

The Mississippi Miracle & Evidence-Based Education

Featuring Dr. Molly Macek

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TRANSCRIPT

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Welcome everyone to the Wisdom and Influence podcast here at Cornerstone University. We have a very special guest with us today. She is the former director of education policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. She holds a Doctor of Education from Johns Hopkins University. Prior to attaining her doctorate, she earned a master's in teaching degree from Johns Hopkins and a bachelor's degree from Georgetown University.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: She has almost two decades of experience in secondary education. She's worked both in private and public schools as a classroom teacher, department chair, administrator. She's performed extensive research on educational problems of practice that has been published along with innovations and interventions.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And her most recent post is here in July, as principal of junior high and high school at Nouvel Catholic Central School in Saginaw, Michigan. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Molly Macek. Molly, it's great to see you. Thank you for being with us.

Molly Macek: Thank you so much for having me. It's an honor.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: There's so much to talk about. You know, you've now stood on every rung of the ladder of education: principal, chair, policy analyst, statewide policy director. Tell us a little bit about what each rung of the ladder has contributed to how you see education now, because you have such an incredible perspective, not just theoretical, not just policy, not just research, but a doer, a practitioner in lots of different ways.

Molly Macek: Yeah, it's been a really wonderful and rewarding journey. I feel that I was called to be an educator, and that began as my role as a teacher. I began at an all-girls Catholic school in Towson, Maryland, and was there for fourteen years and wore multiple hats there. I was the department chair of the science department.

Molly Macek: I led their STEAM program. My last year there, they did STEM and incorporated art into that. And just played a lot of different roles there. As you mentioned, got my doctorate in education along the way and later found myself in a secular school, a pre-K through twelve private school in Toledo and education policy.

Molly Macek: So throughout that journey, it's been really incredible to be able to experience education from these very many different perspectives. And I would say it was really important to where I am now in being successful in my more recent roles to have been a teacher for many years. Teachers play such a critical role and have a very challenging job that certainly needs to be acknowledged.

Molly Macek: They are tasked with preparing our children for their futures, for this very rapidly changing world. And today especially, we are seeing so many changes in terms of technology and social media and pandemics and just the evolving social landscape. So to have had that experience in the classroom, to be able to learn how to adapt to various challenges along the way, and then that was really critical to my ability to then take on additional leadership roles, and in the policy world, that was a really different and valuable perspective as well.

Molly Macek: You know, that removed me from the school environment, so I was no longer in the classroom. But again, having that classroom experience and that school leadership experience I believe gave me a really invaluable perspective at navigating state policy and understanding and advocating for policies that would be most effective at improving education for students, improving achievement and educational outcomes and teaching conditions for educators.

Molly Macek: And all of that has, I think, led me again to return to my true calling and passion, and that's back in a school environment where I'm very excited to be able to take all that I've learned along the way and be able to help Nouvel to grow and to become an even better and more faith-filled school community.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That's great, Molly. I want to ask you about oftentimes people speak about a gap between theory and practice, right? Between the textbook and the way things are really, really done. I mean, you bridge both of those. So what are some of those things that you want policy people to understand about education that they don't get because they have not been teachers, they have not been in the classroom, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Or even critics who are critical of teachers or the educational system and so on, and they maybe have never taught, have never been in a school really recently that they don't get. And what would you want for teachers to understand about the concerns of the policymakers and the policy explorers, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That maybe the teachers don't grasp because they're so entrenched in the classroom doing their work that perhaps they don't see the questions on the other side. So what are some of those lessons learned that you can give to both for a greater shared understanding, right? So you can have more richer conversations about how do we educate our students better?

Molly Macek: Yeah, that's such a great question, and to be able to understand and to really navigate that gap as you stated, between theory and practice is imperative in order for policy to actually do what it's intended to do and for students and educators to be able to benefit from those policies.

Molly Macek: So I would say for policymakers, one of the most important lessons for them to understand is the importance of implementation of policies. So, you know, policymakers are good at drafting policies. They're good at seeing, I think, big picture issues, challenges, problems that need to be overcome and addressed.

Molly Macek: For example, we could take achievement or literacy in Michigan as an example. That's something that I worked hard to tackle in my role at the Mackinac Center. And what we saw time and again was that even though some states were passing good policies when it came to literacy

development, those policies were not being implemented necessarily with fidelity within the school systems.

Molly Macek: So there are a lot of challenges, a lot of factors that policymakers need to take into account when the end goal is to have these policies implemented and implemented consistently to the extent that they are actually producing the intended outcomes of those policies.

Molly Macek: And again, having that classroom experience can certainly help policymakers, but a lot of policymakers and lawmakers who are working to advance education policies don't have education classroom experience. So I would encourage them to connect with educators, connect with liaisons from school systems to make sure they are really understanding what are those obstacles at the school level, at the district level that need to be addressed in order for these policies to work.

Molly Macek: For school systems, for educators, school leaders, it's important also that they understand that these policies are being passed with the best intentions in order to improve outcomes for students. And it's important for them to have the appropriate leadership in place, leaders who are really well trained in program evaluation, for example.

Molly Macek: So when new policies are passed, and so again, going back to literacy policies, if there are policies requiring that reading curriculum must be grounded in the science of reading — which did happen in Michigan — research that really supports evidence-based reading practices being used in the classroom.

Molly Macek: So in order for those to be implemented with fidelity, then school leadership needs to be trained in strategies for doing that and also for evaluating programming, making sure that they are performing needs assessments and then evaluating the implementation of that programming and really assessing how well it's being implemented.

Molly Macek: And if the outcomes aren't what they had hoped for, being able to reflect on that and determine what areas of that program really need to be adjusted, improved, fixed in order to be more effective. But it really is an iterative process, and the more that policymakers can communicate with educators, with district and school level leaders to make sure that they are on the same page and in alignment with what's needed and what's going to be most effective.

Molly Macek: That's where we're going to see the best results.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You've done a lot of work on literacy. You've mentioned it already two or three times here in our brief start of the conversation. And it's fascinating because this month's magazine, *The Atlantic*, the main issue, the main story in *The Atlantic* magazine is entitled "The Age of Reading Is Over."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And the entire piece, and I was just reading it beforehand, is an argument that America's not illiterate, it's post-literate. People are reading less. The sentences in op-eds are a third shorter than they used to be, so people are reading less words. They're having a hard time reading longer sentences.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And obviously all the distractions, so many things abound. But the author makes a profound argument that the reason why this could be happening is negligence — that we've become a negligent society when it comes to reading and the importance of reading in shaping our minds, shaping our hearts. And so you've done a lot of work on literacy, but now even as a principal, give us your expert analysis of this issue of the importance of literacy and the importance of reading. And I obviously will talk more here about the Mississippi Miracle. We can talk about some of the things that are going on in Houston, Texas, and some of the wins there.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: But many will argue at the core of a strong society, a virtuous society, reading has to be a part of that. So now that you're a principal again, and have a vision for your school, talk to us a little about the importance of literacy, the importance of reading books, and what we can do to recapture that, because it seems like we're losing it, Molly.

Molly Macek: Yeah. Yes, and sadly, I think we are. And as far as what the reason is for that, I think we can attribute it to a number of factors. We have such a fast-paced society with technology. The ability to access so much information just at our fingertips and that kind of instant gratification that our students get, that we all get through the use of social media and various gaming tools and whatnot, I think all of that is impacting.

Molly Macek: Of course, there are wonderful opportunities, but also a lot of challenges posed by technology and the evolving technology landscape. So reading of course is absolutely critical, and this is an example of a really significant challenge that educators are faced with today, is how can they best prepare our students with the literacy skills — so reading and writing and also communication.

Molly Macek: And effective communication both online, virtually, in all the different types of environments that they are communicating in, as well as in person. And especially given that so many of them are communicating a lot more online than they are in person, making sure that they are having those opportunities to develop all of those skills that are so important.

Molly Macek: In light of the tools that are available to them that in many ways allow them to bypass those — AI, for example, where they can get information so quickly, which can be really wonderful, but also problematic when we are trying to — if that ends up being an obstacle to students actually learning those skills.

Molly Macek: So as a principal, I want to make sure that our teachers are supported and prepared with instructional strategies that are known to be most effective, evidence-based strategies for developing literacy and reading comprehension and all the different forms of writing and argumentation.

Molly Macek: Really higher order thinking skills along with literacy are what really need to be the focus. You know, it's wonderful that we have so much information at our fingertips. So here's an example of what we don't want to do as teachers. We don't want to spend too much time on the lowest end of what's called Bloom's Taxonomy.

Molly Macek: Right. It is something that rightly is used to understand higher order thinking skills, the different levels of thinking. And at the base of that, the bottom rung is memorization of basic concepts. So while they need a strong foundation of basic concepts to build from, we want to make sure that we are taking them up the rungs of that ladder or that pyramid to be able to analyze information and evaluate information and create new ideas and be able to apply what they're learning to solving more complex real world problems.

Molly Macek: So this requires making sure that teachers understand how to use technology and how not to use it, and how to support their students in using it in a way that will enhance their learning and their literacy development and their higher order thinking development, and not hinder it.

Molly Macek: Because it can do both if it's used as a crutch versus as a tool to enhance their learning. And we want to make sure that they understand the distinction between the two and are helping their students to use it appropriately in a manner that will optimize their learning. So, you know, and this is not something that we're just focusing on here.

Molly Macek: I think this is a common struggle that probably most schools are needing to navigate. And so it's imperative that all of us in education are staying abreast of evidence-based, brain-based practices,

especially in light of the rapidly evolving technology landscape that we're all faced with, that we are always learning how best to develop those skills and make sure they are really being emphasized in the classroom and that technology is really being used to enhance those learning outcomes.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You know, Molly, as a follow-up to that, I want to ask you to comment on the role of parents in all of this, and the role of the family in this, and what should be the right relationship between parents, teachers, and schools, and vice versa.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Several years ago, I remember reading some research. And I knew this, but when I saw these statistics, they were a little jarring. We were doing a wisdom conversation summit here at Cornerstone on the decline, the apparent decline of Christianity and the Christian faith in America. And one of the statistics that I came across was from Pew Research Forum, and they had interviewed a large number of parents and families, and they had concluded that perhaps the single most important reason why oftentimes children or teenagers leave the faith or don't carry the Christian faith with them seems to be the fact that an overwhelming majority of their families never wanted to pass the faith on to them.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: As a matter of fact, it was parents who decide not to do so. And I remember pausing. I mean, it's intuitive, you get it, but it was jarring to see the numbers, that a large number of religious families, Christian families just didn't pass on their faith to their kids. And it made me, you know, it reminded me of the importance of the family.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And so when I think about education, right? It's so easy, I think, for us as parents or educators or critics or policy people to blame the school, blame the school district, critique the teacher. And I'm not saying those things shouldn't be done or offered if they're appropriate, but the role of family is critical in all of this.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: The role of the parent is absolutely essential. So if you would comment for our listeners about what you've seen, both good and bad when it comes to the role of families and parents in education of children, and then also comment on what's the right relationship between the school, the teacher, and the parent.

Molly Macek: Sure. And the experience that I have comes mostly from working in private schools and primarily in the Catholic school environment. And in wearing these different hats, I've had the opportunity to work with parents in different capacities.

Molly Macek: And I would say that in this school setting, that parent-school partnership is really critical to the student's success. In private schools, they depend on — without students, they're not going to be sustainable. So they need those families to be able to keep their doors open.

Molly Macek: That being said, private schools, and if they are religious schools like the Catholic schools where I have worked, they have a mission that is at the center of what they do. And it's important that the families that they are enrolling are really clear and supportive of that mission and are prepared to work with the school to support their children in living out that mission. So in the Catholic school environment, our mission is Christ-centered, as it is in any Christian school environment.

Molly Macek: So the parent-school partnership is critical, and we want to make sure that parents are on board with that mission. Otherwise, it's just not going to be the best fit for those kids. And within the school, any school in order to be successful and to do its role in educating the students as it sees best fit, they must maintain their mission at the center of all that they do and make sure that when it comes to making decisions about these students, about these parents' children, that their values, their beliefs are what are guiding those decisions.

Molly Macek: So again, that's something that the parents really need to understand very clearly. The school must make sure that it's doing its job to communicate with parents on what its mission is, and how decisions are made, and how their values and their beliefs are at the center of all that they do.

Molly Macek: And any decisions pertaining to their child, that's where they're coming from, is from their mission-centered approach. And at the same time, parents, I believe, know their students best and need to do their part to communicate with the schools. And if the student seems to be struggling, if there are issues at home that are impairing their ability to learn or to attend school as often as they should, to be sure that they're doing their part to communicate.

Molly Macek: So I would say that that partnership is critical, and it's really important that the parents are on the same page as the school when it comes to when they are selecting a school for their child, that they believe in the mission and are supportive of it and willing to do their part to make sure that their student is successful in that environment.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You know what, one of the questions that arises as I hear you answer the question, thank you so much, is the issue of accountability, right? I mean, on the one hand, private education, there's a way in which you can hold it much more accountable in some ways than maybe the public one, or at least it appears to be so.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: I mean, you're paying tuition, right? Private education's not subsidized by taxes or anything like that. I mean, you're paying tuition out of your hard-earned dollars as a parent, and therefore you have a lot of stake in this to ensure that it's going to be done really, really well, and it's effective, and certainly that it's mission focused, mission centric.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And obviously the incentive on the school side is to provide a wonderful education. And so there seems to be a different incentive structure there than there is in public education. It's subsidized, so it's free in theory, right, for the parents. And it's almost like you drop off your child and you pick up your child, or your child gets picked up and dropped off, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You don't have that accountability context. And so what advice would you give to parents of public schools, right? And the other part to this is that it's difficult to understand or to grasp what's the mission of public education or the mission of a public school.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: It's different in a Catholic school or a parochial school or religious school. But public education's so different. It's not mission focused maybe, and if it is, it's really ethereal. I mean, I look at the mission statements, for example, in my world of public universities, and they're very ethereal, and I guarantee you, most people don't even know what they are.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right? They just don't. So what advice would you give to parents who perhaps can't send their children to a private school, don't have the means to and can't homeschool necessarily or maybe can't do the charter school? Public school is the option for them. How would you — what advice would you give to them in terms of working with the teacher and the school and maintaining that healthy accountability relationship?

Molly Macek: Yeah, and like you say, it is tougher in that schools are subsidized, and this is where school choice can really be so effective at motivating schools to improve when families do have other options.

Molly Macek: If the school that their child is attending is not meeting their students' needs, they can send them somewhere else. But when they don't have those options, they're really only relying on this one public school in their region to meet their students' needs. So when parents find themselves in a situation where they're really limited in their schooling options and are sending their child to their local

public school, and if that school is not necessarily meeting their child's needs as well as they would like, they need to remember that they do have a voice, and that's why the school board is in place.

Molly Macek: The governance system that public districts have with elected officials on that school board. So it's important that they reach out to their elected officials that are representing them on the school board, that they attend school board meetings. They can certainly try to reach out to teachers, and if they don't get a response that way, to school administration.

Molly Macek: But they absolutely should have a voice, and if they feel that they are not being heard, if a school is not responding to their needs, remember that the school board is there to also serve them, their constituents. So make sure they're really active within the school. Because if the school board is not hearing any sort of complaints from their parents or any concerns that are being brought up, then as far as they know, everything is fine from the parents' perspective.

Molly Macek: So just make sure that they do use their voice. But it's a great example of how school choice can really help. And those parents that are fortunate to have more options due to financial means and whatnot, and to choose to send their kids to a private school — parents have a lot more, are more empowered in those cases to hold the schools accountable, because as I was saying, those private schools are very much dependent on having families.

Molly Macek: Without that tuition, they are not sustainable, so they really need to be responsive to parents' needs. And in my experience, private schools, that's just inherent in being a private school educator, that partnership between the parent and the school, that's critical.

Molly Macek: And that is, the school leaders and teachers work hard to develop that. And me as a school leader myself, that's something that I will plan to emphasize with our faculty here as well. I know they already do that quite well, but that's something that we will continue to develop and make sure that we are communicating effectively with our families, because they are incredibly important to us, and we want to make sure that we are best serving their needs.

Molly Macek: And you mentioned mission as well, and just to make a final point about that, I think public schools, regardless of the school, it's important to have a defined identity and values that help to guide their actions, their decisions. And I would encourage public schools as well to have, if they don't already, to have a guiding mission, a value statement.

Molly Macek: You don't have to — it doesn't have to be a religious-based school or parochial school to have those values in place. And by having them, it really makes those — they have a basis, a foundation upon which they can build and make decisions and justify their decisions to parents or others that might not understand how, where those decisions came from.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: I mean, that's one of the challenges, and I think in public education, is that I think we've lost or we're losing what I call a common moral ground. I mean, when you speak about values as an example, there's such an antagonistic or perhaps contested atmosphere in public education about what the human being, what the human person, even just core values that everyone can agree to.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: I mean, in some ways it's a picture, a small picture of the larger debates we're having in America right now about these fundamental questions, and that makes it so much more difficult in public education to do that. And I think we need to, we should, and I think there are ways to do this.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And I think there are a number of charter schools out there that are great examples of this. I'm mindful of one in the Bronx, Vertex Academies. Ian Rowe is a founder of that. He's

one of our president's fellows here at Cornerstone University, and he has founded a school on the four cardinal virtues.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm. The wisdom, courage, temperance, justice. And I went to visit it last year, and I was so impressed that the students recite the virtues. They talk about them. It's integrated into everything that they do, and it's really an incredible, incredible school, and again, does not have an explicitly religious mission, but the cardinal virtues are just at the core of it, which are consonant with the Christian tradition, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: In harmony with it. So, I mean, I think there are ways of doing it, but boy, it seems like there's a lack of a political will or institutional will on the part of schools to do it.

Molly Macek: Yeah. For sure. And I've heard of that school, and I'm just fascinated by it, and I think it's wonderful that they've incorporated those virtues even though it's not a religious school.

Molly Macek: So why not? You know, those are certainly values for everyone to aspire to. But there's absolutely a place for morals and ethics, and I think it's essential that those are incorporated in education. You know, even ethical decision-making. That's not something that should only be in a religious school.

Molly Macek: I think all citizens, we're faced with, especially coming back to technology, there are a lot of opportunities and a lot of ways to use technology that could do harm. And that in and of itself is something for everyone, for all of today's youth to learn about, is how can technology — how do decisions around using technology and all the advances — how do we use our ethics and our moral compass to guide those decisions?

Molly Macek: So I think a society, our society is — the sustainability of it is very much dependent on how those decisions, how technology is used moving forward. So I think it is critical that we are, as educators, incorporating morals and ethics into our coursework. I think our society depends on it.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, we'll talk — I will talk a little bit about AI here soon. But before we get into the Mississippi Miracle, and I know you wrote a wonderful report on Michigan's report card, I want to ask if you'd be so kind to speak or share with our listeners the difference between evidence-based, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: We hear a lot of evidence-based education, teaching, learning, and what I'll call non-evidence-based teaching and learning. What are these two things that are oftentimes thrown around quite a bit in these debates and conversations? If you could parse out what's evidence-based teaching and learning educational philosophy versus its opposite. What are these two things?

Molly Macek: Mm-hmm. So evidence-based would be teaching and learning strategies that are supported by extensive research in education, and I'm talking about research in the neurosciences, brain-based research. That's, when it comes to literacy, most of the evidence-based research we're talking about has come from research on how the brain actually learns.

Molly Macek: And then how to apply that knowledge of how the brain learns to actual classroom practices. So it's about making sure that our teachers are using types of instruction, instructional strategies that are supported by how the brain learns so that students are actually able to learn how to read most effectively in all the different types of reading, and not just word recognition and being able to sound it out and associate a meaning with it, but also reading comprehension, for example.

Molly Macek: So there have been different schools of thought around reading and how students best learn how to read and different types of strategies that have been advocated by different schools and people who claim to be experts in these areas. And there was one form of literacy instruction that was

widely espoused by many to be effective in promoting literacy, and one term for it was called balanced literacy.

Molly Macek: There's a whole language approach, which was found to actually not be very effective, and especially with struggling readers. It lacked key components of evidence-based strategies that are needed in order to really help students learn how to read. So it's very important that when districts are adopting instructional strategies, when teachers are engaging in professional development, when schools are selecting curriculum, they want to make sure that the strategies that they are learning or that are used within the curriculum are those that are supported by research, that have been developed based on how the brain learns, how the brain reads basically, or how the brain learns.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: So let me, I don't want to offer a terrible caricature to the opposite side here of this conversation, right? But would it be fair to say that non-evidence-based approaches are basically theories of researchers that look really good, sound really good, and appear to be the most equitable possible, but have very little evidence, scientific evidence behind them?

Molly Macek: Sure. Yeah. I think calling them a theory would be appropriate, and they might be advocated by researchers who do have a background in education and who believe and have the best intentions and believe that this approach works. But when it comes to really developing these strategies, it's important to —

Molly Macek: Even if somebody has performed research, it's important to be able to look at the research with a real critical eye and to be able to determine whether or not the results are really valid, based on the approach, the experimental approach that was used. And also, it's important that you don't have just a single study.

Molly Macek: Now, some studies are very, very robust and produce very valid and legitimate results and reliable results. But certainly in the world of science, it's always better to have multiple studies performed in different contexts to make sure that those results are scalable, that they are also producing the desired effects at a larger scale or with different populations.

Molly Macek: So there's a lot to take into consideration when determining whether or not a theory or some approach that somebody's really advocating for is a really valid and effective approach.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Thank you, Molly. So now let's jump into the Mississippi Miracle, which I know you know something about.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You know, the Mississippi Miracle has been heralded as just a model, potentially a model for every state in the nation. You have Mississippi at the bottom, literally at the bottom of the state, forty-ninth I think it was, and it rose to top ten in the country.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And there have been many critics, but there have been many who have said there's something to this. Something really did happen here to take the forty-ninth state in the union and bring it to the number ninth state in terms of fourth grade reading in about 10 years or so.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And so whether we call it a miracle or not, something did happen, and there were certain things that were done. So perhaps you can explain to us where Mississippi was before, what happened, if you can walk us through this miracle, and what are the lessons learned that perhaps even our own state of Michigan should pay attention to?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: As you know, it's one of the hottest issues now for the governor's race, the governor's mansion, education. And so maybe you can walk us through the miracle and lessons learned.

Molly Macek: Yeah, and it's unfortunate that they have received some criticism because Mississippi has proven incredibly successful in being able to increase their students' literacy.

Molly Macek: And we're talking about really the early elementary grades where they have had so far the greatest success. So it really warrants taking a close look at what they've done. And that's what I sought to do in doing my report on the Mississippi Miracle that you referred to.

Molly Macek: So narrowing it down to really exactly what it was that produced those outcomes is certainly difficult. But I think if we look at all the steps that they took and determine where they might have been most successful and what can be adopted by Michigan, that might help us to make some progress as well.

Molly Macek: So as you said, Mississippi was nearly fiftieth. They were at forty-ninth in the nation back in twenty thirteen. And at that time, in literacy — fourth-grade literacy, I should mention — which was based on their performance on the NAEP assessment, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which is something that all states participate in, in fourth and eighth grade, reading and math.

Molly Macek: So in Mississippi in twenty thirteen, they really took the initiative to improve literacy, to improve their outcomes by passing a few different policies. Their largest initiative or their most significant policy change was their Literacy-Based Promotion Act passed in twenty thirteen, which required — it had a number of components to it, key components.

Molly Macek: One of those components was they required students to be proficient in reading before moving on to fourth grade.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: This became so controversial, right?

Molly Macek: Yeah. So that, I would say, is the most controversial component of that policy. And I would also argue that that component by itself is not sufficient to produce the type of outcomes that they had.

Molly Macek: So you really have to look at the big picture and make sure that all of the pieces or many of the pieces of the puzzle are there. I think if you just single out any one, it is not as likely to work by itself. But that is a really important piece of it because, for a couple of reasons.

Molly Macek: For one, we talked about accountability earlier. It's an accountability piece. It incentivizes schools to make sure that they are adhering to the policy, that they are implementing it as intended with fidelity, implementing all components of it. And so that it benefits the students because they are more likely to receive all of the interventions that they are supposed to receive by law, before advancing to fourth grade, so they are more likely to develop the reading skills needed to be successful in future grades.

Molly Macek: You know, it holds the districts accountable to implementing the policy as it was written. So there are, again, a number of components of the law. It requires there to be literacy coaches in the classrooms of especially among the more — the lower performing schools, kind of the schools in greatest need of support.

Molly Macek: Those literacy coaches are there to support the teachers and the principals in implementing evidence-based practices in literacy. Right. And designing professional development for them and making sure that they are designing interventions that are grounded in the science of reading, which again is an evidence-based approach to reading development.

Molly Macek: So those coaches support the schools in designing appropriate interventions to support students who are deficient in reading. It also — the law requires that districts are assessing every

student beginning in kindergarten, so they really prioritize early diagnosis of reading, dyslexia and other just reading challenges.

Molly Macek: They want to make sure they are catching those students as early as possible. So as soon as they enter kindergarten, they are taking diagnostic reading assessments, and then they can take them multiple times. They do take these assessments multiple times throughout the school year. And as soon as a reading deficiency is identified in a student, that immediately triggers a chain reaction of responses.

Molly Macek: Where they are again working with literacy coaches, developing an individualized reading plan for the students, communication with families. That's part of the law that is required, that parents receive certain communications from the school.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: So parents are notified?

Molly Macek: Absolutely. That's in the law as much — in fact, they have really — Mississippi has really prioritized that partnership with parents, recognizing that schools can't do it all by themselves. You know, we do place so much pressure on schools, and they are not miracle workers. And in fact, in talking to experts who were very much involved in the Mississippi Miracle — I do quotes because they don't like the word miracle associated —

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right.

Molly Macek: Right, that implies that this just was some event that was out of their control, when in fact it was very intentional, very thorough, intentionally. I mentioned it — intentional steps that they took to be able to produce these amazing outcomes.

Molly Macek: So it's important to recognize that. But yes, they prioritize that parent partnership and made sure that parent — they really took a grassroots effort to, or approach to, meet with parents throughout the state, where different districts throughout the state would schedule meetings with parents where they could answer parent questions and provide parents with support and resources that they could use at home to support their children there.

Molly Macek: And they had online dashboards for parents to access resources and made sure that parents had grade appropriate resources for their children. So it was all hands on deck. And I've mentioned implementation several times in this conversation, and that's something that they did really well also.

Molly Macek: So the policy that they passed was the first step and a very critical step. But without all of those other steps that the state took — the Department of Education in collaboration with districts, in collaboration with parents — the policy would not have had that effect. So it required both the policy and the effective implementation and the accountability piece that I mentioned, where students, unless they met some type of exemption — and there are good cause exemptions they call them, in place by law, where some students would still advance or can still advance to fourth grade even if they haven't demonstrated that proficiency yet.

Molly Macek: For the most part, students are not advancing if they haven't met those proficiency standards.

Molly Macek: It's also important to recognize that most students are advancing. You know, I think at this point, more than ninety percent of students are moving on to fourth grade, which also goes to show how successful they have been in, by having that provision in place where it's a requirement, students must be proficient. It just shows how everyone is coming together to make sure, for that student's sake, that they're doing everything they can for that student to develop the skills needed to be successful.

Molly Macek: So it's really been an incredible journey. And now they are in the top ten for literacy for fourth grade, and in fact, their low income students, when compared to that same population in other states, are doing — they, on the 2025 NAEP assessment, they performed better than any other state in fourth grade literacy. So it is certainly something to be celebrated and recognized, and for all other states to study and take lessons learned and try to apply some of what they've learned to improving their own outcomes.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: I mean, those are incredible results. We can quibble — people can quibble or critique implementation or the philosophy or the theory, but the results are absolutely astounding and just quite frankly, something we should all be rejoicing about for the state of Mississippi. Let's switch gears to the great state of Michigan in which we live, right? I mean, Michigan, the last I looked, and please correct me here if I'm wrong, we're very — fourth graders are very low, too, at the bottom. I mean, I think they were 44th in the nation in terms of reading.

Molly Macek: That's right.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And so I know there've been a number of pieces of legislation repealed and others put in place that'll be going into play, I think, next year. Tell us what that looks like and how it compares to the things that were actually done in Mississippi that brought about those amazing results. Is what Michigan doing — what our policymakers have put in place, similar, different? What are the similarities? What are the things we're not doing that we should be doing? What do you think? What are you seeing in this new piece of legislation in the future here in Michigan?

Molly Macek: And I would say Michigan should be commended for the progress it's made in improving its literacy laws. Yeah, policymakers have made a lot of changes to our literacy law.

Molly Macek: Now they had made some changes not too long ago that weakened our law, the literacy laws, but they have taken steps in the last couple of years to strengthen them. However, the provision that we don't currently have that Mississippi does have is that third grade retention provision.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm. The most controversial one they say.

Molly Macek: Yes. Now, that was in place for just a few years, and I think if I'm remembering correctly, maybe three years that it was actually in effect, and that was partially during the pandemic when it was not implemented at all. And then in the two years prior to the pandemic where districts did not implement it very well, where the majority of districts promoted to fourth grade all of the students that were retention eligible, you know, who were eligible to be held back based on their reading proficiency.

Molly Macek: So the policy that we had while we had a third grade retention policy in place, it was not as — it lacked the teeth. It was not quite as strong as the one that Mississippi has. That has since been repealed in Michigan, and now they have amended our literacy law, and I say it should be commended because they have incorporated a number of provisions into our current literacy laws that just recently went into effect, as Mississippi has in place.

Molly Macek: So for example, our current literacy laws require literacy coaches for elementary schools. It requires teachers to be trained in or to be using instructional strategies that are grounded in the science of reading. So those evidence-based reading practices. It requires professional development.

Molly Macek: It requires the curriculum also be approved by the Department of Education and be grounded in science of reading as well. And they've recently passed laws that also require teacher preparation programs — who are preparing teachers with strategies in reading — that those teacher candidates are also learning science of reading strategies.

Molly Macek: So there is a lot of good work happening, but again, our new literacy laws do not have a third-grade retention provision and therefore really lack the teeth that the law needs to really make sure that it's being implemented with fidelity. Without that, there's greater likelihood that some students will slip through the cracks, may not receive the interventions that they really need, and end up being promoted to fourth grade when they really aren't ready with the reading skills that they need.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: So do you think they will keep Michigan from having its own miracle?

Molly Macek: I think there's a good chance. I think there's still a lot more that Michigan needs in order to experience those types of results. And for one, it's really developing an entire system that has bought into the need to do this.

Molly Macek: And I don't know that we're there. I think we still hear a lot of school districts, school leaders celebrating, and it's important, of course, to celebrate our successes. But while I was in the policy position, I didn't hear enough about areas that really were needed, that we needed to focus on for improvement.

Molly Macek: So and I think in order to have any sort of change, there has to be an understanding of what the problems are, areas where we are not serving our students as well as we should be, areas that are not meeting their potential, and then really developing solutions that target those areas.

Molly Macek: And I don't think we're there yet as a state. Now, in Mississippi, they even created a department. Within their Department of Education, they had a number of individuals who were devoted to or hired just to focus on the literacy piece, and they hired a literacy director who led that initiative.

Molly Macek: And I met with her in writing that report, and she was — Dr. Kenyatta Burke is just absolutely amazing, and we haven't taken those steps yet in Michigan. I don't see that we have the even infrastructure in place to be able to lead such an initiative. And as I've been stressing, unless it's implemented with fidelity as intended, it's not very likely to produce the results that we would like.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Molly, last question, and thank you — it's been a fascinating conversation. Thank you so much. The last question is, do you think there's a place for private schools, classical schools, Catholic, Protestant private schools to serve as innovative laboratories from which our public schools can learn best practices, right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: So oftentimes the debate's so intense that the private schools get sort of pushed aside in some ways. But what do you think about the possibility of state policymakers looking at private schools as laboratories, as exemplars, right? And offering those as models that could be perhaps replicated, or at least certainly learned from, to improve our public schools. What do you think?

Molly Macek: Absolutely. I think private schools are in this very unique situation where they have that ability, that flexibility to be able to innovate. In fact, it's imperative that they do. They have to, like we've talked about, to keep their doors open. They have to make sure that they are being innovative, that they are meeting the interest and the demands of the parents in their community who are interested in something different.

Molly Macek: You know, something that maybe their local public school is not providing. So I think it's a wonderful opportunity for public schools and for our Department of Education to be looking at the different types of school models that are emerging in Michigan, and it's really been fascinating to see across the country and in Michigan the different types of private and just different schooling models that are emerging, especially since the pandemic when parents realized that they wanted more. They needed something different than what they were getting from their local schools.

Molly Macek: So there — it's been really an amazing phenomenon to see the emergence of so many different schools which are more innovative, that are more flexible, that are student-centered, that are personalized, offering really unique programming that parents wouldn't be able to get in their local schools.

Molly Macek: And I have seen in Michigan, there have been innovative districts. There are innovative districts that are doing amazing work and that are looking to other types of schools and how they are able to attract so many families. So there are districts out there who are interested in and who are actively engaging with homeschooling families.

Molly Macek: We have a very robust homeschooling population in Michigan. So there are schools out there, private and public, who have come up with creative ways to be able to engage some of those families, maybe part-time or through online learning, through flexible schedules where students can come to campus for one or two classes or participate in sports even though they might not be enrolled in their school.

Molly Macek: So there, you know — and private schools are in a unique position where the sky is practically the limit. They have so many ways that they can offer education. And if there are — and I know that there are, I've been to one — there are many very successful private schools that are able to effectively meet the interests and the desires of their parent population.

Molly Macek: So I think it's a wonderful opportunity for other schools to look to them and learn what can they incorporate, how can they think outside the box, how can they better engage their current families and other families in the community who might be considering looking for something a little bit different or looking for more innovative approaches.

Molly Macek: So we are surrounded by some really unique types of schools here in Michigan, and we can look to other states as well that have more robust school choice options. But I think it's really essential and for the sake of our students' futures that all educators and school leaders are looking to those schools that are models out there for innovation and who have proven to be very successful.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Molly, thank you. It's been a wonderful conversation. Thank you for all you've done for the state of Michigan in your former role, and what you will continue doing in your new role as principal of Nouvel Catholic Central School Junior and High. It's been great to have you, and we'll have you back again, and we wish you the very best this first new school year.

Molly Macek: Thank you so much. It's been wonderful being here with you. Thank you.

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