

Hello, and welcome to "A Public Affair." It's Tuesday, so that means you've got me--I'm Carousel Bayrd, and we have a fabulous and exciting show lined up today. Such a fabulous guest sitting right across from me right here in the studio is Madison Metropolitan School District current superintendent--she's still here in charge of all the fabulous thing it is--Dr. Jennifer Cheatham. Hello, Jen.

Hey Carousel, hey everybody. It's good to be here.

Wonderful to have you and I do want to just kick it off. You know, you're leaving at the end of the summer, moving on to other adventures but to say first of all, thank you to your accessibility. We've had a lot of conversations.

We have.

...with you and many of your leaders. They aren't always easy going conversations, you know...

I believe that (laughs)

..but they're important conversations and your availability to answer questions and be on the show and come and have these conversations is really important to Madison. So thank you.

Well, thank you for asking, it's been wonderful every time and I'm sure it'll be wonderful again.

Another great show.

That's right. We're gonna make it happen.

"I don't know, I'll burn down all the bridges, leave town, got nothing to lose, nothing to lose" (laughter) All right. Well, let's sort of start with a, I have very few statistics that I brought with me today, but just a few, just a few.

Okay.

There's approximately 27,000 students

Correct.

...in MMSD, more than 50% are students of color including 18 percent that have self-identified as African-American, 21% that have identified as Latinx, uh, 32 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, 6 high schools.

There you go. Those are the stats.

It's big for Dane County, but it's not, it's not huge, in, compared to other big cities. Does that make it more manageable? Do those numbers seem like "okay, I can work with those." Six years ago when you showed up and you said "I want to be the superintendent of Madison."

Yeah.

t felt like a world that you could play a role in.

No doubt. No doubt. I think you know this Carousel, but I worked in San Diego before coming to Madison, where there are 200 schools. Then Chicago where at that time there were about 600 schools. And so coming to Madison, it did seem doable to me. The challenges seemed hard even from the outside, uh, uh, but they seemed doable...I always imagined, "wow, I could have all 50 principals in a room together."

Right, right...

...and we can just talk. Real talk. And that's been true. I mean, it's been wonderful in that way, yeah big challenges but doable because of the size and the community that we had...

That's fantastic. So, first of all, congratulations on your new position you're moving off to Harvard University--that I mean, I think that bodes well for us for..that leaders from Madison move on to Harvard University...

There you go!

... so thanks for, uh, representing Madison and, uh, at Harvard. That that's excellent.

No doubt. I think sometimes when we're in our own communities, we lose perspective on them and as much as we have challenges, we have tremendous strengths and school districts outside of Madison nationally have looked to us, right, have come to us for guidance and advice for lessons learned some of them learned the hard way, right, but important lessons that we've gleaned, um, so I want people to know that not only have we made progress here within our community, but we've been already--Madison's been influencing the field of education beyond Madison.

How is that right when we're in it? All we see are the challenges right? Because like okay, here's another problem. Let's work on that. Here's another and you know, that's the daily job of solving problems, but to understand that it is it because we're at least a community that is willing to address the challenges instead of trying to ignore them?

I think so. I think that's a part of it. Um, I had and still have a longtime mentor named Carl Cohn. He was the superintendent in Long Beach many years ago, and I remember my early days working with Carl, he called, uh, this work, he describes it as a hard slog, right, the hard slog of school improvement, right? It's not, um--you don't get to spike the football much, right? There's always another challenge to address right and it's ultimately about children, right? So it's like schools and school districts are at the center of humanity, right? And all the challenges that come with being alive, right, exist in a school, in a classroom, in a school district.

Um, so, um, yeah, it's challenging work. But I..to your point, I think that Madison has, um, as a community, right, of educators, but of people, um, have been able, I think to talk about hard issues together. I'd love to talk to you about that more actually.

Yeah, oh yeah.

Okay, I think it's a, it's a major asset that we don't talk about enough, our ability to be in dialogue with one another..

...even if we disagree, even if we don't go the route that you know changemakers want to go the fact that we're willing to have those conversations

...put an issue on the table...

I do agree, I do I think that that's really valid. Let's talk about..so you've been here for six plus years--

Um hmm--

Let's talk about the changes that you've seen in that six plus years.

I think there have been a lot of changes.

Okay!

...and, um, I, I mean, of course everyone's going to think that, that they're for the better, but I would say that they're for the better. I think that mostly they have been, um, for the better. When I started six plus years ago the general sentiment--it was a difficult time in Madison by the way, the context--Act 10 had just happened, so the education community was feeling incredibly demoralized...

...Devastated, devastated...

I mean, you don't get over those feelings actually, I think they're hard to get over.

Yes.

What else was happening at that time the.. Right as I was starting, The "Race to Equity" report was released. So everyone was kind of grappling with the realities of the disparities between black and white people in our community...

Putting numbers...the communities of color knew these challenges all along and no longer could the white communities of Madison deny them when the numbers were boldly in their face.

Right--so think about that though. So here we have teachers, staff, educators feeling, uh, demoralized because of Act 10 AND simultaneously being faced with the reality of these disparities, right? That's really challenging. Um, what else was happening at that time? Um, oh and the Urban League proposal for the charter school, right, had just been denied...

Boy, that was a tough, that was a tough moment in Madison...

...right? It was a tough moment.

It was a very racialized conversation.

Tell me about it. It was intense. And so that was the context that I came into...

Welcome!

...yeah, right, and I'm inherently a very optimistic person, so I thought "yeah we can do this, this is hard but, um, there's an inflection point here, right? We can come together and find a better way of doing this," um, and I felt like that all the ingredients existed in Madison to do so, um, so it's interesting that given all that context what came up in those first few months when I was on the job was a desire for just direction and coherence, right? There was this feeling that the district at that point in time, which is a point of I think some chaos, right? That was a chaotic period of not knowing what direction to go in, knowing that we were facing challenges but not knowing how to move forward--everyone just needed and wanted desperately some direction, right, and some coherence around the strategies that were being put into play. So I took that and ran with it. And I think that over these last five or six years we've accomplished that. Um, meaning, we have real direction. I still get regularly criticized for doing too much, right, that's different from not having direction.

It's hard to, when there's so many things to do to have I'm sure a desire to fix not everything at once and yet you have to move all the balls forward a little bit at a time.

I think that's true. So my challenge has always been well, okay, we are going to have to do a lot because there's urgency, right, and there are children who need us to make progress now. Um, so I can't narrow the focus too much, but at least I can make sure that what we're doing is coherent, right, that it all holds together and is leading us in a direction that's addressing the real problems that we face, not the fake problems (laughter) but the real ones, um, and again, I think we've accomplished that. I really wanted for us to adopt some more disciplined ways of working. I wanted us out of the gate to invest in school leadership teams, school improvement planning, data use, I just wanted us to be a more disciplined organization...

To have a sense of structure.

Yeah, to have structure and have systems and structures and shared leadership structures that would help the people who work most closely with children, um, to be empowered to make the best possible decisions.

I remember, I remember that. Yeah, I remember when you moved here. Yeah. I have a 7th grader so I had just gotten to know MS...Madison Public Schools, right? I was an observer on some level before, before you became our superintendent and I and I remember having a conversation with Marj Passman, who is a mentor and good friend of mine who was a mentor, member of the Madison School Board at the time talking about how my daughter's first grade class wasn't learning the same thing at another first grade class across town, and still in Madison, because that wasn't the structure that we had, and that on some level there was a lot

of teacher freedom, but on another level kids you, you couldn't switch schools and expect to be able to have the same curriculum and you would either be advanced or behind depending on where you go just because you moved apartments across the city.

Well, that's an excellent point.

It's not like that anymore.

No, and so in addition to creating more discipline in the ways we make decisions and how we measure success and learn from, um, our failures and make improvement over time, we insisted on more instructional coherence. So let's get clear on what we think great teaching looks like in the classroom. Let's get clear on, uh, the standards, right, that we have to teach especially in literacy and mathematics--that has been the major focus for these, um, past five, six years, um, and, uh, and we insisted on, uh, on teachers not working in isolation, but working in teams, um, right? So there was a big investment and not just, uh, as a learning community understand how we teach, uh, but knowing a little bit more about what we all need to teach and how we how we need to work together as teams to continually reflect on the effectiveness of our practice. So teachers coming together on a regular basis to talk about what we taught last week, what do we learn from it? Which kids are getting it, who isn't, what does that mean for what we're going to do next week, right? Um, and that sounds simple but it is just essential. I mean that is the core of what school districts do.

...and I could see, I feel like every time you start a new initiative or change things up. Not you specifically but everyone in general.

Yeah -

you almost have to go all in--okay, this is what we're doing. And then once you master it, you can pull back out so I could see a lot of challenges and difficulties of teachers that were fabulous teachers.

Oh, yeah -

that. More of course. They taught our kids, of course, they were fabulous qualified teachers, but they weren't as interested in making sure that their first grader was doing the same as another first grader was doing--they had love and nurturing and they wanted to inspire this, these students to love education, and not that they have to be, um, I can't think of the right word com, combative with each other but there were definitely teachers that thrived because of the free form that we allowed and here you are now adding....

No doubt...

...adding a structure to it. Where do you think we are in the process? Do you think there's a point where we can say? Okay, you've mastered the structure, and now we can pull back out.

Yeah. Oh my God, that's such a good question. I think that both the disciplined ways of working that I described first, and this work that we've done around instructional coherence was, um, for a while and for some felt really constraining, right to your point, and...

I bet it would...

...for great principals who felt like they had a leadership structure that was working or you know, like there were principals who were feeling those constraints too, um, and certainly teachers, um, and I've talked with enough teachers to know for a fact that that is absolutely true, um, but I think that what I've always believed was that it was a step in the process, right? Which is I think is your point but that's not the end goal. Um, the end goal is something more important. The end goal for those disciplined ways of working, um, at the school and district level, especially at the school level related to SIP planning, were so that at this stage we could even further empower schools right to make their own decisions because now...

What's SIP planning? I don't want to interrupt you but you said something [overlapping]

Oh, I'm so sorry. School improvement planning, which is kind of the disciplined way of working, we've adopted at the school level for decisionmaking...

Okay.

...um, and school-level focus areas. Um, we want--now that those disciplined ways of working are pretty embedded--like they're part of our culture and our way of working--um, we can actually further empower schools to do what they think is right for their school community, right, and in collaboration with their students, their staff, their, their families. We--the new strategic framework, uh, uh, kind of lays out, um, a strategy for further empowerment of schools. Same thing for the classroom experience. Um, now that we have more coherence, right, instructionally as a system, I do think that now we're at the stage where what we can and should be thinking about is how to ensure that those, the teachers have the freedom they need to ensure that those, um, are not just nurturing environments that build community, which is essential, um but that there's deep and rich learning happening in the classroom. Right? It's not--standards alignment isn't enough. It's got to be, uh, instruction that's, uh, meaningful to the children who are in the classroom, right? It's got to be content where students can see, uh, themselves, uh, represented in the curriculum, right, so that they can understand the world around them and interrogate it. Like I just think that we're at, poised to bring instruction to another level in Madison without losing the coherence that we've created, right, we can empower schools to make decisions for their communities without losing those disciplined ways of working that we think are essential...

What does that say about Madison when you inherited it, that it really didn't have this structure? It really was a city that you know, again, I, I've only been here for I've been here for how long have I been here at around 20 years now. I don't know some, so I certainly don't know the history of this, of the city, but I know the gentlemen before you were white men that perhaps didn't mind that school A was completely different than school B, they didn't think about the academics because that wasn't, they weren't, I don't, I don't want to slam these gentlemen at all, but for some reason that wasn't Madison's priority, that's sort of surprising.

There's a whole lot to unpack there, isn't there Carousel. But so I don't know. I know, all I know is what I've experienced and, um, not just me, but the people who have led in Madison--the teacher leaders, um, who are on their school based leadership teams, the principals, the senior team of Madison. We are hardcore educators, right, who have put the educational experience at the center, right, that the theory that we have adopted for change has, uh, been focused on improving the experience that students have with their teachers, uh, around content that's worth learning, right, that is, that is the hard slog of school Improvement, right?

We're talking with Dr. Jennifer Cheatham Superintendent of Madison Public Schools. We'd love your questions or comments, please join the conversation, the phone call--the phone number is area code (608) 256-2001. You can also send us a tweet @worttalk or a message on our Facebook page. Our page is A Public Affair 89.9 FM Madison.

So Jen, let's talk about race.

Okay -

...and it seems to intersect with everything that we do. Big picture is uh, our president is racist. I think our, I think our country is racist. Is Madison racist?

Yeah.

I think every individual, I think I'm racist--I live in Wisconsin, I live in Wisconsin, I live in the United States, I'm racist.

I am too. I'm married to a black man and I have a bi-racial son and I'm racist. It is--I've gotten myself into so much trouble for saying those words, Carousel.

Really?

Yeah, I think you know, it's funny.

I've I love saying those words, but that's the conversation we were talking about at the beginning. Can we at least start there, let's admit it.

Right - I think I, I, out of all of the challenges that I've experienced in Madison being able to lead um for racial equity to, to, to try to be an increasingly anti-racist leader, which means doing my own work, right? It means doing my own inside-out work simultaneously alongside everyone else who's an educator in Madison has--that has been the most challenging, uh, aspect of this work and the most fulfilling in some ways, right, the most important, the most powerful, and the most challenging, um yeah.

Let's sort of break, break it down in so many pieces. Does this fit in with the conversation about the behavior education plan.

I think it does, it does.

It does, right, when you say suspend and expel students of color at a tremendously high rate. I didn't, I didn't pull up the numbers from six years ago. I'm happy I didn't because I don't, we don't need the numbers in front of us for you and I to admit the things that we've already admitted and then along came the behavior education plan that was really a challenging new way to look at things.

Yeah. Yeah, I think, let me, let me, I want to zoom out before we zoom back into this because I do think it's a great example of this work in action. Um, I think in my first five years we certainly were leading for racial equity, um, and the main approach we were taking was to, um, uh, I want to think a couple things. We were, we were certainly talking a lot about what it means for all of us to be culturally responsive educators, right? How do we build relationships with students of color especially in a district where most of us, most educators are white and white females like me, um, and at the central office at the district level we were very interested in both investing resources and tackling the, uh, institutional barriers that stood in the way of success for students of color and their families, right? So we've been all along, you know, working on, um, addressing those systems and structures, Um, you know, we rewrote our strategic framework, um, a couple years ago now, launched it a year ago in the fall and tried--we thought we were ready, and I think we were, to take it a whole, to a whole another level and be even more explicit in that commitment. Right? We used the word "anti-racism," right, that we are as educators obligated to be actively anti-racist. Um -

You intentionally had a piece that talked about Black Excellence.

Yeah.

We are focusing on our black students to rise them up. And even though I think there has been criticism from the community of "oh, Black Excellence, let's see it." But that's the whole point. At least you're putting it out there. If you never put it out there you can't hold yourself accountable

...hold yourself accountable - that's right

...and you can't measure your failures, so the community that wants to tell us we're failing. At least we're saying "You're right. We said black excellence and we're not meeting it at all."

No doubt and both of these simple things are different but have, have to happen simultaneously, right? You have to lead for Black Excellence, which is I mean, what, what what is implied I hope in those words is that, that black students are already excellent, right, and that it is our job to yeah, to cultivate that excellence, um, and that we have an obligation simultaneously while we're cultivating Black Excellence to recognize and dismantle racism in all of its forms, um, and we're educators who are held to a higher standard. This is a really big deal. Um, I think for me that work that we launched last year, um, what I wish I would have done better was to kind of preview for everybody what it might feel like, right, that we would feel excited and motivated by the commitment, and then when we started actually doing more of the work and holding ourselves accountable for it, every time, not just sometimes, that it would create a feeling of, um, like not knowing of, disequilibrium, um, not sure being sure about your next step, uh, what I

think it's produced a lot in Madison right now is this feeling of, of who's on the good side and who's on the bad side, right? Like yeah, which is really...

Lines are very drawn -

They're very drawn--it's fine because it is a step in the process. We just can't stay there. Right? Like what we need to do as a community is say "okay - right, this is, this is a natural feeling right when you're faced with our own, right, racism, the racism of the institution that we work for, um, right? Like I have this ambivalent relationship with any school district. I love it because I'm rooting for it and I hate it because it was, uh, uh, kind of born out of, out of racist ideals, in many, right...

...and that's the whole concept of institutional racism

That's what it is!

...you're fulfilling your actual intentional institutional design...

Right -

...which leads to racism.

So it is natural to go through this feeling of disequilibrium, to worry that you're not on the good side, right, um, and, and if we stay there, things we may actually, um, we will suffer as a result. We have to, uh, pull together and have that dialogue that we were talking about earlier in the show. Like we have to not let people leave the table but bring them back in in loving and compassionate ways. Um, I actually think that Madison and the school district, which is a kind of at the center of Madison, um, will be stronger as a result of this dialogue, right? We're going to get through it and we are going to be better...

...the hope of the future.

Yeah. I have no question about it because there is a movement underway in Madison not just in the school district. Um, I mean our educators are phenomenal people who get it and are working hard to do this inside out work, and make our institution a better institution for every child. I have no doubt, um, but we have to stop pitting ourselves against one another, right, we have to stop looking for someone to blame, um, and just accept that this is our reality, right? It's not just ours...

We've got to fix it.

Yeah, and we're the people who are in these seats now, right, we're the people doing the work, yeah [overlapping]

We have a question that came in Jen had a question on Facebook. Thank you Jen for contributing to the conversation and using Facebook. Excellent. It does get relayed over to me. Yay, success technology. She wanted to ask you dr. Cheatham to talk about what carr--parents

can do. I almost said "carrots." I guess I don't know why, maybe I'm hungry. Okay, start over. Jen wants to know what parents can do to push the schools forward and to work on race and equity issues.

Oh, excellent.

And I also I'm going to put my own little spin on that...

Yeah, go for it -

I think they're different conversations versus white parents, parents of color. Um, I know that there's so much intentional effort and we can talk about the successes there of getting families and communities involved. But we also live in a time where when people say "where are the parents" which I hear all the time. My answer is I don't know working three jobs trying to not get evicted. Taking the bus that doesn't actually get them to where they're going. They are just hoping that their kid is safe at school. They don't have time to meet with the teacher because they don't have enough time and money to fight being evicted which is what they're working on and then those are not I don't think that's anecdotal. As a tenant rights attorney. I think those are very real lives of many many people.

Absolutely.

Sorry Jen. I co-opted your question there, but can you help us understand the complexity of wanting parents involved, needing parents involved, and also acknowledging that parents have overwhelming things of basic needs on their plate.

Um, yeah, parent partnership has been a steady focus for us as well. I mean it was one of the major priorities in our initial strategic framework. Um, shout out to Nichelle Nichols who's been rocking it in that role.

Yeah, certainly one of the greatest things in Madison -

She is amazing and, um, uh, in our whole focus there has been on parents as partners, right, as full partners in the educational process. We have always felt that parents don't need to be present in the traditional ways, which is what you are kind of getting at a minute ago, Carousel, to be our partners, but they need great communication. They need to know what's happening with their child at school, um, so that they can play a part, um, in the ways that they that are possible for them. Meaning, uh, sometimes the most important thing a parent can do is just to, to check in with their kid right to talk about it to encourage them, right? You don't have to come to the PTO or PTA meeting

[overlapping] on their math tests to say. Hey, how's school going? Did you do feel safe and I'll be there? Are you challenged? I love you. I know you're smart. Right? It's

...right. Yeah, no question.

Every parent of course does every that's what every loving parent, loving parent does...

...absolutely

when they have a free five minutes at the end of the day, sometimes they don't

...all kinds of ways to be partners with teachers and all the I've talked to a lot of parents over the years and I'll tell you that relationship between the parent and the teacher is the one that's most important to most parents, right? That's the relationship they want to have be really strong. Uh, I think to the Facebook question.

Yes -

what I'm reading into that is, uh, how beyond the typical parent partnership can parents be involved, especially around this work on race and equity and I am, and I would encourage. especially the white parents in Madison to think very carefully about and deeply about this question. Um, how do White parents, especially parents of privilege unintentionally kind of hold up the systems and structures that need to be disassembled if every child is going to be successful, um

The wrong idea as a white parent and I live, I'm a white parent in a predominantly white neighborhood in a predominantly white school that--we don't have to talk about racism

right

...don't talk about it. We're not racist. So we don't talk about race, which is actually the wrong response when we live in a racist world.

Right, yeah, I mean students need to talk about it, right, they need to make sense out of this world around them, um, especially if they're going to make it a better place. I think that's essential, um, but I think I've seen, uh, some leaders especially PTO and PTA leaders really lead this conversation well over the last couple of years I've seen PTO and PTA leaders introducing book clubs to read, like books like Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*, right, among parents to better understand why they're having some of the responses that they're having to our efforts to address racial equity head on. I mean, I would encourage parents to be thinking about that. What inside out work do they need to do, right? It's not about what we do in the big ways necessarily, the big initiatives. It's what we do in the small ways, our one-on-one conversations with our fellow parents, right, how we challenge one another. I think that's really important.

And do you see those changes? There's so much to talk about we only have 20 more minutes which is crazy. But do you see these changes...

I do -

...happening in Madison by the conversations of, of and I think that's the natural progression is to start with anger, "what we're not racist. What are you talking about? My kid got a great education. I love Madison schools. Are you attacking Madison School? Yeah, we need to protect our schools, too." Sort of okay. Well, actually here's a conversation. I just gave a, um, here's my

tangent on this. I just gave a presentation on Criminal Justice Reform to Jewish Social Services and part of a tiny piece of my talk was about police in schools,

Um hmm -

...a tiny piece, and it was just acknowledging the school-to-prison pipeline and hey, here's the percentage of African-American students that get tickets when there are police in our schools and all of a sudden people go "Oh, that's why you're mad about police in schools and that people in that room actually said that to me they weren't ready to say "we don't need police in schools," you know, but at least there was a moment of understanding that hadn't trickled down to them of why would people..."only criminals are afraid of the police" kind of thing. And I think that's what you're getting at. Is that, do you see those conversations happening?

I do, I mean I, again, I think there is a powerful, um, an exciting movement underway in Madison that more and more people, not just our educators, but Madisonians are, are getting into this dialogue with one another, right, in the small moments and in the big ones and I think that bodes well for the future of Madison, we just, we, you can't step out of it. We can't pit each other or people against one another, even the police in schools issue. I mean, it's such a good example, Carousel, I think that, um, by criticizing and raising serious questions about the issue, um, shouldn't be misread as uh, as um being anti-police, but it always ends up sounding that way, right -

and there might be people on that position that are anti-police

Sure -

but that's not the core of what they're saying

Right, right

and you, and you use the excuse of anti-police to stop listening to what they're saying.

You got it, you go it. It's a really easy way to shut down the conversation and what I want us all is to stay in it together, um, right? Let's not shut down the conversation. Let's figure out what is the real problem that we are trying to solve, um, and if we can do that we're going to be okay

and you feel like we're moving--so back to Madison schools--what, talk to us about some of the programs and the initiatives that you feel are moving us forward - there was a caller and then he got disconnected--sorry about that Dan. He had a question about the achievement gap and I don't know the details of what his question was but moving forward with how do we raise, you know? Address the racial equity that exists.

Yeah. Well, I think that's what this new strategic framework is all about. I'm very hopeful, the board I think is very supportive of continuing to move in this direction and I would hope would find a future leader who's capable of leading this work. Um but um but yeah, I think we're poised for really, really powerful things.

What needs to happen to end racial disparities in Madison schools?

Oh gosh, I mean there's not any one thing right? I mean I think the center of it, if I had to pick one thing, Carousel, it would be to, uh, for everything that we do to be ultimately aimed at, um, seeing each other's humanity--does that sound too fluffy? That's what we need to do. Right? Everything we do, the way we, um, organize schools, right, through the school Improvement planning process and our decisions about instructional design, if we made all those decisions to make sure that you experience a school day in a deeply humane way, right, where you're seen as a human being that's seeing the teacher as a full, you know, human being, seeing every student in their full humanity, every parent, I mean, it's interesting, right, like what if that were the design principle for every decision we made moving forward. [laughter]

What does that look like? I know that there's conversations about schools have become too academic focused sometimes.

Um hmm -

Yeah, and I don't know how you deal with this you get it from both directions. We're not meeting our academic needs, we're not academic focused at all. And we're too academic focused, can my kid please take a dance class and a ceramics class and something that makes them feel like a beautiful person.

I think that the strategies, I'm going to make some assumptions about what the caller called about--the strategies that have been put into play over the last 20 years to quote unquote close the achievement gap--that term drives me absolutely crazy, by the way--

Why? Because what we're talking about is racism, we're not talking about achievement gap?

Yeah. I don't think it's actually describing the actual problem that we're trying to solve. But I think that the strategies that have been put into play, um, which have been largely about, uh, being more prescriptive on academics--how we teach literacy? How do we teach math, about intervention, so giving double and triple doses of literacy and math if it's a student is struggling. I think that those strategies, I mean, we need to teach literacy and math well, I mean don't get me wrong.

That's what I [overlapping]

I don't want anyone to misinterpret me here, but the, the intense focus on only that has actually I think set us backwards and no pushed us forward. I think that if we had--and this is where the district is going now building on the coherence that we've created--if districts were more focused on deep and rich learning experiences for students, if imagine young Black students saw themselves in their curriculum right from day one, if they were getting access to historically accurate depiction right of the world in which they live, um, if they were, um, um, uh, how do I say this, um uh, if they were consistently seen as fully human? Right? Too many black students in this country are not, are dehumanized on a regular basis. I think we would see those results change much much faster.

So the next level of work in Madison is all about that--empowering everyone in a school community to create a holistic instructional experience, uh uh uh, investing in teachers as, uh, culturally responsive teachers who are actively anti-racist, um uh, ensuring that the learning experience offers one that is deep and rich, right, and relevant to the students who attend our schools. Um, I mean that work is already underway in Madison and I feel like that is the key to transformation.

So all of these things...

Um hmm -

...sound wonderful.

I know -

They cost money.

Yeah, let's talk about money.

Let's talk about that. Uh, Wisconsin, the United States, but Wisconsin, award-winning Wisconsin, we do not fund our public schools

No.

And one of the, from my perspective from what I've seen as a parent and someone that cares about these issues from the behavioral education plan for example, was that there weren't enough support for teachers and in our schools because we don't have enough money to hire a dozen social workers in every school. I mean people always talk about let's get at our needs. I want to have social workers sitting around doing nothing because we have we've hired so many of them. [laughter] I mean I dream of that of a school just overflowing with abundance of people ready at any moment, but that is a complete fantasy that is not based in any reality of how we fund schools in Wisconsin.

Yeah, yeah. I agree entirely. I mean the scarcity model of it. I don't know. I've been an educator for over 20 years and sometimes you've been living in scarcity and for me working in scarcity for so long. You forget what, what's possible, right, like you,

You accept it as the norm -

You accept it as the norm, I know - it's terrible and we shouldn't accept it as the norm. I um, I was thrilled when Tony Evers got elected. I will not, I'm not shy about saying that. And I -

He cares about public education.

He sure does. He gets it. I think the proposal that he put forward was really inspired and inspiring and not um, and not uh Fantasyland. I mean he was trying to lay out for all of us a

picture of what it actually looks like to fund education public education appropriately. I was happy to see that we got a little bit of bump in per-pupil aid for next year, which is great.

It's still not enough.

No.

And the problem is, is that right if my daughters don't get things in their school. My daughters have piano lesson. My daughter has, you know dance classes, our neighbor's daughter has a math tutor--all of these things that if you can't get it at school people with money can help supplement our excellent schools that are starved to death. We can, I can supplement it but if that cost thousands of dollars a year that which what I do,

...so ultimately the disparities get bigger that..

we get it

...right they get worse. I think that's exactly right Carousel. I, I mean, I'm not giving up on what um, uh Governor Evers is trying to accomplish and, um, I don't think anyone should. We should be funding full day 4K in the state of Wisconsin. I mean that is an absolute must. We should be funding, uh, reimbursement for special ed services. Um, that is an absolute must. Um yeah, I mean we we should be fully funding services for English language learners, which is not happening now. I mean the list goes on and on and on. Um, I'll tell you we make, uh, we, we do a lot with very little, um, but yeah our kids and our teachers and our parents deserve much more. That, there's no doubt about that.

What do you, what do you hope to see in the next superintendent? What is, what is your, you know, the team comes together. You don't really get a say in it -

I don't -

- the team you were part of gets a say in it. Um, you know, what do you think are, the school board should be looking at when they choose - hopefully they have many qualified applicants to choose from but everyone brings their own unique strengths and weaknesses to the table. What are the strengths you think they should be looking for?

Well, I mean this superintendent uh will be starting from a fairly strong foundation, right? I mean,

[overlapping] say so yourself.

Yeah, I mean, they're not going to have to redo their HR systems. The budget despite the challenges we just described is, is solid. We have got is a lot to work from there. So I'm part of what I just I hope is that they're looking for someone who can lead this kind of next level of work, right? And that's got to be someone who has a, uh, fairly robust vision and deep understanding of the kind of transformational change that we're trying to make now and we're trying to make, uh, changes in instructional design that are um that are truly transformative--the

Community Schools model, right, that is a different way of doing school. Pathways at the high school level--that's a different way of doing school.

There's pushback on all of them.

Yeah.

I'm scared of Pathways

- and it's gonna be amazing!

Good good. I'm scared of what West High School looks like when my kids get there.

Well, because it is a different instructional design, right? I mean, it's, we're, ugh, this is a longer conversation, but when you're trying to change, um, the way schooling looks and feels for students so that they so that they're actually thriving in school and truly prepared for post-secondary, um, and I would hope that we would get a leader who can lead *that* transformational effort. I do think the district and the school board should be looking for someone who can continue to keep racial equity at the center. Um, I don't think there are many, enough education leaders and superintendents who uh cannot just talk that talk but but walk it so I'm hopeful that they'll look for, for somebody who can continue that work as well.

Um, yeah, and I think the last thing I would say is, uh, there are a lot of leaders out there who don't understand teaching. This is maybe what you were getting to when you talked about my predecessors a little bit but there but I would hope that they're looking for someone who has really strong instructional leadership skills, right -

They know what it feels like to be in the classroom.

I think it's really important. I had always wished that I could have taken a week every year and gotten back into a classroom and co-taught with a teacher. I was never able to quite pull it off. I hope that for the next superintendent, right, to stay really grounded for my work that teachers

To remind them what is happening in the schools -

That's right. That's right.

And do you think, I know the school board has talked about, for referendums, do you think those are things that we should be moving forward, both--I know there's conversation about building referendums and operational referendum. They've been supported in Madison. I'm hopeful, I would hope that our school district if they think that's the right thing to do would go for it.

I would hope so. I mean, I we've been working on that long range facilities plan for years and we didn't even talk about some of the other things that we've done, right, we've made some facilities improvements already. But um, but the plan that is shaping up, um, on facilities, which would lead with the four comprehensive high schools the alternative high school Capital High and address South Madison, some major gaps in learning at the elementary level, I think the

package that will Shape Up is going to be powerful. Yeah, and both the school board and the new superintendent I think needs to lead that work forward, you know, the buildings that we have are old, 50 years on average. Uh, we need to take good care of them and our students deserve to learn in uh you know, in spaces that reflect our value of them that are inspiring. Yeah, that's about deep learning too.

Well, it's been wonderful to have you, I want to wish you great success as you move on to your next adventures, but you're, you're still here for a couple more weeks. Deep in it.

Oh, yeah, deep in it, yep, I'm thrilled, I'm transitioning to Jane Belmore as the interim as you know,

The interim, and will she serve, the goal of the setup is she'll serve for the duration of the next school year?

Yeah. Yeah, uh-huh. That's right. And she starts August first. She was the interim when I started. So I transitioned with her in those first months with this job -

She's an old pro at this job -

She sure is, and it's been a pleasure to transition with her. I think the district will be good, in very good hands with Jane next year. Thanks, Carousel.

Well, that's that's good. Maybe well, I'll put a bug in Jane's ear and get her on the show to talk about the challenges of being a leader that isn't a permanent leader. That's a whole new world of it, but, and yeah, and when do you, you head off to Boston? You still have a bit, a couple more weeks are there anything left that you're really focusing on that you that you hope to work on in the next few weeks?

Well, the next couple of weeks, I'm getting the senior team with Jane set for next year. We want to make sure that the group is ready to rock and roll. Um, the big kickoff of the year happens in the second week of August, meaning there our big Leadership Institute, which is really the signal but the school year is starting, welcoming back teachers and starting with the administrators and the leadership teams which includes teachers and then a couple weeks later all the teachers. So we're working on making sure that that welcome back plan is strong, that the team is ready to rock and roll, and they will be it--there's a strong team here in Madison. I'm leaving but the team that is here both the principals, the leadership teams at the school level and at the district level is a very, um I don't know, I mean, they're an impressive group to say the least. So Madison's in good hands.

Wonderful. Well again, thank you so much. Dr. Jennifer Cheatham Jen Cheatham Madison superintendent for six plus years. Thank you for your leadership. Thank you for facing the challenges and, and the criticism and the successes and all of that and we wish you great success in Boston

Thanks, Carousel.

Thanks everyone for listening today exciting news. I'm actually filling in for Ali's show tomorrow. So you're going to hear me again you get to hear my fabulous voice. It's coming back tomorrow, but thank you to Tim for engineering Michelle for producing. I think Anita and Joe have been working on the phones. Thanks everyone for your great work. Have a great day. Bye.

July 16, 2019 via WORT - FM

MP3 audio file can be found here: <http://www.schoolinfosystem.org/2019/07/16/departing-madison-superintendent-jennifer-cheatham-wort-fm-interview/>