

# Interview of Don Weatherspoon

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## SPEAKERS

Dr. Jim Goenner, Don Weatherspoon

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- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 00:05  
Well, it is September 8, 2020, and I am here with the legend, Don Weatherspoon. Don, thank you.
- D** Don Weatherspoon 00:13  
Thank you for having me Jim.
- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 00:14  
So Don, you have seen and done so much in education, some of which can be told and some of which can't. But we're hoping to get the good stuff today.
- D** Don Weatherspoon 00:24  
I'll try to behave myself.
- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 00:27  
So your reputation precedes you, but one of the things you've done is gone into tough spots and try to turn them around. What are some of your greatest memories and greatest accomplishments?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 00:40  
Well, when you say going into a tough spots, that means both financially, academically and environmentally. And our focus is on what was the best outcome for the children. So with that in mind, we would go into places where we were sent, specifically to look first at academic performance. And in those instances where there were kids who were doing well, we tried to to enhance what they had, and the kids who were doing poorly, or not being served at all, we would attempt to take drastic, or make drastic changes in the shortest period of time, sometimes up to and leading to closers of schools.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 01:23  
And you've got such a broad background, you worked for the State Department of Education, for the Department of Corrections. What are the other ones like round us out on.

**D** Don Weatherspoon 01:34  
I've been chief deputy director, chief deputy director in five state agencies starting with the Department of Commerce, then Natural Department of Natural Resources, State Department of Education, Family Independence Agency and the Department of Corrections.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 01:48  
So when you bring all of that expertise and experience together for public education, how do you see it benefiting the future of schools and what they should be doing?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 01:58  
Well, there's, there's a precursor to that. There are a couple of things that happened in my life. One, when I was finishing undergrad, I worked at a maximum security facility for boys right here in Lansing with the old Department of Social Services. And I left there and became a police officer in California. And then I returned to Michigan, and became a juvenile worker for Ingham County. So those were the foundation platforms on which I formed a lot of opinions about children, particularly children who were challenged, economically and academically.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 02:34

Tell us about those experiences.

**D** Don Weatherspoon 02:36

Well, beginning with the, the, the, the, the incarcerated youth, I was about 21. And my oldest charge at that time was four years younger than me. So we could relate on a lot of levels. And some of those kids just didn't have an opportunity coming out of the chute. And that was unfortunate. And I wanted to know why. And when I say why, who was taken for granted, where was, where were the pressure points in that kid's life where he or she made decisions that were not good for him. And in this instance, these were males. When I was a probation officer, there was instances of neglect, where the kids were really beholden to the family members, maybe a mother who may have been on drugs or whatever. And they were more focused on survival than academic achievement. Not that these kids had any kind of impairments that would have prevented them from learning, but they just chose to survive. And most of what I've seen is a survival mentality of a lot of kids.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 03:48

So you have done so much, but where were you in the mid 90s, when charter schools came to be in Michigan?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 03:57

If you recall, I was assistant state superintendent in the Department of Education.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 04:02

So you worked for the state superintendent, Art Ellis at the time?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 04:05

Absolutely. And, and as part of that, when the first evaluation was mandated by the legislature in cooperation with the governor, I was given the responsibility of having the first evaluation of charter versus, versus public done. So I contracted with a private organization here in Lansing to do one side of the state and with the policy center at Western to do the other side of the state.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 04:32  
So that was public sector consultants in Western Michigan University. And you were to find out how charter public schools compared to district public schools?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 04:41  
That's correct.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 04:41  
And what did you find?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 04:43  
There really wasn't any data that we could look to at that time because it was so early that made any significant, where you could draw significant conclusions about who was performing better. The good schools in the public sector were continually performing well, and the poor schools are continually to perform poorly. And the charters were trying to find a way, mainly in the areas where there were poor performing schools. So the populations who that were performing poorly shifted from one school to another. So no miracle happened.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 05:20  
And in those early days, there was really no startup money for charter public schools. Now, we have a federal charter school grant program of about 40 million per year. So a new charter public school in Michigan can get nearly a million dollars for startup. Do you see that as a game changer?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 05:38  
It is a game changer. But there's only one problem that I see that, that needs to be taken into consideration. And that is the timing. And obviously, the lead up to the opening of the school. And I don't know whether or not that, that seed money, gives sufficient amount of leeway to the authorizer and to get the word out that there's going to be a change in the neighborhood where the school is going to be located.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 06:09

Talk to us about that. What, what is get the word out that a change is coming? What do you mean by that?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 06:15

Well, traditionally, churches and schools are anchors in a community, where people look to, to be told what to do, and to trust what they're told. And even if the information is inaccurate, they still will follow it. And most people comply with whatever they're told to do. Now the kids draw their own conclusions and figure out what the boundaries are and react accordingly. So if there's going to be something new, is it going to give me something for free, for example or will I have more constraints, etc. So you saw some of the schools that have evolved in the past that were specifically identified, let's just say in science and technology. Well, for those kids who were inclined to really apply themselves, they might be attracted to that school. But if they've never had the foundation, to be able to compete, and learn at a level where they are just basically operating at ground zero, as opposed to underwater, they're not going to succeed. And so when I say a change is coming, you have to talk about readiness, you have to talk about awareness. And that goes beyond the child, it has to go into the home or the caregivers, and you have to prepare them for at least six months before they go into, come to school.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 07:40

Why are you so passionate about education and kids?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 07:44

Because I've seen too many young lives lost. I've, I've seen too many young men be sentenced to prison for life. In fact, I've done work in, in gangs and things of that nature. I produced with another colleague podcasts on pathway to prison. And it was kind of startling in terms of the data that that we found.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 08:10

Is there really a pathway to prison?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 08:12

Absolutely.

D Dr. Jim Goenner 08:12  
How does it work?

D Don Weatherspoon 08:13  
It starts very early. And starts with failure and lack of support, lack of caring and, and bad choices. And there's no early intervention that is sufficiently effective, to give that kid the attention that he, that he needs and I'm talking about primarily males. Now it's begin to affect girls in the same way. But my emphasis right now in terms of this discussion is on males. And when you have young men coming to school, many of them are distracted by stronger, and environmental appeals, that, that gives them immediate gratification. For example, if I come from a home, where a child isn't really a part of a larger constellation, where they feel like they belong, they need to belong to somebody somewhere somehow. And in the instances of gangs, gangs fill that niche, and then you have a whole different education process that a child goes through when they are brought into a gang. The gangs will supersede anything else.

D Dr. Jim Goenner 09:30  
How do they do that?

D Don Weatherspoon 09:32  
Well, they teach them discipline. They teach them adherence, they teach them loyalty, they also teach them value. Value, meaning value of their being a part of a larger organization, and thereby that overshadows anything else that happens in that child's life at that time.

D Dr. Jim Goenner 09:52  
So we often think about schools as a place to go learn, a place where you develop your character, the formation. Can schools compete with the gangs?

D Don Weatherspoon 10:01  
Yes.

D Dr. Jim Goenner 10:01

How?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 10:03

The first thing that I think is a very simple thing. And, and you'll see this in a lot of quotes, schools that have, that are child centered, where they say, when a teacher is greeting a child coming in, they meet him at the door, and they talk to that child before that child enters that room. So they immediately discern where that, what that child got, got up to in the morning, whether or not they had a meal, whether or not there were any occurrences in their lives the night before, or anything in a larger context that would have had a direct impact on. So I would mean out in the community, did they see a fight? Did they see a car wreck? Or did they see a gunshot? Did they see drugs? Etc. Or did they see a life taken? And, and, and find out whether, and the teacher would then find out what that is and when we say talking about what's going on in a neighborhood, that's a, quote, information source, is that child walking in that door.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 11:01

That's different than being a math teacher or a third grade teacher, that's being a teacher of kids and understanding their context.

**D** Don Weatherspoon 11:08

Absolutely.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 11:10

And is that the greater calling?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 11:12

It is a greater calling. I mean, first of all, you got to be willing to stand in the doorway and say good morning to a child who is not prepared to come to school. And to make that child really want to be in the classroom with you and and for you to be able to connect with that child in a learning environment.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 11:30

So Don, the State of Michigan had some struggles with school districts, as you well know, that built up over years. And they created a law called the Emergency Financial Manager.

Were you the first gubernatorial appointee as an Emergency Financial Manager for schools?

- D** Don Weatherspoon 11:46  
I am not the first. The first one was in the city of Detroit under a different, under court order by Jennifer Granholm, Governor Granholm. But in terms of the Public Act 436, and I am the first.
- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 12:00  
So would that have been Roy Roberts, the first under the court order?
- D** Don Weatherspoon 12:03  
The one before Roy.
- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 12:07  
And so you came in as Emergency Financial Manager for Muskegon Heights and Highland Park?
- D** Don Weatherspoon 12:15  
Muskegon heights in, it would have been April of 2012. And then, shortly thereafter, I was given the Highland Park School District. And then after that, I was sent to Pontiac and so I got out of Muskegon Heights first. And then when I got into Pontiac, I was there for a couple of years. And then Benton Harbor opened up so I went into Benton Harbor and gave up Highland Park.
- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 12:48  
So there was no playbook to find out what an emergency manager does. And if I remember there was emergency financial, emergency financial manager, and then it got changed to emergency manager, can you talk to us about what was going on?
- D** Don Weatherspoon 13:00  
Consent agreement consultant. There were, there are four components to an Emergency

Manager Law. And each school district had several choices based on the findings of the team that went in to kind of do discovery work as to whether or not a true emergency existed. The second one, for example, is community could ask for an emergency manager. The third option was for a school district to say well, we don't really need an emergency manager, but come in and do an assessment. So there had to be some kind of evaluation as to whether or not the school was financially stable, academically stable, etc. And the fourth one is, well, we just declare bankruptcy. So it was not politically expedient because of the needs of the children for the latter to, to really be a reality. So in order for the locals not to go into total revolt, there was extensive, extensive discussions with the local boards prior to someone like myself showing up as emergency manager.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 14:08

So you get appointed by the governor, you walk in the day, the door for the first day on the job and say I'm the emergency manager. How does that go?

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Don Weatherspoon 14:20

It goes something like this, "Hi, I'm Don and I am the E.M." And so I want to convene a meeting of all the principal administrators and central administration and take all the power away from all the people who thought they were in charge. Then I would require immediately an audit of cash on hand and, and all of the equipment, etc. So anything that was materially owned by this district, I wanted an accounting for it.

D

Dr. Jim Goenner 15:01

And what did you find?

D

Don Weatherspoon 15:03

Nightmares, graphic corruption was a major problem. Friends and family benefit plans, major problem. Egocentric board members, major problem. And I'll give you one example. If I, if, if a teacher had in a previous year received an injury on the job, that person was never really given extensive sick leave, but regular leave. So that meant that their retirement, their health etc is all paid at par for money that the district didn't have. So when it came time for them to leave the district or retire from the district, that was a bill that had never been funded. So what we found a lot is that the legacy costs were the things that just got away from a lot of districts. And when I say about legacy, I mean things like health care, etc.

D Dr. Jim Goenner 16:13  
So accrued vacation, sick time, health care cost.

D Don Weatherspoon 16:16  
Absolutely, all of those and, and, and one of the most blatant ones, I went into one district where they had nine different insurance programs, health insurance programs, for fewer than 100 people. And a board member's son was the, the liaison between the insurance company and, and and the district employees. So when I took that away from them, obviously I had an enemy in a board member.

D Dr. Jim Goenner 16:50  
But I'm assuming you got a lot of love letters in this role.

D Don Weatherspoon 16:53  
I received no Christmas cards from any of these people and I never understood why.

D Dr. Jim Goenner 17:01  
Serious question though, did you? Did they try to intimidate you? Or scare you off?

D Don Weatherspoon 17:06  
Yes.

D Dr. Jim Goenner 17:07  
How did that work?

D Don Weatherspoon 17:09  
Well, I kind of blew off most of it. But I gotta tell you what I did before; I would go to the local police department before I went in. And in most of the in most instances, the police departments knew of me because of my work in, in education, because I taught part time school police, police administration at Michigan State for 21 years. So I already had those connections. I was, I already had the connections through the juvenile courts because of some of the work I had done in different departments, or state departments. So I've

touched my base, I touch base with each of those entities and said, "Okay, I'm going to be here and there are going to be some things that are going to be happening." And basically what I want to know is are you going to be on my side, or the other side. And in, in, in every, in all but two instances, I didn't have a problem. So the things that also protected me was the fact that I could order under Public Act 426, 24 hour protection. I could also pick up the phone and call the Department of Treasury who in turn called the governor's office to say, if I need so many officers here, like now they would show up, the state police would show up and give me the kind of support I needed. So I've never had a fear there. And as a matter of fact, what we, what we did in Muskegon Heights, we decided that we're going to turn it into a positive. And we had a quote "Officer Day" so MSP flew in their helicopter. And we had all middle school kids go and walk through the helicopter and talk to them and they got the little pilot's license and badges, etc. And then we also had health care people come in and do some preliminary screening and some training. So whatever might have been a threat really got turned around, and the staff got behind it. The funny part about it was we received several calls to the school district say somebody got murdered. That's why all the cops are here. So we had to worry about whether or not parents are going to start coming down there in a panic, because somebody had sent a rumor out and say, "Oh, so many people being killed, they got the metal backing people out." Well, it was absolutely the opposite. So once or twice after that happened, I didn't have any more problems. And one, one other in another instance. There was a drive by, I don't know whether I was there or not and a person shot into our building where my office was. And it lodged in a, in a door and on a wall next to the door. So all we did was dig the bullet out and hung a picture over the hole.

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Dr. Jim Goenner 20:16

You know, it seems like you don't learn how to deal with that in superintendent school?

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Don Weatherspoon 20:22

No, I don't think so. You learn that in law enforcement. Not like this.

D

Dr. Jim Goenner 20:28

Well, we're all indebted for your service. Can you talk about the model itself? So as an emergency manager, you looked at all your options, and you finally concluded with Muskegon Heights being the first that you were going to essentially flip that district into a charter system. Can you walk us through what transpired to lead you up to that decision?



## Don Weatherspoon 20:48

Yes. I think I said it was April 12th, or 22nd when I went in there, and I took a look at the finances. And one of the conclusions that jumped right off the pages was that if I close the district down for two years, and receive the same amount of revenue, I still cannot operate an open in the third year. So in talking with the people in the community, and with staff, there was still a desire to have a local school. And what was important to them, because the school was one of the oldest and at one time when the most prestigious school districts in that part of the county. So we said, okay, we have to close the old school down. But I did not tell staff that, I had, because I had to come back with an option. You were one of the people that I talked to about options. And the option that we determined to be the best was okay, close it down, open it as a charter, and do it quickly. So I don't think that in the history of Michigan that any school district has been transformed from a closed district to an open and reopened as a charter in the shortest amount of time, because we opened school on time as a charter, and we did not have a significant loss of population. So with, with help, from, from people like yourself, and some attorneys here in town and, and strong backing and support by the governor's office, we were able to convince the community that there was not going to be a loss of service, there was not going to be a loss of basic control, because they were going to have a different kind of control in terms of where they're going to send their kids, there was going to be a different form of accountability as far as academic performance is concerned. We had major strikes against the district in terms of special education. And we developed a workout protocol with the county or the ISD. And all those things were put in place in record time. And so we didn't have any more, let's say real contentious issues in the community, because we ended up retaining their football team, they wanted a football team, they wanted a band. So okay, we'll give you that. None of those things would have been in place had the school district been able to limp along. The second thing we were able to do is to start at zero in terms of, of, of any kind of indebtedness. So it was, it was the new charter came in with no debt to the, to the community itself. We also told the community that if things held the same, they can pay their debt off in 37 years. And so we got, we got a millage passed to, to, to address the debt and still keep their school as a charter. We, I used two people out of that administrative team to help me write the contract with the first charter provider. And we talked the board into becoming the authorizer. So the community still perceived that they were in control. You got new board members for at the elected level and new board members at the appointed level. I used a local radio station owner as one of my sounding boards to figure out who to approach to become a member of the board. And he gave me great advice. I went to the ministerial community and spoke to the members of the clergy and in fact I had two members of the clergy be members of the board. And so they moved aside and they opened it up. Again, this goes back to having done some homework within the community itself. So we got community support. And we didn't have, we had very, very strong support from the ISD. I didn't get

the kind of support that I wanted from the local police department and the local sheriff department because it had become too political at that point in time. But I did have more than adequate support from MSP, but MSP and in collaboration with the local police department began to turn that department around which they had their own challenges in terms of finances, etc. So as the program got underway, I think that the board was willing to accept a lot of input from me as emergency manager, and working with the new administration mean, the, the the provider, had its own leadership team, etc. So when we, when they stepped back, a half step and allowed me to have direct input to her. And she was phenomenal in terms of going into the neighborhood. In fact, there's a standing joke that she's the only person I've ever seen lead a parade down the middle of the ghetto, where you got drugs on one hand, and gang members on the other hand, she's out there giving away ice cream and saying come to my charter school, and she didn't lose a kid.



Dr. Jim Goenner 26:43

Wow. As you've, you know, pioneered this new approach to turning around a district that was failing financially and academically, what were the biggest surprises?



Don Weatherspoon 27:00

What were the bigger surprises?



Dr. Jim Goenner 27:01

What were the biggest surprises?



Don Weatherspoon 27:08

I would say it's, I would say that the tolerance for failure was overwhelming. That wasn't a surprise, because the, because the history was there. But the resignation, and I think people became so disenfranchised simply because they couldn't get better. They didn't know how to get better. Even though the school districts had declined in enrollment, they still didn't want to get better. Nobody said, "Hey, I've got to change, we've got to change this." So it had to have an outside intervention that would have had the strength to get around local politics. And, and people who had co-opted power. Because they were, like I said, when I looked at corruption, and I talk about friends and family benefit plans, it's my war against anybody, it's my tribe against your tribe. And that is not the kind of thing you got to have when you're dealing with children and learning, and particularly with funding, state aid funding.



Dr. Jim Goenner 28:14

So what I'm hearing you talk about is vision, leadership, being part of something greater than yourself and your own organization is that.



Don Weatherspoon 28:23

It is but, but by the same token, there has to be almost an army of support for the administration in this environment. And it can't be at the total mercy of people who've always traditionally been in charge. And when I say that I mean, traditionally, there are traditional leaders in local communities in where the economic circumstances are so bad, I mean, and the second thing is, you have a lot of people who have not had exposure to, to the funding requirements for Title One or reading requirements or, or even IEP s and understanding what that means in terms of what my child has to go through in terms of special education. They just don't understand that; it's never been explained to them. So if I if a new administrator came in and was going to implement a new reading program, for example, and somebody didn't agree with it, or somebody on maybe on a board, on the board said, you're going to use this company for to buy books and reading program that that administrator had adopted wasn't in agreement with the, with the board members and the purse strings, then you had conflicts. So those, there was such a rapid turnover of administrators, it was killing everything. So, with the support of the board where the board was given particular guidance and say you will not do this, you will not interfere by a contract, etc. And you say to the administrator, you just can't do what you want to do, and expect to get fired and get a big payout. So you had to break those down into smaller bite sized pieces, be more specific with the objectives. And that began to have an impact on what was going on with the teachers and the teachers contracts. It had, I think, a calming influence in terms of the parents, because you now have started a brand new process for parent teacher conferences for those who appeared.



Dr. Jim Goenner 30:25

So, Don, I recall you telling me, I think that two of the biggest creditors to the old Muskegon Heights district were the Michigan Education Association and the State of Michigan. Is my memory right on that?



Don Weatherspoon 30:41

Yes.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 30:42  
And how did that happen?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 30:46  
The MEA, it really wasn't MEA, it was, it was the insurance component of MEA, and what, they would write in a very healthy insurance policy, which the members took advantage of, but they never paid the premiums. But they carried it on a book. So it almost became like a revolving loan fund. So the debt was there. The second debt was retirement, that will be part of the legacy costs. People would not be given pay raises, but they would be given contracts that had a lot of hidden clauses in it that would be activated upon retirement. Okay. And that means, for example, in one instance, a teacher received almost \$140,000 payout for 27 years worth of service, and you say, "How can that happen?" Well, it was all in contract, and we had the honor it. And so, and then workman's comp was another one. A lot of people took advantage of that, and we were in debt to workman's comp. Unemployment Insurance was another one. So those costs were that where the districts that may had to pay back the state, the state said, "We don't care, we owe, you owe us this money." So we had to then formulate a new strategic plan for cash flow, and cash flow projections for a five year period, based on enrollment, etc. and say, we got to pay this money back and then allow the charter to operate.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 32:23  
So fast forward, you, you come in as the emergency manager, you assess the district say it's financially and academically not viable. You look through all your options, and you say, I'm going to try this charter option. You authorize the charter, you appoint the board, they're off and running and how did it play out?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 32:44  
In most instances, very well, as long as they were given guidance, given training. And, and, and when I say guidance, all we said or all I said to them was, this is the expectation in terms of what you have to do as far as the process is concerned. We will teach you what the objectives are, as far as the curriculum is concerned, etc. But you've got to trust the process. And we'll support you in that, in that process. And I think that that made a difference in several instances. There were several board members who thought they were now the super board member, replacing the elected board members, because the, the because I authorized them. That meant they were a local authorized charter, as opposed to being authorized by a university or ISD, or whatever. So the game still was in the community. And so we had to, let's say, shift a few more, or persuade a few members to

leave the board where they, they misunderstood what their role was.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 33:59

But you were able to do this without disrupting a school year, you made a transition over the summer, the kids went to school. So while you made a change in the governance legal structure, you were able to not interrupt services, not interrupt children's educations, family's lives.

**D** Don Weatherspoon 34:17

Well, again, this is where the community was, was instrumental in helping do that, because I had shared, I was required by law to have a minimum of four meetings, public meetings a year. Well, I had more than that. And I used what I call the "church ladies", to give me guidance as to what were the questions that were coming up. And, and I would anticipate with those questions, what I would have to do to address those questions. And several times we would shut down our offices, send people back in the community and say this is what's going on.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 34:52

Now an emergency manager under the law could only serve two years?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 34:55

18 months.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 34:56

18 months, was that enough time to be able to make and sustain change?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 35:00

Absolutely not.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 35:02

If you were advising lawmakers today, how much time do you think it takes?

- D** Don Weatherspoon 35:06  
A minimum of three years would be ideal, with a support team of about six people dealing with all the way from accountants to attorneys to public relations people, and a medical and some medical people.
- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 35:12  
So an emergency manager can't get it done by themselves, they need a team. And you can get things started in 18 months, but it's hard to build the sustainable part of it?
- D** Don Weatherspoon 35:33  
It will not be, it's not self sustaining, because all the support that the emergency manager brings to the table disappears, when either that emergency manager disappear or that particular manager disappears. Okay, so, so if, if I were appointed and had been appointed for six months in Muskegon Heights, and left in six months, it woulda collapsed. Okay, simply because they, you have to start from all over in terms of the learning curve and, and and you were talking about the things that where you had discussions on and off record, okay. When I say off record, I mean, where you go to your local leader, and say, "What do you think, how can you help me? Or can we work together?" Those are conversations that are absolutely necessary, but they're not required. So you have to kind of find your way. And like I said, there was no script for it.
- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 36:28  
So take us to the future Don. You've dealt with challenges in schools and in districts, in lots of different ways, the emergency, emergency manager just being one of them. Do you think that we've passed the challenges with districts? Or do you think we've got more challenges to come?
- D** Don Weatherspoon 36:51  
You have more challenges to come. And when we look at the types of districts, any district under 2500 kids is in trouble. Any district that has less than 5% fund equity is in trouble. Any district that has a rapid turnover of a superintendent. When I say superintendent's tenure, less than three years is in trouble. So when you look at this, you have to go in and say what are the underlying reasons why that superintendent is not there, or why there's continued loss of enrollment, etc. Because the system itself will not adjust in quick, in a quick, responsive way that allows you to absorb the blow, and still provide the kind of,

kind of services you need for the children. Because the money is depleted. When I say fund equity, there's the law says you got to have at least 8% fund equity. Well, that could 8% fund equity, on on, on on a school district that has 1300 kids, you don't have a lot of money in the pocket, and a roof off of a building wipes away your fund equity. So therefore you are broke immediately. And you can't play catch up. The second thing, you continually have individual districts that are in trouble, that have individual health care plans, ect, they all can negotiate it locally. And my suggestion would be that they'd look at a uniform policy and pick and choose what the options are under that uniform policy. And that policy would be developed through either legislation or an entity developed, established by the legislature.

D

Dr. Jim Goenner 38:38

Is that because it'd be a better negotiated agreement? Or because it would be more economically scalable? What's your rationale?

D

Don Weatherspoon 38:46

Both. It has to be economically scalable. And, and based on my experience in terms of negotiating, just say for example, health care. We, we also had to reduce pay, okay. And I think in one instance, I had to take 25% of a person's pay. In some instances that made those people who were, were paraprofessionals, for example, they immediately became eligible for welfare. So we had to say go back to wait a minute. We're not going to do that now because I don't want anybody working here and also receiving financial assistance because of their job. Okay. And at the same time, I don't want to be tied into a contractual scale where I've got to pay a person, a premium for a Master's plus 31 for the tenet, for example. And, and a person's teaching, maybe 20% of the time, that, that doesn't make sense. So you have to come back and say what are the needs of the group as far as insurance coverages are concerned, and what is the best plan that I can get that will fit the needs, not adherence to anybody particular entity.

D

Dr. Jim Goenner 40:01

So there's a lot of talk and research that says if you really want to change a kid's education, you've got to have the best teachers in the classroom, do you believe that? Has that been your experience?

D

Don Weatherspoon 40:14

Best committed teacher in the classroom. And that means that teacher has to be trained

in, in the subject matter in which they're teaching. They have to have, I would say, some extra teaching with regard to classroom management. If the data show that there are very few minorities going into education, particularly males, so males are non-existent. And so if we're going to have primarily white females, going into hardcore schools, where these challenges exist, they're needing an extra set of skills, to be able to have a good classroom management, to be able to relate to the kids, etc. And I've seen that happen. And, and the commitment will be there, you will see it immediately when they're when they're in action. And I've seen young teachers who were five foot two have total control of the classroom, including kids who had behavioral issues.

D

Dr. Jim Goenner 41:22

Don, you've worked hands on, you've worked in Lansing in the Capitol, if you're advising governors, speakers, Senate Majority leaders, and you were to say, Here's what's coming in public education, here's what the state needs to get prepared for. Here's the way you can make it be a winner for both students and taxpayers and communities. What would you advise them?

D

Don Weatherspoon 41:50

Have a conversation with the major employers in the areas that they each represent. And ask what will those employers need in the future, then the second thing is what's coming down the pike in terms of where learning is going to be. And I'll give an example, STEM appeared within the last 10 years, for example. Who was prepared for STEM in the district that we're talking about? The name was there, they moved some courses from Column A to Column B and said oh these are STEM oriented courses, but where did the training come for those teachers? Okay. What message was sent out to the family, oh, this is going to help your child to be able to compete. Okay. So on a 10 point scale, if I'm minus nine points, in terms of working at grade level, and I'm in a, all of a sudden, I'm in a STEM program, I'm going to be swimming uphill or upstream for a long time. And this is where the key gets. In that discussion you gotta say, each of these school districts have children that are minimum, three grades behind. So that means by the third grade, they're still at kindergarten, in terms of performance, You'll never catch up. Because if I can only get one and a half grades max growth in a year, by the time in sixth grade, you still don't have a child functioning at grade level in the 12 year. So this is where the question that comes, where do I allocate the money and invest that money in terms of preparing the kid, preparing the teacher in an extraordinary manner?

D

Dr. Jim Goenner 43:41

So what I hear you saying is this idea of one year of growth is fine, except if you're behind you never catch up. So what are the techniques that you'd advise school boards and school leaders to use to catch kids up?

D

Don Weatherspoon 43:56

Well, there when you, this is where the, the grant writing application process needs professional intervention, you can't leave it to the local people to write a sophisticated grant application. For those, the kind of objectives were originally about closing the gap. Everybody keeps talking about closing the achievement gap. Okay, how are you going to do that as a block by block method, and you have to do it with the thought in mind that you're gonna lose and gain kids, maybe four or five times in one school year. So that means you have to have collaboration with other buildings within your district, if the district is large and other school districts within your geographical area. That is not something that is, is happening. And when I say other school district that would include charters. So there should be a consortium agreement that as far as a child who moves from district from one building to another integrate, we monitor that child's growth no matter what. And no matter where.

D

Dr. Jim Goenner 45:01

Don as you look to the future, how do you see the transformation of schools playing out? And I'll put it in context. A lot of people in the charter schools movement have said, we're transforming public education. And yet we have institutions that are maybe incrementally changing but it's hard to change at the pace of technology, the pace of the world. Do you think the institution of public education itself is outdated?

D

Don Weatherspoon 45:38

No, I don't think it's outdated, it's being out paced. And so there's an old book called 'Change at the Speed of Light', okay, the kids are changing at the speed of light. So you have to adapt.

D

Dr. Jim Goenner 45:53

So you got to be responsive, you got to be adaptable, you got to be flexible.

D

Don Weatherspoon 45:57

If I can see an ad on for a soft drink on TV today, and I see his competitor, come back with

a better ad the next day, you have to adapt that kind of mentality in terms of your curriculum.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 46:09

So you've served on many boards, and you've served many boards. I want to now talk about your, your wisdom, your sage advice. If you're advising members on a charter school governing board, what would you tell them?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 46:27

That you're not there for the title. Be prepared to work extremely hard with, with, with no pay. Probably very little recognition but understanding that you're touching a future. And as the old saying goes 'of the future you're not going to see'.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 46:47

So you're not on a perk board, you're on a working board that's designed to make a difference for kids and so you got to be committed.

**D** Don Weatherspoon 46:54

You got to be committed. And that goes back to who is recommended by the authorizer to serve on that, on the board. And, and and how do you rotate people who are performing well into different positions onto that board. So you develop the leadership capacity, and, and the vision. And you also have to get rid of people who either fail to understand what the goal is, or agreed to the goal and work collaboratively together on a board and be willing to be trained. See this, I mean, if you want to have control, you need to be, you need to be trained to understand what you're controlling.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 47:43

So, as a governing board member, right, you're volunteering your time, you're raising your right hand, you're swearing a constitutional oath of office, you've got the same responsibilities as an elected board member, you're just simply appointed. How do you use that position of a governing board member to make change, lasting change?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 48:05

Well, first of all have to as, as the old saying goes 'check the you at the door'. So that

means no, no personal preference for travel, no perks, no ego trips, etc. and friends and family programs out the door. I know somebody knows somebody that's gone, it has gone through a process. That's number one. Number two, the, the authorizing entity must provide more direct training to board members on site in their, in their environment.

D

Dr. Jim Goenner 48:38

So let's talk about that. You're running an authorizing agency. One of your roles is to train board members, how would you go about that and what are the key things you think the board members need to know?

D

Don Weatherspoon 48:53

Let's just talk about swimming underwater. Okay. If I'm minus eight, and zero is, as I'm making it, just barely making it. How fast? How rapid? Do you want that child to ascend to zero? And then how far do you want them to, to go for the time that you have them? And you have to break it down in bite sized pieces so that they understand how to read data? Okay, so it'd be almost like a crisis intervention team that trains board members how to interpret data and look at the materials in front of them and say, "Okay, if I'm reading, if I can't read, or if I'm reading at the third grade level, and I got a sixth grader, okay, what is it that, why am I measuring this kid at the sixth grade level? When I know already, before I go into the, before my annual report comes out that I can't get the he or she is not going to get through to the sixth grade level." So what are the inter-, the intervention strategies that are working? How do we read that data and then try to translate that data to the way the state assesses a child's performance. So when we see children saying, oh, we made gains of two years on a test, but the test doesn't relate to what the state measures, or the test doesn't relate to what is expected when a child graduates from high school from high school matriculates in a way that they can be a part of the workforce. And to me, that is on the side of the authorizers, that is their responsibility, because they're supposed to be explaining hope to these children. Failing that we just wasted time and money.

D

Dr. Jim Goenner 50:42

So let's, let's dig into that accountability, right. There's the state accountability system. There's the charter contract, and that can go deeper, can go above and beyond, it can move away from a one size fits all. If you're advising authorizers what kind of goals, would you say they should put in charter contracts?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 51:02  
I would have measurable outcomes on a monthly basis in all curriculum areas.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 51:10  
A monthly basis?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 51:10  
Monthly.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 51:12  
Explain why.

**D** Don Weatherspoon 51:14  
Well, again, using the commercial example I gave earlier, if you've got to make a change, if something is not working, stop spending the money and doing the same thing over. Change it and measure it again.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 51:27  
So in education, we often look at a standardized test given once a year, sometimes we get the results of that even after the year is over. How would you bring goals that are monthly and measurable?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 51:41  
Well, I think the example that I would use right now is, is what COVID is teaching us. If so, if I'm going to have a minimum, just say for the sake of discussion, a third of my time where I will be in front of a screen. But then I would extend that to the child's cell phone, to gaming, etc. And say what learning objectives line up with what's happening to the way the child's, when the child already meets society, and is performing well in society. So if you got, and I know you have children, if your children know how to operate your remote control better than you, then you better ask that child, how did they learn that? The kid doesn't understand what goes behind, putting those concepts into, to get to the point, they just know it doesn't work. And they'll keep plugging away until they get, they find a way to get it to work. Well, there's, I don't see where that sets makes it too hard for a

teacher to say, okay, if I'm teaching a concept dealing with, let's say, fractions, or percentages, that I can't use things are in that child's life, to teach him. Now, I mean, I'll admit to something when I taught preschool, third grade, I remember using dice to teach some, some, some some lessons in terms of percentages.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 53:12

Don when board members go to Board 101, they're told, 'Govern, Don't Micromanage'. And yet, they've got a role to hire the leader, hold their own leader accountable. That might be their version of a superintendent, it might be a management company. With your experience, how would you advise a board to evaluate its leadership?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 53:39

Again, because of the complexities in surrounding failing communities, when I say failing communities, unemployment and high need for medical, medical, I'm sorry, food, etc, were all those things are in the negative. It is hard for a recent graduate to come in and say I have a vision. It's hard for a seasoned veteran to come and say, I'm gonna apply my, my vision to this community. The communities want somebody from their own community to be their leader. Well, and they resent the contractual placement by that management company from somebody come in and leave them. So somewhere in there, there has been in negotiations to say, alright, the vision gets determined by the community in conjunction with the authorizer of where they're going.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 54:38

So a shared vision.

**D** Don Weatherspoon 54:39

Shared vision, absolutely. The second part of that is who has demonstrated in the field that they have that capacity to understand both. And then third, go through a kind of a screening exercise. Where not, where interviews aren't not necessarily the beginning. process, it is the attitude that the person brings to the table.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 55:05

To have to build that relationship of mutual trust and respect.

- D** Don Weatherspoon 55:08  
And you, and you set them loose in the community for at least a week. And then you have a forum, say, okay, I've listened to what you said, Do I represent what you, what you believe to be the right thing? Are we willing to go down this path together?
- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 55:22  
So in a way, a translation between where the community is at and what they want and where the leader's vision and what they want. How do you reconcile that?
- D** Don Weatherspoon 55:31  
With approval by and, and direction by the board, because you have so many, so many masters you have to satisfy here. There is a way to find a common thread.
- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 55:43  
So we often talk about the three legged stool, the school, the board, the authorizer. You're adding a fourth, the community.
- D** Don Weatherspoon 55:48  
That's right.
- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 55:50  
And get a shared vision around that by all four legs of that stool.
- D** Don Weatherspoon 55:55  
Yes, that's correct.
- D** Dr. Jim Goenner 55:58  
In Michigan, Don, we have districts, intermediate districts, community colleges and state universities that can serve as authorizing agencies. And they have the boards of those institutions that actually issue the charters and can take them away. But then they establish offices to carry out the work. If you're serving on the board of the authorizing agency, what would you expect from your staff?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 56:30

I would expect a report on all the schools that have been authorized by me as a member of the authorizing body. Then I would say my noot analysis of data of the kids who had been with you from the start. And then the kids who come in and leave. And I would also would want to see the strategy for closing the achievement gap and how effective that is. Because it seems to me that at the end of the day, if I haven't closed, we haven't closed that achievement gap then we are doing something fundamentally wrong. And we've, we've taken money and not used it wisely.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 57:24

So what I hear you saying is we need to know where our students start at, whether they stay in the program, or whether they come and go. And then for those that do stay, are we moving them from where they're at? You've used the analogy of a minus eight, how do I get to zero? And then how do I get the plus eight? And at what speed can we make that transition?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 57:45

Well, I think that with with, with the technology, the technology that's available now, you can move kids three and four grades, if they have the capacity and the attentiveness to stay on task. And I know that the technology exists where you can stay on task, where you can change your, you can increase your reading scores by two grades.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 58:09

So if the kid crosses their arms and says you're not teaching me anything, how do you break through that?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 58:17

You said, well, you just taught me something. That you at least hear no. So you basically figure out what the deal is, what is a kid telling you that he or she needs? First of all, he's probably tell me he's afraid. Okay, and secondly, afraid of failure and doesn't and would not know what to do if he did become successful. Thirdly, there probably is something in that child's life that says, "You know, I want this." So okay, well you can have it.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 58:47

You gotta to find the key to unlock.

**D** Don Weatherspoon 58:50

Well stand at the door and find out, as I say, getting the information coming in the door.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 58:54

Find a way. Don as you look at charter schools back when you were a deputy superintendent at the Michigan Department of Education, with a few schools and a few 100 students, did you ever think you'd come to nearly 300 schools and 150,000 plus students enrolled?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 59:16

Yes.

**D** Dr. Jim Goenner 59:17

Why?

**D** Don Weatherspoon 59:19

Well, at that time, when, when the argument was charter versus no charters. There were two types of discussion or three types of discussion. I'll give you two. The first one was if it cost \$800,000 to produce a failure for K-12, all right. Could you take that \$800,000 and put that kid in a room one on one with an instructor, would they be able to perform? The answer is yes. If the second part of discussion was, if we're going to spend \$800,000 in K-12 and then add to that the hidden costs or what I call the legacy costs for the state meaning low income. So that'd be housing, medical, etc. and juvenile costs. Put those two numbers together, you have an astronomical number that says, now I have a candidate that transitions from a failing school to adult facility, then it costs drop down to \$50,000 a year, and they get to re-enroll in a program where a lot of them get their GED. And they get their GDEs in a short time, and I have been part of a program where we designed a program where we could get the GED in prison in at 50% of the costs, and in half the time than it did than people could get it on the outside. And you say "Why?" Well, it's a captive audience, two there was motivation, three there was reward, and four, they got paid.



Dr. Jim Goenner 1:01:09

Human incentives.



Don Weatherspoon 1:01:10

Well, you know, when you're in prison, you got to find two things: redemption and money.



Dr. Jim Goenner 1:01:20

Don as you look out the next 20 years, what's your hope for education,



Don Weatherspoon 1:01:26

That we will wake up and find that with the heterogeneous populations that exist in this country, that one size obviously will not fit all. And we have to become more prescriptive in terms of how we meet the child's needs based on where their child is at at that time. And I think the technology will help us and enable us to do that faster.



Dr. Jim Goenner 1:01:49

Well, on behalf of the National Charter School Founders library and the people of the State of Michigan Don, we thank you for your service and your can do attitude and the difference that you've made for countless kids. Thank you.



Don Weatherspoon 1:02:00

Thank you.