

### Conversations with Bill Kristol

**Guest:** Chester E. Finn, Jr.  
President Emeritus, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation  
Assistant Secretary for Research and Improvement, US Dept of Education (1985-88)

*Taped March 3, 2020*

#### Table of Contents

**I. Reforming American Education (0:15 – 33:10)**

**II: Technology and Education (33:10 – 1:13:20)**

**I. Reforming American Education (0:15 – 33:10)**

KRISTOL: Hi. I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by my old friend and colleague – not old – my young –

FINN: Old enough.

KRISTOL: – young but longtime friend and colleague, Chester Finn, Checker Finn, who – we worked together in the Reagan Administration in the Education Department. We met previously when you worked for Pat Moynihan. One of, I would say, the leading education reformers and students of education reform over the last several decades.

FINN: Well, you're kind. It's nice to be here.

KRISTOL: It's good to be with you. So education reform, when I came in '85 – you too – to work for Bill Bennett in the Education Department. It was two years after "A Nation at Risk," which was the report that was done under Reagan that kind of seemed to coalesce the education reform movement. We had great hopes and here we are, what? A long time later, 35 years later.

FINN: Thirty-five years later.

KRISTOL: As we speak here in March of 2020. And where does it stand? I mean where do our schools stand and where does the reform effort stand? I'm thinking of K-12 for now. Yeah.

FINN: Our schools are nowhere near where they need to be. They're nowhere near where the Nation at Risk Commission said they should be. They're better than they were. There have been gains.

KRISTOL: That's right. So you think from '80 whatever, from –

FINN: Yeah. If you just look at test scores, there were considerable gains especially in the early grades, especially for poor and minority kids, especially in math through the nineties and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's plateaued over the last five or eight years, pretty much since the big recession.

A big issue is that the gains that were visible never reached high school. And so the achievement results in high school are basically flat, have been for 20 years. The mystery is that graduation rates have been rising while actual evidence of learning has been flat. Why are graduation rates rising?

KRISTOL: Is that a mystery, or is that just people wanting to graduate kids?

FINN: It's a lot of pressure to raise your graduation rate, a lot of accountability pressure from federal and state law that graduation rate is part of what counts in how your school is evaluated. And so yeah, there's a lot of pressure to graduate kids and a lot of pressure from kids to graduate. Parents, everybody wants kids to graduate. Nobody likes dropouts. So high school has not been a pretty picture. And there are a lot of crummy schools out there.

But a couple of other things need to be said. A whole lot more kids have school choices than they did before the reform effort started. There are a whole lot of interesting people coming into teaching through side doors that weren't ever doing it in the earlier era. There is more attention to things like advanced placement and millions more kids, literally, taking AP courses.

So there are good things to say. But if you now look at international comparisons, a lot of companies are beginning to surpass us in terms of results, which is to say we mostly look flat and other countries are gaining.

KRISTOL: And to really step back in a way sort of how do we really stand, we're not – I mean leaving aside the reform efforts for a minute, you're just saying if you came down from Mars and looked at all the countries, for our wealth and for the other advantages we have, our education system is not as –

FINN: The elevator speech is that we're in the middle of the pack among the OECD countries and yet we're spending more than most of them.

KRISTOL: OECD being the developed –

FINN: The advanced countries that – we used to say industrial countries.

KRISTOL: Right, right, right.

FINN: Middle of the pack. And that seems to be true whether you're looking at literacy or math or science. Middle of the pack and not rising. Those exams are given every three years. It's called the PISA exam. And we've been static or slightly down in all three subjects in recent years, partly because other countries are doing better.

KRISTOL: Is that an education system issue with us, do you think? Or a society, culture, et cetera, et cetera?

FINN: Yes, yes, and yes.

KRISTOL: Okay. Yeah.

FINN: It's schools that don't push kids very hard. It's parents that are satisfied with the schools they've got even though the schools aren't pushing their kids very hard. There's huge complacency across the American middle class with the schools they've got. There is no sense that *my* kid has a problem. There's a lot of people who think the other side of town has a problem or the other part of the country has a problem, but my kid's fine, happy, well-adjusted, going to go to college. Don't worry about my kid.

So if you're satisfied with your kid's school and you think somebody else's school is a problem, you're not going to push for anything other than what you've got.

KRISTOL: And when we were in the Education Department, we sort of focused on two things, I'd say, that were slightly in tension with one another. One was the push on curriculum and standards and the substance you might say of education. The other was parental choice and competition, the sort of free market, you know, mechanism.

FINN: Bill Bennett called it the three C's: content, character, and choice.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I guess they're not really in tension with one another but a little bit in the sense of –

FINN: A little bit.

KRISTOL: – you know, that should the government impose these standards, or will competition take care of it? But I'm just curious, on both of those fronts, maybe beginning with competition and choice, which has been a core cornerstone of certainly the conservative –

FINN: And for a long-time bipartisan –

KRISTOL: – education reform.

FINN: For a long-time bipartisan that is sadly, along with bipartisanship in so many other realms, that is sadly ebbing away as we can see in the current presidential contest. But the push for choice has gotten about 8,000 charter schools into existence that didn't exist before, and that's all in the last 20 years. That's six or so percent of kids going to charter schools. There are only nine percent going to private schools.

KRISTOL: So the country as a whole, 90 percent or so public schools; is that my memory?

FINN: Some kind of public school. Charter schools are this interesting hybrid.

KRISTOL: They're taking six of that –

FINN: They're taking six, seven percent; and they're public in one sense and private in another in that they're voluntary and they are operated by private nonprofit, usually, organizations, but they are tax financed. You don't have to pay tuition and they are accountable for academic results to the state.

KRISTOL: So do we think that that six or seven percent – would we be better off if 15 percent of that 90, or 30 percent of that 90, were some form of charter school or –

FINN: Yes.

KRISTOL: – competitive schools that I guess were not just geographical? Is that the main alternative I suppose?

FINN: Less and less so. I mean when we were kids, everybody went to their neighborhood district school unless they were rich or Catholic. Those were the exceptions. Today a very large number of people have some kind of choice. Many districts have some kind of open enrollment within the district so you can go to another school in the district. Some states have open enrollment across district boundaries.

KRISTOL: So that's not captured by charter schools?

FINN: No, absolutely not.

KRISTOL: So there is more competition –

FINN: There is.

KRISTOL: – or more choice.

FINN: There's much more choice. There is much more choice.

KRISTOL: And that's good.

FINN: And that's good. It's not perfect. A lot of poor and minority kids are still stuck in really dismal inner-city schools and don't have choices. A lot of other people do have choices.

Some of the schools of choice, sadly, are not as good as they should be. So we've got a different problem, which is a fair number of charter schools that are not doing any better than the crummy district schools to which they are alternatives. Now, the parents are satisfied with them again. They're safe. They're convenient. They're welcoming. Those are not minor things if you're a poor inner-city family to have your kid safe in a welcoming place.

But the academic outcomes in a number of these schools are pretty weak. My organization, the Fordham Institute, actually authorizes 11 charter schools in Ohio. And so we're up close and personal with 11 of these charter schools. And several of them are among the best schools in town in Columbus and Cincinnati. Others are struggling, shall we say.

KRISTOL: I guess one thing free-market types say, which has some truth it seems to me, is choice is good, but of course the reason choice works, if I can put it that way, in business, in the private sector is if there are 10 restaurants and the customers become knowledgeable, the worst two will go out of business. So there's accountability for choice.

FINN: Correct.

KRISTOL: And here, if you have choice but in a sense you get your third choice instead of your first but every school keeps chugging along and no school can change administration the way a restaurant could change its owner or a chef, you know, it's sort of choice without the –

FINN: Charter schools and the private schools have a lot more flexibility to change teachers and principals if they want to. But it's very hard to close a bad school because even a bad school, whether it's a district school or a charter school, has families that love it, a neighborhood for which it is the center piece.

It's the theory of charter schooling. I've been at this for 20 years. The theory of charter schooling was if it's a bad school, you just don't renew it; you let it close. Well, the reality is that unless it's really corrupt and doing horrible things, you let it keep going because the parents like it and the kids like it. And you put them out on the street if you closed it. And it's possible – this is certainly true in a couple of our Ohio situations – that the alternative schools for those kids are even worse than the mediocre charter school.

KRISTOL: But in general, leaving aside closing schools, you also can't – I take it it's hard in many public school systems to remove principals, to remove teachers, to pay good teachers more than – how much of this sort of competition at that level doesn't exist that does exist more in the private sector?

FINN: A lot doesn't exist. The district schools are mired in bureaucracy and tenure and union contracts and bureaucratic arrangements, all of which make it very hard to make big changes in district schools. You can almost never fire a veteran teacher. You often can't even move them to another school. You often can't change their assignment within the school. You may not have good evaluations of them in the first place, but why bother if you can't do anything about them? Why give them a bad rating if you're stuck with them? A lot of principals are saying that to themselves.

School principals can be changed by superintendents but not necessarily for the better. A lot of district school principals – and these are key figures; these are the people that run the school. In district schools there are great ones of course, but there are an awful lot that are sort of like middle management.

They're told what to do by the superintendent's office. And so they do it. They aren't creative executive leaders.

KRISTOL: If some politician came to you, a local mayor or something, and said look, I have limited political – I can probably change one of these things, you know, teacher rules and regulations and hiring, principals, more charter schools, I mean is there one thing that has more effect on educational outcomes and school success than others?

FINN: It's a web of things. So there's no single thing that will do it alone. Empowering principals to actually run their schools, which involves personnel and budget and curriculum, and then hiring good principals to do that.

New Orleans after the hurricane basically went all charter. All charter. And it's the most dramatic reform story in American education. The district basically vanished. Now, the district has gradually crept back into existence and is now essentially responsible for these crew of charter schools. The district vanished. And a whole bunch of interesting people came to town to open schools and run schools and teach in schools, and the results were conspicuously better than they had been before the hurricane.

KRISTOL: Wow.

FINN: Empower principals to really run the schools. But again that involves freeing up who teaches there, freeing them up to decide who teaches there, giving them budgetary control, which they usually don't have in districts, and giving them curricular control.

KRISTOL: So really a deregulation.

FINN: Yeah, it's a deregulation.

KRISTOL: A decentralization agenda –

FINN: Exactly.

KRISTOL: – would be very useful you think.

FINN: Combined with picking talent to then be in the leadership roles in those schools. Yes.

KRISTOL: So it does sound like we were onto something with school choice. I mean school choice and competition and deregulation.

FINN: Absolutely. Absolutely.

KRISTOL: I mean that the bureaucratization of the system, the lack of reward for better and penalizing for worse, is it really a big problem?

FINN: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: The easiest way to do that is not to presumably have massive bureaucratic teacher accountability systems but just to make it more –

FINN: Well, both things have been going on. There's been top-down accountability for results under federal law, mostly No Child Left Behind and its successor law, such that schools are in fact evaluated from on high basically. The basis of their achievement, their gains the kids are making, a bunch of other things.

Simultaneously choice has been going on at different rates in different places. I mean there are still a lot of places without much choice going on.

This is still a very decentralized system across the United States keep in mind. Not only are the 50 states responsible, but we have 14,000 school districts across the country and they are fairly autonomous in many, many ways, including things like do we have open enrollment within our district for kids to go to a different school.

But I would say we've had two big education reforms over the last 20 years. One has been creating more choices and freeing up people to go to other schools, which has liberated a lot of kids to improve their situation, a lot of families.

And secondly, judging schools by their academic results. I mean way back until the famous Coleman Report of the 1960's, schools were mostly judged by how much money was spent, how many teachers there were, how many programs they offered. Now we mostly look at the results, the scores, the rates, the graduation rates, the promotion rates, the third-grade reading rates, things like that. This is a very important shift to look at outcomes instead of inputs.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's a good thing, right?

FINN: It's a very good thing.

KRISTOL: That at least has –

FINN: That's been good.

KRISTOL: – yeah, established.

FINN: Like all forms of accountability it's led to some fraud and some cheating and some finagling, such as those sort of fake graduation rate increases in high schools, that may not be justified by student learning, but are the result of pressure to boost your graduation rate.

KRISTOL: I mean I guess our more libertarian, strict free market fans would say, "At the end of the day though isn't it sort of like you have a choice of McDonald's or maybe McDonald's and Burger Kings. Some will be a little better than others, you know, run better and they'll do a little better than others and that's good. That's good to know. Maybe it's good to let customers choose which of them they prefer based on their either experience or reading some Consumer Reports type thing or, you know, rating. But at the end of the day it's a very small step towards genuine competition, deregulation."

FINN: It is. Milton Friedman would not approve of this system. But he wasn't entirely correct that a free market would produce better quality in education. And the problem there are the consumers are not necessarily looking for what I'd call quality in education. If they are satisfied with safety, convenience, and pleasantness, niceness, welcomingness. And if they're not looking for reading, writing, and arithmetic, then you don't have the right kind of demand-driven quality improvements that Milton Friedman assumed would come.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting.

FINN: It's important. I mean among 20 percent of the population, the people that want their kids to go to a selective college, motivations are different. People will look for a quality school. An awful lot of people are satisfied with safe, convenient, and welcoming.

KRISTOL: And I suppose the way a lot of those people look for a quality school is two things. I mean private schools which do have more autonomy, genuine competition I suppose.

FINN: Yeah or suburban schools that have a lot of advanced placement courses.

KRISTOL: Well, or they look by moving to a certain neighborhood.

FINN: Yeah, exactly.

KRISTOL: Or town.

FINN: We call it real estate choice.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

FINN: It's school choice by relocating somewhere.

KRISTOL: Which I guess is okay.

FINN: Of course it's okay.

KRISTOL: I mean it's okay in a way. I mean it's bad for poor –

FINN: Exactly. It's good if you can afford it.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

FINN: And that's why poor families get stuck in these inner-city schools without choices because a lot of what the middle class, upper middle class is doing is real estate choice. They are moving to a place where they think the school is going to be better for their kid and they can afford to do it, whether they're renting or moving to a fancy house in a posh suburb.

KRISTOL: And the bulk of young people who don't go to a selective college and go to some college or – I mean do we have evidence that maybe parents are being reasonable? You know, "if it's safe, it's pleasant, they learn the basics, it's not the fanciest highest standard, you know, they don't read the greatest English literature, but they get out and what's the big damage," I guess would be the question, right?

FINN: Their kid may do okay. Though there's a heinous college dropout rate that is worth noting. A lot of kids going into college often borrowing money not being actually ready or motivated to succeed in college, dropping out of college and no degree but debt. And so this is a problem worth taking seriously.

But there's also the case that, you know, the economists talk about education as being a public good and a private good. The private good part is, "Is my kid going to do okay with the education she's getting?" The public good part is, "Is the country doing okay with the population it's educating?" I think that's where the more vivid problem is.

KRISTOL: And I suppose one would learn that problem either by contrasting with the past or with other countries.

FINN: Exactly.

KRISTOL: So you're not just having a utopian standard about what should be, you know, a genius or something.

FINN: And some of the sophisticated analysts that have looked at other countries, whose economies are in some cases growing faster than ours, are finding it's because their kids are better educated than ours. I mean the mass of kids are better educated. So there is a connection, not a real direct one, but there is a connection between the quality of the education people are actually getting and the economic success of the country that they're living in.

Now the U.S. is doing fine economically for all sorts of reasons, and some of it is very good schools for a fraction of the population and highly educated people that become inventors and entrepreneurs and scientists and so on. So there's a part of the population that's doing fine, and that carries a lot of weight in how the country is doing.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

FINN: Yeah. But there's also a lot of people who once upon a time worked in a factory or field and who now aren't getting great jobs or careers and they're sort of dead ending because they don't have much education. And a post-industrial economy needs a better educated population than it's getting.

KRISTOL: Yeah. So there seems to be two sort of challenges. Let's call it the average education level, which we could do better and should do better at, and increasingly need to do better at because more and more people need to depend on education, not on –

FINN: And the advanced part.

KRISTOL: Yeah. So let's finish up on the average one.

FINN: All right.

KRISTOL: Have we said most of what has to be said about the average? I mean how optimistic I guess would you say – it's just such a big system I guess and it's so embedded.

FINN: Big, embedded, and decentralized.

KRISTOL: Which in a way is the worst.

FINN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean we're for decentralization. I am at least as a general matter in American life and politics for various reasons. But in a funny way here you get the worst of – am I wrong to say that you get the worst of both worlds? You get unions and you get standards which are sort of general and sort of average-ish and then you get decentralization, which makes it hard to actually improve it, you know.

FINN: Yes. It's why I'm no longer a believer in one of the shibboleths of American education, which is called "local control" of the schools. Because what that now means is municipal control of the schools through an electEd School board that is often either just full of aspiring politicians out to placate their constituencies, or taken over by the teachers union which now runs the candidates that win the election. They end up bargaining with themselves at the bargaining table. So I don't like that kind of local control anymore.

Once in a blue moon you get the stars aligned in a particular city – I mean New York under Bloomberg and Joel Klein did amazing things with the schools because they got power to make changes, and they got out from under the elected local school board, by the way. That was mayoral control.

KRISTOL: And did that reflect itself in actual results and scores?

FINN: Yes, it did. Now, mayoral control is not an unmitigated good thing, either because Bill de Blasio, the successor mayor, is undoing most of the things that were done. This happens in a democracy. There's another election and things get undone.

KRISTOL: Yeah. The local control thing is interesting. I learned that when I got here in a way, that having not studied education policy like you but just a general kind of vague preference for such things as local control, it sounds good, but it's not really parent control or citizen control.



FINN: That's where charter schools come in. Charter schools really are a kind of reinvention of local control because most of them really are purely neighborhood based or group based or they're locally controlled, unlike Los Angeles School District for example. It sprawls across hundreds of thousands of kids and many miles of real estate. So charter schools are kind of a reinvention of local control that I think has got great merit, but the school district structure, uh-uh.

But our high-end education is in decent shape and is bigger than it was even in the – I mean three million kids took AP exams last year. This is in high schools that enroll 15 million kids. I mean about almost a quarter of high school graduates last year in the United States had at least taken an AP exam. This is impressive. I have this new book out about the AP program, which I will happily show you.

KRISTOL: Yes. Good.

FINN: It's called [\*Learning in the Fast Lane: The Past, Present, and Future of Advanced Placement\*](#). And this was a small elite thing when I was in high school and college. I skipped my freshman year in college thanks to the Advanced Placement program, which actually produced credit in college. There are many versions of this now, but the fact that 70 percent of high schools offer some AP, that about a quarter of the kids take some AP, this is good.

And there are alternatives like the so-called International Baccalaureate Program, the IB Program. This is good and the standards are high, the rigor is there. The college-level work in high school is there for kids who have already exhausted what the regular high school curriculum could offer.

I'm pretty bullish about the high end. There's not enough of it, which is why places like Stuyvesant and Bronx Science and Boston Latin and Thomas Jefferson are endlessly the subject of admissions controversy because, you know, such a small fraction of those that want to go and are qualified to go actually get in.

KRISTOL: And so why don't these school districts create another –

FINN: That's a really good question.

KRISTOL: – Bronx Science and another Thomas Jefferson?

FINN: I keep asking them that. Why not expand the supply? And the usual answer is oh, these are elitist – I mean the progressive reply is, "These are elitist things and we should put all our resources into low achievers, because we've got this terrible underclass problem of kids who are barely literate." Which isn't wrong.

But it's as if we can't walk and chew gum at the same time in an education system. And work with low achievers and also high achievers. No. The part of Virginia where you live should have five Thomas Jefferson High Schools. And New York City instead of having nine selective high schools, exam schools they call them in New York City, should have 50 because the kids are able to do the work. And so now we're dealing with the kid that gets a 570 on the exam gets in and the 569 kid doesn't get in. Well, the 569 kid would also do really well in a school like that.

KRISTOL: Uh-huh. And better than at his local high school.

FINN: Yeah. And deserves it, is ready to accelerate, and the districts tend – when my colleague and I of the previous book called *Exam Schools* went hunting for these selective admission public high schools around the country, we only found 160 in the whole country.

KRISTOL: Now I guess you could say, but a lot of regular, good, if I can put it that way, nonselective or non-exam schools have Advanced Placement."

FINN: Exactly.

KRISTOL: They have accelerated classes so it's not as if the students just aren't being offered opportunities to do more.

FINN: Correct. And you don't have to have separate schools. You can have AP programs within your regular school. You get into a different issue there about are you internally tracking kids within the regular school and denying admission to AP to minority kids for example.

KRISTOL: Right.

FINN: And you get into a whole lot of questions of who gets into the honors classes and the AP classes in regular high schools, which echoes back further into what kind of middle school did these kids go to? Because if they went to a really disastrous middle school, they are probably not well-prepared to do AP work in high school. Whereas, the kid in the same room who went to a really good middle school is in much better shape when they get to high school.

KRISTOL: Well, that raises an interesting question, which I probably should have asked you earlier, but it's okay. We can cover all these different things. It's a complicated area, right. Different levels of schools, different parts, different questions about how to organize schooling and about the content, which we haven't gotten to yet.

So one often hears well look, early childhood education is actually the crucial thing. Then you just said, however, that we do reasonably well in elementary schools but somehow something disappears I suppose between elementary school and high school and suddenly we have mediocre high schools, I mean, which maybe the middle schools don't do that well in those years. I have a vague memory of that from when I worked at the Education Department.

FINN: Yeah. Yeah.

KRISTOL: I'm sure it's all important, but is there sort of – again, if a politician said okay, I can only focus on one of these, age 2 to 6, 6 to 12, 13 to 15, or high school, what should I focus on? I mean a good high school presumably can't really make up for a very bad elementary and middle school, right, if you don't know some of the basics?

FINN: Some of them try hard to make up, and we profile in this AP book a little public high school in Brooklyn that does a remarkable job taking kids from crummy middle schools all over the city and preparing many of them, not all of them, to manage AP work before the end of high school, but it's hard. It's really hard if they didn't come from a decent basic education in the elementary and middle schools.

You were touching on something that's also worth noting, which is are they ready to succeed in kindergarten when they're five? And that gets to the preschool question and the home upbringing question and did anybody read books to them when they were little, and do they have a vocabulary because people talked to them? And we've got a lot of kids who are entering kindergarten ill-prepared to succeed in basic kindergarten, first grade, second grade stuff.

KRISTOL: And how fatalistic are you on that?

FINN: If you're not reading fluently by third grade, your prospects are bleak.

KRISTOL: But if you don't come from a well-off home or a home that's got a lot of books and maybe not an English-speaking home and show up at a decent kindergarten or first grade, they're not way behind, it's they're never going to catch up?

FINN: It's not fatal in kindergarten and first grade if you've got really good teachers who know how to teach reading and who do it. Most kids can be caught up at least in those ways. They'll still lack background knowledge about a bunch of stuff. They may learn to read fluently, but they will never have

heard of George Washington or England or China because they won't have any of that sort of Core Knowledge as E. D. Hirsch would call it.

But they can learn to read and there you just need first-rate teachers who know how to teach primary reading. That sounds like a no-brainer, but we've all sorts of evidence that about half of our Ed Schools don't even teach the future teachers how to teach reading.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

FINN: Yes. Yes. This is really depressing.

KRISTOL: Do we have a big Ed School problem?

FINN: Oh, do we have a big Ed School problem. Yeah. We have about 1,200 colleges of education in the country and they do prepare the overwhelming majority of teachers and there are two problems. One is that for a host of reasons they're not getting very many of the best and the brightest young people to even attend them. So they're reaching fairly deep into the barrel in order to just fill the Ed School classes with people who aren't that smart or aren't that well-educated themselves.

The second problem is what Ed Schools teach is often not what teachers need to know, and sometimes that's for ideological reasons. There's the so-called reading wars, the so-called math wars. There are professors that actually sort of don't believe in phonics who are teaching future elementary teachers and they're not teaching them to teach phonics because the faculty is a problem in this regard. Yeah, we've got a huge Ed School problem.

That's why one of the good things I mentioned earlier are the side doors into teaching such as the Teach for America program and the so-called alternative certification programs. So you don't necessarily have to go to an Ed School to get into teaching.

KRISTOL: Yeah. We pushed that quite a lot when we were in government.

FINN: We did.

KRISTOL: There's something a little crazy about yeah, you graduate from one of the best colleges in the U.S. and you want to teach for a few years, but you can't get certified in the public schools of your city or your state.

FINN: When we were talking earlier about the crazy bureaucratic restrictions on schools, teacher certification by states is one of them. And again the charter and private schools are generally free from this. They can generally hire whom they want. And that is a hugely important freedom. They don't in general have to be state certified. In some states they do but mostly not.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I think we pushed hard to get military –

FINN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: So if you're retiring after 20 years in the military, you're probably pretty good at dealing with 18-year-olds and maybe you could be good in a high school teaching various things or as a counselor.

FINN: There is indeed a program called Troops to Teachers.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

FINN: Yeah. It's not huge, but it's exactly following that reasoning.

KRISTOL: And is the union resistance less to all that or –

FINN: There's a kind of union ed school oligarchy that often takes charge of the state decision-making process that regulates these things. And the Ed Schools of course want a monopoly, and the unions in general agree with that view of how you should become a teacher because for them it become an issue of what they would call professionalism. If you weren't trained to be a teacher, you are not a proper professional and you shouldn't be allowed in the side door because you're not a professional teacher. You're just this random person. Well, you might have gone to Princeton and graduated *magna cum laude*, but you're still not a proper teacher.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Or you could take one course probably.

FINN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And it's like, you know, whatever and how to teach nine-year-olds, which is not nothing. I mean some of the psychological and sociological and behavioral stuff –

FINN: No. There's important stuff to know about how kid –

KRISTOL: A couple of courses there but yeah, the idea that if you graduate from history in Princeton, that you can't teach history.

FINN: Exactly.

KRISTOL: You don't know enough history to teach fifth graders seems a little odd.

FINN: Absurd.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

FINN: Absurd but it's a good example of how this system has gotten tangled in its own undergarments with those kinds of regulatory arrangements.

## **II: Technology and Education (33:10 – 1:13:20)**

KRISTOL: So the most deregulated part, and we fought about this too – we fought for this when we were in government – of the system I guess is homeschooling.

FINN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Which once was prohibited in many states or very, very much discouraged.

FINN: It's permitted now.

KRISTOL: And is now permitted fairly liberally would you say?

FINN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean you've got to take some tests and obviously you make sure the kid's being treated decently and so forth. I guess there's a little bit of an exam. I don't even know how much there is of that actually monitoring.

FINN: We're up to three or four percent of all kids in America are homeschooled, and it's up from about two percent 15 or so years ago. That's almost all we know, however, because the data –

KRISTOL: And about .1 percent 40 years ago I would say.

FINN: That's correct. Homeschooling is a bit of a black box, a bit of a mystery because very little is known about what it actually consists of, who's actually doing it. We've got a little bit of demographic information, but we've got almost no outcomes information.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

FINN: Yeah, because homeschoolers don't take those standardized tests that everybody else takes and, therefore, we can't compare their outcomes with anybody else's.

KRISTOL: We must have a little SAT and ACT level information I mean if they want to go to college.

FINN: If they want to go to college, so at the end of high school, those that are headed for college. And there's lots of anecdotal stuff. I mean every year you read about the homeschooled kid who never sat in a regular school who's admitted to Harvard and so on.

KRISTOL: Right.

FINN: But systematic data on achievement across a proper sample of homeschooled kids, we don't have any.

KRISTOL: And your general judgment of that movement?

FINN: Well, as long as parents are working, we are never going to sort of overwhelm the system with homeschooling. It's up to four percent. Maybe it will go to 6 percent while charters maybe go to 10 percent, private schools still hovering around 9 percent. I can see that happening. But no. I mean it requires parents to be the main actors in homeschooling, and most of them can't or won't or don't want to.

KRISTOL: I mean it's a little misleading the term because my impression from – this is mostly anecdotal from talking to a lot of homeschoolers, it's more like, you know, communal – I mean it's "nongovernment schooling," as they would say, certainly on the right. And so it's not necessarily each parent teaching.

FINN: No. It's teaming up.

KRISTOL: Teaming up.

FINN: Yes.

KRISTOL: You can order stuff online for curricula. If it's a subject you don't know, you can get someone to come in and teach it just the way we have music teachers and art teachers and et cetera. So it becomes a little more of an informal, formal education as opposed to home education.

FINN: Well, that's correct.

KRISTOL: Which is good I think.

FINN: You can also in many places send your kid to school for that one subject, you know, you can't – physics, your kid wants to learn physics so he goes to school one or two periods a day and learns physics. The online thing has become a huge –

KRISTOL: Yeah. So let's talk about that.

FINN: Well, a become a huge benefit for homeschoolers –

KRISTOL: Yes, huge.

FINN: – is that the online curriculum is available now.

KRISTOL: Yes.

FINN: And you no longer have to write off for someone to mail you books and things.

KRISTOL: And competing online curricula, right?

FINN: Yes, absolutely.

KRISTOL: Khan Academy here and this there.

FINN: Yes. Some of them are good. Some of them are good. And if the parent is involved in actual supervising, then the online curriculum can work fine. Where online education fails is when the kid is just sort of strapped to a computer and the theory is he's going to educate himself because the online stuff through the computer is going to be sufficient to motivate and educate and evaluate and answer questions and so on. That's not working so well.

Where there is a competent adult in the kid's life, whether it's in a school classroom or at home, the online supplementation of the adult or equipping the adult works fine. Works fine. In schools this is now called blended learning. There's a teacher in the classroom, but half the kids are on the computer learning something while the teacher is working with the other half learning something else.

At home it's a parent who is drawing down, whether it's from Khan Academy or from one of these proprietary programs like K12, an online company really that Bill Bennett and I helped to start. It disappointed me in many ways since then. But if there's an adult at home, it can work fine for these kids. The strapping them to computer, not so good. I mean picture an eight-year-old sort of being left to educate himself. Uh-uh.

KRISTOL: So I've had sort of hopes that the combination of some homeschooling – and of course you don't have to homeschool your kid, as you said, every class every year.

FINN: Right.

KRISTOL: If it's a good teacher, you can send them to school, but if it's a bad year –

FINN: Bring them home.

KRISTOL: – bring them home for the year. And I do run into more people who seem to be mixing –

FINN: Grazing.

KRISTOL: – mixing some home education, some online education, some formal government education. And that does seem somewhat hopeful in the sense that you presumably – and again it probably takes a fairly small number of parents with the time and knowledge.

FINN: Sophisticated family with the time and knowledge to be choosy and to have the options, be able to afford the options, which involves again having a parent who can afford to be at home that year or a neighbor who's good enough that that works for the kid. Yeah. It's not going to work for everybody.

KRISTOL: So it sounds from what you're saying generally that – I mean if I asked you what's it going to look like in 25 or 40 or 60 years, the American education system, you seem to be a little more on the side of it's not going to be 100 percent fundamentally unrecognizably transformed. We're still going to have government public schools –

FINN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: – taxpayer funded –

FINN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: – kids going physically to these schools and so forth.

FINN: Mostly. Mostly it is very slow to change. It is evolving with standards and choices and other forms of schooling that are available to a slowly growing part of the population, and it will continue to evolve I think in that way, though there's pushback coming now from what was a bipartisan coalition in favor of these things.

What we call the education establishment, what Bennett called the blob, which is not just the unions though they're prominent, also the school boards' association and the superintendents' association and the custodians' association and so on. There's a lot of pushback coming against this loosening up, these choices, these alternatives. Because for them it's jobs and it's also status and power and influence and so on. So I do worry that the politics that made a lot of these reforms get as far as they've gotten is crumbling a bit.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I mean the two most-recent Democratic presidents, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama each –

FINN: They were fine on charter schools, not on –

KRISTOL: But they thought of themselves I think it's fair to say at least – and Clinton much more so because he actually did it as an education reformer, but I wouldn't say listening to the debates this year among the Democrats, they're more defending of the system against bad people who –

FINN: Exactly. And including a couple of prominent candidates who were once in favor of charter schools and now they're against them. And I mean they've literally flipped on that issue. And the only conceivable explanation for the flipping is they want the teachers union support and they think pandering in this way will get it for them, and they're probably right.

KRISTOL: So we shouldn't be complacent.

FINN: No.

KRISTOL: Even the muted incremental progress we've made, let alone the real breakthroughs.

FINN: The muted incremental progress was to a very considerable degree dependent on a reform coalition that was bipartisan and that included a lot of smart people, nonprofit organizations, some visionary political leaders, some visionary philanthropists. That's not real visible today.

So I worry. I mean the evolution is going to continue and mostly in a positive direction, but I think it's going to be a lot slower because of the easing off or crumbling of mechanisms that made it possible.

KRISTOL: I mean I guess is it possible a Sputnik-like moment would sort of galvanize people to say we need really big changes? Or maybe that's all a myth. I mean did it actually galvanize people?

FINN: It galvanized the federal government to do some stuff that it had never before done in the fifties, Sputnik, mostly in the science and math and engineering area. It did galvanize some federal programs. It galvanized a handful of practicing educators to do stuff like AP. I mean the AP program more or less dates to the Sputnik era.

And so what are we going to do? We had serious people like James Bryant Conant, the president of Harvard, saying what are we going to do for these kids who need to become tomorrow's engineers and

scientists and they're bored in high school and so let's bring some college-level work into high school. So it did make a difference. Subsequent developments have not had an equal effect. I periodically looked at these PISA scores that show the United States not doing very well and said ah, that's going to be a Sputnik moment. That's going to really wake people up. No. Sadly, no.

KRISTOL: Yeah. If you're in a country whose economy is growing and, as you say, if parents are reasonably satisfied with the overall –

FINN: Reasonably satisfied.

KRISTOL: – the overall atmosphere and the performance of the schools and –

FINN: If you're complacent about the schools you've got and a lot of middle-class families are and they're not striving to get their kid into Stanford. Or if you're stuck in a dire inner-city school with no alternatives and your state representative depends on the teachers union for re-election, you're not in a real good place to – you may not be complacent about your school, but you don't have much alternative there.

KRISTOL: Unless a governor or mayor could really –

FINN: Exactly. Exactly.

KRISTOL: – bust through and do it. So you'd think there would still be political opportunities maybe.

FINN: I think there are. I know there are. And you can see a handful of states today where that is the case and many more where it has been the case. And there have been some crusading state leaders. I mean Jeb Bush and actually George W. Bush both were very good examples of – Lamar Alexander when he was governor of Tennessee. I mean you can make a list, including a fair number of Democrats of crusading governors that made a difference in their state's education system for a while.

KRISTOL: Yeah, but it tends to regress back.

FINN: It tends to regress. I sometimes think of American public education as a giant rubber band that stretches while there's tension on it, but the tension goes away and it resumes its previous shape.

KRISTOL: Would cost sort of put a lot of pressure on it or what's the projection over the last 20, 40 years in K through 12 education?

FINN: We've roughly tripled per-pupil spending in real terms over the last 50 years, and it leveled off with the recession 10 years ago and who knows about today's economy, but it's been rising again slowly since the recession. We're spending – national average is about \$14,000 per kid in public education, which is more than almost every country in the world is spending when you make those comparisons. One or two small European countries spend a little bit more.

So we're not in my view getting anywhere near our money's worth, but it also has to be said that a lot of schools are struggling on, you know, seven or eight or nine thousand dollars a year and in some posh suburbs we're up to \$60,000 a kid. I mean it's big differences.

KRISTOL: They're the local and state funding really.

FINN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I was thinking of the healthcare comparison where we spend more than other countries.

FINN: Yes.

KRISTOL: We spend a higher degree more than other countries.



FINN: Yes, we do.

KRISTOL: And people could argue about outcomes, but we do foster a lot of innovation and a lot of other countries probably freeloading on us in terms of pharmaceuticals.

FINN: Yes, all true in the healthcare world.

KRISTOL: It doesn't feel to me like in education you could make a comparable argument.

FINN: No, you can't.

KRISTOL: The tripling of expenditures is not matched by a –

FINN: No. I'll tell you why.

KRISTOL: I mean healthcare's better today than it was 40 years ago just objectively.

FINN: Yes.

KRISTOL: People are living who would have died; and drugs are dealing with problems that couldn't be dealt with. A little hard to make that case for education.

FINN: Well, most of the additional money is going into hiring more adults to work in the system. And so one of the reasons the teacher pay has stayed flat is that instead of hiring better people and paying them more, we've hired more people. And so teacher/student ratios are radically down from where they were when we were kids.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

FINN: Yes. It's stunning. The national average ratio of kids to teachers when I was in school in Dayton, Ohio in the fifties was 27 to 1. The national average now using the same metric is 14 to 1.

KRISTOL: Wow.

FINN: We've almost doubled.

KRISTOL: And that's real teachers. And then we also have more administrators, right?

FINN: More of everything. And so now we've got this massive workforce in our public education system. I mean four million teachers for starters, bigger than any other part of the American workforce. More than the military, more than nurses, more than anything you can name are now teachers. And the upshot is that we've hired a lot of people, but they're getting paid the same that their mothers were getting paid in real dollars when their mothers were teaching school 30 years ago. So the money's going into hiring more bodies, and I don't think that's – I mean there's some justification for it.

KRISTOL: Well, so the counterargument would be well, that's great to have 14 to 1. No one wants to be in a class these days with 30 other students. I mean no parent wants his kid I guess to be in a class with 30 other students.

FINN: Well, that's the motive. The motive is parents –

KRISTOL: I don't know if they do or don't, but I mean.

FINN: No. You're right. Parents want smaller classes.

KRISTOL: Do parents care about it? Is this responding to parental demand or is it –

FINN: It depends on how you ask the question. If you ask the parents would you rather have your kid in a class of 27 kids with a great teacher or a class of 22 kids with a mediocre teacher, then you get a different answer.

KRISTOL: Right.

FINN: If you just generically say would you like your kid to be in a smaller class, the answer is sure, yes, of course I would. If you ask teachers would you like to have fewer kids in your classroom, of course they would. If you ask Ed Schools would you like more people to pass through your gates, of course they would.

KRISTOL: Right.

FINN: If you ask unions would you like more members, of course they would. All the pressure has been to expand the workforce, and that has not led to higher quality people being brought into it or being compensated better, which might also bring higher quality people into it.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting actually because that is unlike a lot of other parts obviously of the economy where I don't think we have this bias towards smaller being better necessarily.

FINN: Exactly.

KRISTOL: People can choose to have smaller this or that.

FINN: The following statistic is now out of date because I did this a few years ago, but I calculated at one point that if the ratio had stayed the same as when I was a kid but the spending had gone up as it has gone up, the average teacher in America would be earning about \$100,000 at current spending levels if the ratio hadn't changed.

KRISTOL: Now are they required to have smaller classes? Are they required to have certain numbers of – I'm sure they are – of counselors and, you know, administrators.

FINN: Yes. Some of that's dictated by politics. California made a huge mistake when it passed a class size limit – Florida has done the same thing – because what that meant was that you suddenly had to scramble to get a bunch more bodies into classrooms whether they were qualified or not. It also turned out to have unexpected effects like you had to have more buildings because you had to have more classrooms. So a big capital cost came with that. No, that's not been a good move.

KRISTOL: It seems like some charter school or private school I guess should say we're going to have – if this were legal – we're going to have, I'm making this up, 25 in a class, 30 kids in a class, but we're going to have –

FINN: Best teachers in the world.

KRISTOL: – absolutely, and we're going to pay teachers \$125,000 a year.

FINN: The best teachers in the world.

KRISTOL: We'll give them a couple of, you know, 23-year-old grad students –

FINN: Teacher aides.

KRISTOL: – as teacher aides.

FINN: And some technology.

KRISTOL: And technology.

FINN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And but your kid is going to be in a much bigger class. That's the price you pay for this – surely parents would take that –

FINN: A couple charter schools have done something like that.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

FINN: Yeah. They changed the ratio, but they brought in technology, they brought in college kids to be tutors, and other ways to supplement these bigger groups of kids. But they don't feel like a bigger group of kids because you never have 50 kids sitting in the classroom with the teacher. You've got a teacher who is responsible for 50 kids, but you've got a lot else going on in the course of the school days so that the kids are spending part of the time online, part of the time with their tutor, and part of the time coaching each other, stuff like that.

KRISTOL: I mean I suppose that part of the problem is we have this somewhat sunk cost, if that's the –

FINN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I'm not sure I'm using the term quite correctly. Some economist can correct this when he watches this *Conversation*. But so much human capital and physical capital that exists and so you have the schools and they're built in certain ways and you have all these teachers and administrators and no one is going to – since it's a public sector thing –

FINN: Not going to fire them.

KRISTOL: Right, fire them. It's not like the private sector where too bad, you know.

FINN: Right. We're laying off 100,000 people.

KRISTOL: I'm making this up obviously. If there are one-fifth as many steelworkers as there were 50 years ago, that's just the way the world works when you have – so once you have those sunk costs and a desire to protect them, both human and also, you know, you do have the physical sunk cost too so to speak of all these school buildings and who wants to close one – I guess occasionally they do get closed and converted to condos once in a while.

FINN: Not often.

KRISTOL: That really slows down change.

FINN: It does.

KRISTOL: When you think about it.

FINN: It's a hugely cumbersome and change-resistant enterprise.

KRISTOL: You don't get Google. You don't get Uber. You don't get all the things we think of as the 21<sup>st</sup> century drivers of change and examples of change in that kind of system. Even in medicine you'd get more change I think because the technology almost forces it.

FINN: Correct.

KRISTOL: And there's more private sector. I mean most physicians don't work for the government.

FINN: You can point to small examples, little networks of charter schools that do it very differently. You can always point to good examples in the American education system, but then you look at the fact that there's 100,000 schools, and your good examples represent hundreds, not tens of thousands of those schools. Yeah, it's very cumbersome, very slow to change, glacial.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and hard to change because the military might let's say be susceptible to some of the same criticisms.

FINN: Ultimately.

KRISTOL: It hasn't changed that much in 50 years. They have the same, you know, enlistment tours, the same officer rotations. I mean they have changed some. But of course there a determined reformer could come into one of the services.

FINN: Exactly.

KRISTOL: With the support of Congress I suppose but, you know, would have to have the support of Congress but could actually make pretty big changes. There's no equivalent in education, right?

FINN: No, because we've got a decentralized system. Military is the classic centralized system and this is not. And so famously the word "education" appears nowhere in the U.S. Constitution. It is subsumed in the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which leaves it to the states. And every state but Hawaii has then decentralized into districts.

KRISTOL: Wow.

Higher education? I mean one often hears people from higher education sort of acknowledge that K through 12 is not great but hey, American higher education is the envy of the world. People do come from all over the world to study here and not much the other way and et cetera, et cetera.

FINN: Well, they're partly right. They're partly right at the high end. The hundred institutions that they're thinking about when they say that are – most of the best in the world are in that hundred, but most kids don't go to that hundred.

They go to the other 2,500, most of which are open admission. They'll take anybody. They're in many cases hungry for butts in seats, bodies in class, state subsidies that come with enrollment. They'll take anybody whether they're qualified, whether they're ready for college-level work, whether they're truly motivated to go to college.

We have very few outcome measures in higher education. We're far better at outcome measures in K12 than we are in higher ed. Almost the only thing we have are degrees granted. No evidence of actual learning in higher ed. And we've got a whole lot of mediocrity in those open enrollment public and private institutions, community colleges, now many of which are hurting for students. And full employment is not good for community colleges. Community colleges thrive during recessions when people go back to school because they can't get a job.

KRISTOL: And I think we have a government loan and grant program that probably encourages –

FINN: Encourages everyone to go. We've also got a kind of liberal ethos that everyone should go, which is wrong, and it has led us to sorely undervalue vocational technical career education. This notion that everyone should go to college. It's led to some very bad counseling of people as to where they should go. It's led to a lack of good alternatives to college. And it's led to this kind of easy financing for much like a home loan bubble. Anybody can get financing.

KRISTOL: And is it a bubble? I mean is it going to pop?

FINN: I don't know.

KRISTOL: People said it was going to, but it hasn't yet.

FINN: The government props it up with umpteen trillion dollars now in student loan debt that, you know, some candidates want to forgive all of.

KRISTOL: Well, what about that though? I mean that seems to have some political resonance.

FINN: It does.

KRISTOL: But I guess you can't really blame some of the students. They were sort of talked into taking out a loan, or their family was. And then it turned out to be not very fun or stimulating to go to the particular school they were at, and not even clear that it was going to help them. And by the time they discovered this 18 months in, they owe X amount of money.

FINN: Whether they got a degree or not. And if everybody you know under the age of 50 is paying off a student loan debt, or not paying off their student loan debt, of course there's going to be political resonance in, "let's forgive it all," which I think is a really dumb idea. But it's understandable why.

And it's also understandable why people, a lot of them, default is that they're not earning much money. They didn't get a degree, they didn't get a credential. College was probably a bad idea in the first place for them; but the alternatives available, as I said, were not good.

KRISTOL: I've always had the feeling, but I don't know if there's any evidence, is that the internet, I mean the technology has the potential to help more at that level, at the 18-year-old level or the 28-year-old level who was in the military for 8 years and then got out. It's usually the 8-year-old ultimately who needs to be shepherded or taught by someone, maybe the parent, maybe the teacher. But, you know, a 24-year-old can decide, "I'm interested in X. I want to learn it online, and I'll look at a Consumer Reports type thing to see what the best course available online is."

FINN: Yes.

KRISTOL: And they obviously can be monitored and graded each week and you could provide teachers and teaching assistants to talk to this young man or woman.

FINN: There's lots of this going on.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

FINN: And it works better for older people because they're motivated and they're more or less disciplined.

Now the sort of full-time traditional undergraduate that tries to do it online it turns out from the evidence to date if they never go to class, they never talk to a professor, they never have human interaction with fellow students or faculty, it doesn't go so well for them. It requires an immense amount of discipline and self-discipline and motivation to stick with it.

Again, a blended approach where you're learning a lot on your own outside but you have occasion to interact with people, or even just on the phone, or even just online you interact, you're not just taking a canned program, it works much better. And if there's somebody called a professor who is kind of answering your questions when you need them, and checking on your work, and encouraging you to keep going and stuff like that.

But sure, a highly motivated adult can find anything they want to learn online and can often get a credential of value by doing that.

KRISTOL: I mean I guess the question at some point is does the credentialing monopoly go, that is does an online nursing school which doesn't maybe exist or doesn't exist as much as a brick-and-mortar school – I mean I don't see why it couldn't in principle. You know, people pass the test. Maybe you do have to come somewhere to do some practice, so there may have to be some brick-and-mortar sort of aspect to it, but that could be a limited part and presumably one could then see how well those graduates do compared to graduates of traditional schools.

FINN: Sure. Sure. And there are fields where of course you want the practicum to be present. You probably want the nurse to have some contact with a human body at some point.

KRISTOL: Right.

FINN: You probably want the future chef to have some contact with a kitchen at some point.

KRISTOL: Right.

FINN: Computer programmers maybe don't need.

KRISTOL: And the preliminary courses you take –

FINN: Exactly.

KRISTOL: – I mean biology or whatever, you don't –

FINN: You don't need to do that in a school building exactly. A lot of fields do need the practical side to it, but this combining, this grazing, this blending is widespread and can work very well for adults, much better again than for the eight-year-old. Eighteen-year-old, better; 28-year-old, much better.

KRISTOL: But isn't some nontrivial percentage of the people in higher education 28-year-olds, not 18-year-olds at this point?

FINN: Yeah, particularly in the community colleges. There's a huge amount of adult education taking place there, often people who missed it the first time or who have acquired motivation, or who want to make a career change, or for whom going back to school and learning something in particular. If you're 28, you're usually not coming back for a liberal arts degree.

KRISTOL: Right.

FINN: You're coming back to learn something in particular that's gotten your interest or that you think will get you a better job.

KRISTOL: And politically one hears a lot about free community college and so forth and less about helping people take courses in whichever way they want to take them, whether it's at this community in this state or not I guess.

FINN: Exactly. And when you hear about free community college, what people think you're talking about are the 18-year-olds coming out of high school and going to college, not the 28-year-old or the 38-year-old who's coming back to improve their skills at something in particular. Now, often those incidentally don't lead to degrees; those lead to what are called certificates. You get certified as better at some particular activity that you're engaged in.

KRISTOL: But it sounds to me that there might, therefore, be more radical change in that world.

FINN: I think so. I think it's visible. It's also hollowing out a number of traditional colleges. I mean colleges are closing and merging. And I mean I just read yesterday, the day before that what had been a teacher prep college in Boston called Wheelock College –

KRISTOL: I remember that.

FINN: – has now merged into Boston University and it is now the Fenway Campus of Boston University and the Ed School at Boston University is now the Wheelock College of Education. That's a merger.

KRISTOL: There will be more of that because the absolute numbers –

FINN: Exactly.

KRISTOL: – just of people in these different age cohorts is not going up.

FINN: No, it's actually going down some at the sort of traditional American high school graduate. I mean another reason for bringing in immigrants is there aren't enough Americans to go around. We've got huge capacity in the higher education system, and it often goes unutilized.

KRISTOL: That area of higher ed might get much more disrupted in the way we've seen other parts of the American economy.

FINN: I think it already is. I think it already is. And it's more vulnerable to change. It is far less controlled by big bureaucracies.

KRISTOL: Right.

FINN: It is far less unionized. There's a lot more freedom to change your institution.

Again, that's not going to happen at Amherst College, which is going to remain tenured and stodgy and liberal arts. It's not going to go through radical change. Unfortunately from my point of view change at an Amherst College is, "Let's add a major in feminist studies. Let's add a major in oppression studies," things like that. That's how they're going to change. That leads to a whole other set of issues in higher education.

KRISTOL: So, stepping back, I guess part of me thinks we need to just be more radical in addressing this whole, especially K through 12, you know. It isn't what it should be. It's such a huge part of our success or lack thereof as a country. I mean we haven't even talked about citizenship and forming citizens and the content of the education.

FINN: Exactly.

KRISTOL: We need to come back and have that conversation.

FINN: Yes, we do.

KRISTOL: Which I assume you're not entirely happy about.

FINN: Not at all. Not at all.

KRISTOL: Is it worse than I think?

FINN: Well, we have a whole new book out called [How to Educate an American](#) that is full of laments about the inattention to civics, to character, to history, to patriotic history, to other core elements of the curriculum. No, I'm not at all happy about how that's going.

KRISTOL: And structurally I suppose that's also harder to address because of the sclerotic and hard-to-change nature of the system, right?

FINN: As well as fashionable progressive causes that don't believe in patriotic history for example, because we have nothing to be proud of as a country.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

FINN: It's just a history of oppression and failure and disaster. No. I think the content side is a problem in K-12 and in higher education. And it needs attention. And that's bloody hard to do, as you were suggesting. For political reasons, for sclerosis reasons, for lack of bipartisanship reasons, yes.

KRISTOL: For reasons that I think the people on one side of this fight tend to dominate in certain areas, in professions, certain ed schools and so forth. The people who would be on the other side of the fight are busy in other areas.

FINN: Other areas.

KRISTOL: And they don't have the time to review carefully the curricula of seventh-grade history classes, right? I mean that's, you know.

FINN: Or won't bother. They're retreating into their own enclaves, or into other fields. And indeed, one of the major reasons for this particular book, *How to Educate an American*, is to get people who are right of center to think again about the importance of K-12 education and how it needs to change. We've got some terrific essays in here by some very thoughtful people about how it ought to change going forward. And if we're *not* going to have bipartisanship in education, then right-of-center people might at least assert what they value in education, things like citizenship.

KRISTOL: That would be good.

FINN: Wouldn't that?

KRISTOL: So I'm sort of uncertain. You sort of three-quarters convinced me that it's a massive system that has existed a long time.

FINN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And unlike many other parts of America, where one might have said that, but then things change pretty fast, this one seems the most resistant for various structural and other reasons to sort of big change.

FINN: I think that's right.

KRISTOL: It sometime happens – It's like the Soviet Union type examples where it's a massive system that looks incredibly resistant to change –

FINN: And collapses.

KRISTOL: – and then collapses. I guess that doesn't happen here and we don't really want it to happen in a way, right?

FINN: Exactly. We don't really want it to happen. And it's not going to collapse. It's going to continue to get sort of nibbled around the edges by innovators in situations, typically a charter school or an online, or a for-profit, or a private school sometimes, where things do get interestingly different on a small scale.



And then maybe gets picked up. I mean the KIPP Charter Schools are up to about 170 of them around the country.

The IDEA Charter Schools are up to heading for 100,000 kids as soon as they are able to open enough schools. So some things are getting a little bit of scale in the innovation side of K1-2 education. But it's a long way to go at the rate we're going.

KRISTOL: So with political entrepreneurship, and maybe some data that show this works and it works for poor kids and not just for well-off kids.

FINN: Yes, exactly.

KRISTOL: Maybe you need the profit motive ultimately, you know, to make these changes.

FINN: Yes.

KRISTOL: And is there some of that going on?

FINN: There's a lot of it going on, but of course that leads now to new denunciations from the progressive left that this is privatization of a public good and profiteering off of the education of poor kids. So that's part of the political battle right now, is that the injection of profit motive, or even the injection of philanthropy from people who made money from the profit motive, has become controversial in a way that it wasn't 10, 20 years ago.

KRISTOL: But the injection of a different aspect of the – not quite profit motive, but of financial reward has always been frowned on. I mean if you came down from Mars and looked at the thing, you would think it's crazy that everyone's getting paid the same –

FINN: Yes, it's crazy.

KRISTOL: – as a principal in this district regardless. Some of them are excellent.

FINN: Right.

KRISTOL: And do fantastic jobs for poorer kids, and others are totally mediocre time servers.

FINN: The physics teacher and the gym teacher being paid the same.

KRISTOL: Presumably that doesn't happen much in other areas of American life.

FINN: It doesn't. It doesn't and it shouldn't. And, you know, a brand-new study just the other day saying that well-crafted merit pay programs for teachers produce smarter, better educated kids. But merit pay programs for teachers often aren't well crafted, but they're also *always* controversial. The union is always against them.

Often the teachers are leery of them. How are you going to judge my merit? Is this going to be pure favoritism? Is it going to just be limited to teachers who teach the subjects in which there are standardized tests? If I'm teaching Italian, there won't be any evidence of my merit, at least not in the annual testing in reading and math that has become the coin of the realm for so many of these things.

KRISTOL: I mean I guess – we should conclude in a minute – but I mean one lesson I take from this is that our current political context is particularly damaging to – I mean education reform, it's so complex and it does have such a mix of private and public and so much what I characterize as "sunk cost" but let's just stay "history," and embedded organizations and institutions and practices that can't be changed overnight, and maybe ultimately can't be changed that much even in 30 years but could be changed some. It does seem to be particularly an area where actual, serious, policymaking becomes important.

FINN: It does.

KRISTOL: I mean there's no waving a wand. And since our politics is now entirely wand waving –

FINN: Yes, wand waving.

KRISTOL: – on the Right and Left – maybe it's better at the state and local level somewhat, but I mean it seems to me that there were people in the eighties and nineties –

FINN: There were and there are.

KRISTOL: – who tried, you know, Jeb Bush really knew a lot about.

FINN: And so did Roy Romer in Colorado and Bob Graham in –

KRISTOL: Democrats, right?

FINN: Yeah, Democrats too.

KRISTOL: Now do you think that's still happening at the mayoral and gubernatorial level or are they –

FINN: In a handful of places. But again then there's an election and the teachers union takes over the school board or gets a de Blasio instead of a Bloomberg to be mayor. So things do tend to revert.

I spent four years until pretty recently on the Maryland State Board of Education, which is indeed state level education policy and ended up deeply frustrated by both the resistance around the state to change and the resistance within the state's own bureaucracy to change. And then the stranglehold that the union has over the legislature such that when the board screwed up its courage to make a change, it would sometimes get the rug pulled out by the legislature because the union didn't like the change that we were making. This is the state I've lived in for 40 plus years. Not a happy story. A very illuminating one for me but not on the whole a happy story.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's a depressing note on which to end. We should find something else to say.

FINN: Well, I've been at this for 50 years and I'm not quitting. There are enough bright spots, whether it's Advanced Placement, or poor kids learning more math, or Teach for America bringing more interesting people into teaching, or the IDEA Charter Schools coming out of the Rio Grande Valley and moving into Louisiana because they're really good schools for kids. I mean there are enough bright spots to keep me going.

KRISTOL: It sounds like that yeah, we need entrepreneurship, and we need serious policymaking. And denunciations, or just giving into the status quo, which is a lot of what we now have I would say, don't do much good.

FINN: Absolutely. But I haven't given up, and a lot of people I think pretty highly of haven't given up.

KRISTOL: It is important, right? I mean really.

FINN: It's important. Exactly.

KRISTOL: I mean you can't sort of have a great country.

FINN: With a crappy education system.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

FINN: No.

KRISTOL: I mean you can have it for a while. You can sort of coast a little bit, but at some point it catches up to you.

FINN: Well, what this country did for a long time was it educated 10 or 20 percent of the population quite well. And again the other 80 percent were either pushing a plow or doing something on an assembly line. They didn't need to be highly educated. So it worked okay. And I'd say it carried us through the fifties and sixties pretty well.

KRISTOL: And it had a pretty robust civic education that wasn't academic I would say.

FINN: Exactly.

KRISTOL: Some of which was in schools and some of which was outside.

FINN: Yes, exactly. And civil society kind of integrated. Parents tended to support the school's judgment about their kids behavior instead of fighting it which happens a lot now. The thing was better knit together. But it was also serving a different kind of a population, less diverse and also an industrial population. It was working pretty well. I don't think the system has caught up with the changes that have occurred either in our demographics or our economy.

KRISTOL: So that's an opportunity for politicians, policymakers, entrepreneurs, citizens, but it's a challenging opportunity.

FINN: Yes, precisely.

KRISTOL: Okay. Well, that's a little more upbeat than we were five minutes ago so we should stop there.

FINN: All right.

KRISTOL: Checker Finn, thank you very much for joining me today. Really an illuminating discussion and for me particularly I hope one that shows how complicated some of these areas of public policy are and you really need to know a lot about them to do good. There's no magic finger snapping, right?

FINN: Well, thank you for the opportunity and I'm looking forward to dragging you back deeper into education reform than you have recently been.

KRISTOL: Yeah, we'll talk about that. But I will get you back also to talk more on the content, character side of it, and what could be done about civic education and so forth.

FINN: Yes, happy to do.

KRISTOL: Checker Finn, thank you very much for joining me today. And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]