinney It's really low, So when sense of belonging is high, when academic challenge is there, they report less bullying. And only 34% of elementary's students feel like an important part of their school. That gap. We found is even wider for some students of color that is concerning. On the positive side, we found that when students see adults modeling respect, showing tolerance, listening generously, when they see those kinds of behaviors in schools, bullying drops. Unfortunately, we found that black students and non-binary students are significantly less likely than their peers to report witnessing such modeling. So I was looking at that data and thinking, I don't necessarily have to throw a ton of money if I'm running a school or a district or a county. I don't necessarily have to throw a ton of money at the problem if I wanna move the needle on bullying. I actually can start working with my colleagues in my schools to identify what modeling, tolerance and inclusion actually looks like to remind ourselves that young people are paying attention. It's not just about the curriculum and the content, though that matters. It's also about how we carry ourselves. It's also about how we model what we want our young scholars to be. Particularly across lines of social racial difference, it is about showing young people that contributes to a diverse and healthy and generative and growing and inspiring learning environment for all kids. That's easier said than done. It requires intentionality. It requires naming it. It requires consistent kind of modeling and practice and accountability. But some promise there to know that I actually can move the needle in a positive direction to tamp down bullying just through that kind of awareness and intentionality with adult educators and administrators. You know, in the bullying conversation over the last, I don't know, 10, 15 years, it is a consistent issue that we hear from our partners. This is all happening during a time when we know that young people are really having a hard time with mental health and wellness. So it's not as easy as just saying, as just saying, "oh,

that's the bully. Let me isolate that one bully. That's the bad kid. Let me punish." And it's more so about building a culture of belonging. Supporting all students with mental health and wellness. Limiting the opportunity for bullying to take place through building cultures of belonging and inclusion. Where schools are a place where every young kid. Young person knows that they belong, that they matter, that they have a voice in their school, that there's a place for them. Particularly during a politicized time where some of the models of leadership and of decency that we typically turn to in our public sphere are so disappointing and antithetical to what we want to be teaching our young people.

Phil You know, that's right.

Grace [00:33:23] I mean, you're talking about the power of the data and the data sharing. And I mean in this day and age where my mind goes is, you know, parents obviously, rightly so sometimes have concerns about data privacy, especially around students. How does Youth Truth approach that? So like when you say it was shared with Kaiser, like was that aggregated? Like say more about that.

David McKinney [00:33:42] We take data privacy very seriously. So when we survey, we collect de-identified data, which means that we do not collect student identification numbers. It also means that the data we collect, that we synthesize, that we turn back to our school district county partners cannot be tracked to individual respondents. And so the data can't be used to say, oh, this is what's going on with David McKinney's, you know, freshman students at such and such high school, which from a legal compliance and legal risk standpoint, we take seriously. But also in this day and age with AI and large language models and other providers who may not de-identify data, we're proud of the fact that we know that we are keeping students safe and protecting their data, their family's data, because it's de-identified and can't be tracked back to student identification numbers.

Phil [00:34:50] And it's happening within a mission-driven nonprofit. You're not trying to return a profit to shareholders, which differentiates you also from some others in this space.

Grace [00:35:01] Totally, can I just say for a second, you know, this public school system that my kids are in, we use a competitor to Youth Truth, which is, you know like a venture-backed for-profit player in this space. And I have to say, like, it makes me nervous. I think that the way that we approach it, being a nonprofit and everything is, and also just the thoughtfulness of our policies and procedures. Anyway, that's my soapbox.

David McKinney [00:35:25] No, we take it seriously, as you guys know, we want schooling and everything that goes into administering schools, running schools, to be more human, to be more responsive to what young people need. And so it makes me nervous as well, to know that, you know, there are product and profit-driven entities out there who just are so hyper-technocratic in driving their business models. Not to say that there isn't some value, but they're so technocratic that they really give short shrift to data privacy, and they give short-shrift to actually working with school, community, district leaders around how to improve other aspects of what students are or are not getting in terms of their schooling.

Phil [00:36:17] Moving from... trashing our for-profit competitors, which I always enjoy, to the broader message here. And it's broader just than education, but let's just talk about K-12 education is like the hill that a lot of donors have died on, right? Like so many individual donors, big foundations have said, like, we're going to fix the American public education

system and then have devised often in like... conference rooms with consultants who just got pulled off the case working with like the oil and gas industry or something and are now hanging out doing their discounted work for the foundation or the K-12 school, right? They're devising the plan. This is going to be the fix. And, you know, no better documentation of this sort of phenomenon, I think, exists than Dale Ruzikoff's 2015 book, *The Prize*, which is about the effort in Newark. Mark Zuckerberg announced it on Oprah Winfrey's show, 100 million bucks. And it was going to be the model. They were going to fix it. Everybody was going to emulate it. And there's some disagreement about the degree to which the Newark schools may actually have improved somewhat, but I think we can all agree it didn't pan out in the way that was hoped. And there are so many examples like that. There's been struggles at the Gates Foundation, Annenberg years ago. And you just wonder like... it's probably overly simplistic to say that the reason all of these things have failed is that they've been too top-down and they haven't listened enough to young people and to families and to teachers and to those closest to the issues. But also it's probably legitimately part of the reason that it has failed. And it's part of the reason a lot of well-intentioned philanthropic efforts fail is because they're too top down and they don't listen enough to the people or listen closely enough or well enough to the people that are the intended beneficiaries of the work.

David McKinney [00:38:22] It raises the question of what happens when you do listen? What happens after you listen?

Phil Yeah, yeah.

David McKinney Is that an episodic thing? We listened in February, we're moving on in March? Or is that a systematic thing? That we listen, we're thus going to hold ourselves accountable. We're gonna set goals and targets. We're going to report on... how well we did. We're gonna be vulnerable enough to say the places where we missed the mark. And over what period of time can you sustain that? And so when I think about, yeah, you make a good point, Phil, top-down efforts for change, as you say, some of which have included big private investments, I question whether leaders at the table were really ready to kind of go through a process that I'm just, in the way in which I'm describing, where it's not just listening, but it's also accountability and communicating and coming back and reporting, because of the ways in which it upsets the underlying structures of who has say in what happens in the systems that intersect with kids' lives. You know, and so I'm in some ways describing some of the brokenness of our public systems. Particularly in large urban districts, a superintendent tends to be in that seat at most three years because of the stresses of the public accountabilities, the defunding from the state and federal levels, all of these factors that make leadership and education really tough. And to come back to what you're describing, Phil, that make... building a system that is truly accountable to students and families, even more difficult. That is not to say that we in philanthropy should not continue to work on that. That is not to say that we should now be scared to invest private dollars in public systems with intentional efforts behind it, but we need to be clear-eyed about... how we think of things like transformation and big ideas over what period of time, who gets to own that? Who gets to claim success when we have some wins? And whom are we blaming when we have losses because we tend to operate from a place of blame as well. And by the way, frequently little of that has bearing on what students are actually experiencing. In large part because we don't care enough to ask them. Those investments that we make don't put young people at the center, particularly as you described some of the education reform efforts over the last 30 years we've focused on choice and we focused on standards and we've focused on teacher development and innovative models. All of those things are important, but few of them are actually informed

by what kids have to say. And every time I kind of stand up on the soapbox and kind of chant this mantra, it feels a little absurd. And it sounds so simple in these conversations, but I really believe it to be true. We in education, we haven't invested enough. We still don't take it seriously enough. We act like we don't care enough. About young people, or maybe we don't have high enough expectations of young people. Particularly young people who come from poor families, students of color. We don't believe that their ideas are material enough to inform what it takes to get better systems and better schools. So as I think about the future, it is those kinds of processes and that kind of caring that we are going to need to double down on. And we're going to need to operate with some urgency around, because young people are inheriting a situation that we are not doing a great job of preparing them for. They are inheriting a set of social and economic challenges that are going to require more investment than what was invested in us when we were young. So now is the time to really get over ourselves in terms of whether it's a good idea to ask kids what they think, whether it is a good idea to really engage them meaningfully and authentically and systematically and repeatedly over time, given the urgency of some of the social and economic issues that we face.

Grace [00:43:17] David, I think your vision is just very compelling and it strikes me that I want to ask, how do donors get in touch with you if they want to understand how they can better support students during this time, if they wanna support Youth Truth, either through giving or connecting them with the school district or private charter network that they're involved with, what's the best way to get connected?

David McKinney [00:43:42] I would encourage anyone just to shoot me an email at david dot mckinney at youthtruth.org. I'm just an email away. Would love to have a conversation with anyone who's interested in not just supporting us, but supporting an array of kind of sister organizations, student voice group, youth voice practitioners in our space, who all are doing amazing work and I think feel just as passionately as I do and as we do at Youth Truth. That we can't treat young people as secondary bystanders and instead we've got to really invest more and center them in how we think about whatever issue we care about that we're trying to address through philanthropy levers.

Grace [00:44:29] David, to close, we wanna ask you, in 10 years, what do you hope the landscape of public education will look like in terms of how young people are engaged with and listened to?

David McKinney [00:44:42] That's a great question, I really appreciate it, Grace. You know, it will always be the job of adult professionals to administer and run schools and public systems. The question is what kind of voice do we wanna give to the consumer? And pardon me for utilizing the kind of the private sector language. What kind of a voice do we want to give to the learner?

Phil [00:45:11] No private sector analogies allowed on this podcast. You didn't get that memo?

David McKinney [00:45:17] Consumer voice matters when I buy my deodorant. Consumer voice matters when I buy my eggs at the grocery store. But we need to make sure that that voice matters when it comes to young people telling us what they want and what they need. I'm reminded that just from a socioeconomic standpoint, the jobs that will exist 10, 20 years from now available to young people don't exist today. So we are preparing young people for a future that we can't see and in many cases they can't see. So my hope is that public education doesn't totally kind of turn on its end such that young

people are just running the show. No, we've got a responsibility to take everything we know about highly effective education and schooling and really apply that. But my hope is that the voices, hopes, dreams and aspirations really guide the way. In terms of the data that we use to know whether kids are on a pathway to success. In terms of the data we use to know whether or not we think of a particular school as quote unquote a good school or not a good school. And in terms of making sure that the goals that we as educators have for kids is actually informed by the goals that young people and families have for themselves. And to be clear, they have goals, hopes, dreams and aspirations for themselves, there's a whole lot of stereotype and bias associated with whether we think a particular kid based on whatever biases we might have about them actually has a hope or a dream or aspiration. The problem isn't with them, it's that we don't ask enough, we frequently aren't patient enough and we aren't systematic enough to ask the question of all of our learners, all of our young people.

Phil [00:47:20] Yeah, we've all got hopes and dreams, everybody. And as my man Springsteen says, we need to make this the land of hopes and dreams again.

David McKinney [00:47:28] Absolutely, man. And we need all of those hopes and dreams to be kind of on the table. We need for people to feel like they can express them. We need for people to feel like someone else has heard them and wants to support them and wants to provide some opportunity to make it happen. You know, they shouldn't just be kind of our individual private, this is how I'm gonna get ahead. We're here to help each other.

Grace [00:47:55] That's a great place to end. David, this has been a great conversation. Thanks so much for joining us.

David McKinney [00:47:59] This has been my pleasure, the highlight of my week. Thank you so much for giving me the time and the space and really have enjoyed this conversation.

Phil [00:48:08] Super great to talk to you, David.

Phil There are a slew of resources about effective giving on The Center for Effective Philanthropy's website, cep.org, as well as givingdoneright.org, where you'll find all of our episodes and show notes.

Grace You can also send us a note at gdrpodcast@cep.org.

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