

Interview Of Will Marshall

A conversation with Will Marshall and Ember Reichgott Junge

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Interviewer: Ember Reichgott Junge
Founder: Will Marshall
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Ember Reichgott...: [00:00:08](#) Will Marshall, it has been a long time. You and I go back together more than 25 years.

Will Marshall: [00:00:17](#) Yes.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:00:17](#) I remember the first time when I really knew you was at one of the DLC conventions in 1992 so you have been involved in chartering and public school choice for a long time.

Will Marshall: [00:00:31](#) Yes.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:00:31](#) How did it all start for you?

Will Marshall: [00:00:33](#) Well, it really started, uh, with the Democratic Leadership Council, which Al From and I started in 1985 as an effort to rethink the democratic party's agenda. Uh, this was a time, uh, way back when, when Democrats had a long losing streak in presidential elections. Republicans kept winning the White House and a lot of Democrats were asking themselves why this was happening. And we felt that we needed to rethink the agenda, that we were sort of saddled with stale ideas and needed some fresh ones and needed uh, new thinking about a lot of public problems. So

Ember Reichgott...: [00:01:11](#) Do you have a context of the time. What year are we talking about? Who's president?

Will Marshall: [00:01:15](#) Yeah, this is 1985. It's right after the Mondale debacle as we remembered. That is, uh, your, your home state Senator. Uh, after Reagan's big re-selection win in 1984, the Democrats sort of hit bottom in presidential elections, still had, had the Congress, but, and we represented, the DLC represented more of the outside Washington democratic party, particularly Democrats in the West and in the South. Uh, less so perhaps in Northeast and the coast, but plenty of Democrats there too were feeling the earth move under their feet. Uh, the party was just hemorrhaging public support and we felt it was tied to a status quo agenda that didn't command a lot of, uh, uh, respect or enthusiasm from voters. So, so that's how we came to rethinking the democratic agenda and looking for new ideas, new ways to give people a sense of a party that was, uh, try more modern approaches for problem solving and willing to admit when old approaches had failed. So that was the DLCs, uh, mission.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:02:24](#) DLC, Democratic Leadership Council was a political organization.

Will Marshall: [00:02:28](#) Yeah.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:02:29](#) Can you differentiate between DLC and how PPI, Progressive Policy Institute, came to be?

Will Marshall: [00:02:34](#) Well, so we started the DLC after the 1984 blowout loss for Democrats and then we started PPI in 1989 after the democratic loss in '88, the Dukakis campaign. Uh, so I joked that every time we lose a big election, we started a new organization. But the truth was that we needed a think tank. Uh, the DLC was making a, the DLC was really a vehicle for elected Democrats to revive the party politically, intellectually. And we needed, um, you know, we had a pretty good and compelling critique of why the Democrats were losing on account of why people weren't voting for our party and presidential elections. But that will only take you so far. You have to say what the alternative is. You have to have a different set of ideas that are attractive to voters who you haven't been reaching. So that was PPI's job to think systematically about modernizing the progressive agenda as we would put it in those days. Uh, and then, uh, so PPI was formed in '89. And at about the same time we recruited, uh, a little known Arkansas Governor named Bill Clinton to be the next chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:03:49](#) Why did you recruit him? Why did Al From recruit Bill Clinton?

Will Marshall: [00:03:50](#) Well, we, uh, for a couple of reasons. One was that Bill Clinton was, uh, maybe the best governor in America. And you didn't know that because Arkansas is not exactly a marquee state, but, uh, but Bill Clinton had been a star of David Osborne's 1988 book, 'Laboratories of Democracy', which showcased innovation among governors and in those days we were thinking about what the governors were doing as being sort of the, the arena for a new thinking and innovation in public policy. And Clinton was a leader. He's always been a very creative, uh, policy, uh, person. And uh, so we were admiring him from afar. But the other reason was that Clinton had the ability, he had what I'll call crossover appeal. He had the ability to appeal to liberals and to appeal to more moderate Democrats. He was from Arkansas and knew how to talk to culturally conservative voters and how to win their votes. Uh, and at the same time he had worked on the McGovern campaign. I think they cut his political teeth working on the McGovern campaign, he and Hillary. And so, uh, you know, he had a high regard, uh, among, uh, you know, the liberals in the party and strong African American support because of his great record on civil rights throughout his political career. So he brought a lot of, uh, ability to reach out to

different factions of the party and try to find ways to unify them around common ground. And that was what we wanted to do. And there was, couldn't think of anybody better than him, but the, maybe the short and simpler answer to your question is that he is a monstrous political talent. Probably the most talented politician I've ever met. And, uh, a great articulator, uh, of complicated ideas in ways that people can grasp and he makes them interesting to people and through a strange alchemy that many other political leaders just don't have. So there was that too.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:05:43](#) And from my perspective, I, full disclosure, I was a member of the Democratic Leadership Counsel.

Will Marshall: [00:05:47](#) You were, I remember.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:05:50](#) I was an elected state senator at the time. Um, and how I got to know of Mr. Clinton is because Minnesota had passed the first open enrollment law in the country allowing students to attend any public school within the state of Minnesota with a couple of exceptions. But that movement was brand new. That opportunity to, to go to another school in another district and um, and Bill Clinton in Arkansas was the first governor to, um, to replicate that in another state. Again, Arkansas would not be where you would think that would occur. Um, so he got my attention at that point too.

Will Marshall: [00:06:28](#) Well, when we were, through him, we learned about your open enrollment, uh, plan and, uh, I guess Governor Perpich, uh, presided over in Minnesota and we were taken by that and, uh, choice was in the air in those days. The idea of expanding choice, not only in the context of education, but throughout all of government. And David Osborne was busy at work on his next book, 'Reinvented Government', which did talk a lot about choice and incentives and performance-based government. Ideas that you all were thinking about in the educational context in Minnesota. Uh, and so we were, we were very interested in that, intrigued by that obviously, and through the Clinton connection, learning more about it, but it was really David Osborne who, uh, introduced me to Ted Kolderie. David said, uh, this would have been 89' or 90', uh, he said, you gotta meet this guy in Minnesota who's one of the prime movers behind, uh, Minnesota's, uh, choice, uh, um, movement. And so, uh, then I got a hold of his, his paper on withdrawing the exclusive, uh, franchise and, uh, and then I said, this is terrific. And called him up. And we worked together to produce one of the early papers at PPI 1990, uh, by Ted on withdrawing the exclusive franchise in education.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:07:57](#) So let's distinguish here, choice meaning public school choice, in this case, chartering and open enrollment versus private schools.

Will Marshall: [00:08:06](#) Exactly.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:08:06](#) And, and, and talk about that to give more context because at that time, choice was in the air, but different kinds of choices were in the air.

Will Marshall: [00:08:13](#) That's right, no question about it. There was a, uh, at the time, Polly Williams had the experiment in, um, in, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where...

Ember Reichgott...: [00:08:24](#) Representative Polly Williams.

Will Marshall: [00:08:24](#) Representative Polly Williams, who was an African American representative who was fed up with, uh, the poor quality of schools for black kids in Wisconsin. She was no libertarian, but she wanted some way to give, to expand choice for the kids in, minority kids in the inner city there in Wisconsin. And so she had been pushing for the right for them to go to private schools or parochial schools at public expense. And that attracted the attention of a lot of conservatives who were also thinking about, uh, public support or for private education through vouchers. They were, they were getting very excited, some of them about vouchers, an idea that I guess Milton Friedman had talked about, uh, in the 60s, going back to the 60s. Uh, and at the same time you had your open enrollment idea, a public school choice idea in Minnesota in which people were allowed to choose a public school outside the, the district in which they lived. And we were not interested. I mean, we were interested in vouchers as a sign of public unrest with, you know, the quality of particularly inner city schooling, but we were not in favor of vouchers, which in the end, privatized public education. One of the charges falsely leveled at charter schools by its critics down to here. But that was true of vouchers and that was one of the reasons that we got even more interested in the public school work that you all were doing in Minnesota because we wanted to define choice within the public sector.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:10:03](#) More pragmatic, I think for political, uh, passage also.

Will Marshall: [00:10:07](#) Well more pragmatic, but also we did not want to, we didn't think you could save a, a ailing public school enterprise by abandoning it. Yeah. You had to have a new theory for change and for, for systemic improvement. Uh, not, uh, not just tell

everybody, yeah, you can bail out and we'll pay for you to go to private schools. By the way, one of the points that we kept making to people in the voucher debate, to our conservative friends and interlocutors was, you know, a lot of private schools are lousy too. I knew, I went to one, got bounced out of it, but that's another story. But the truth is that, you know, uh, private schools is no guarantee of a superiority. In fact, a lot of them were, I grew up in the South were segregation academies. They were places where white parents sent their children to make sure they didn't have to go to a school with black kids. And so, uh, particularly where I grew up, private schools were not seen as intrinsically superior in terms of what they offered educationally. And I think, uh, you know, there are obviously some great private schools in America, but they were not always better schools. They were, they met other needs of parents.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:11:18](#) And let's just kind of tidy this piece up by saying that George H. W. Bush, then president, was also a supporter of vouchers, which again, put more context into the political climate at that time.

Will Marshall: [00:11:29](#) That's right. And, uh, and, and, and to his credit, President Bush was also trying to foment or at least uh, contribute to the whole discussion about standards, which, uh, the governors were driving and including Governor Clinton, the very important 1990, uh, excuse me, 1989, uh, meeting of governors, democratic governors meeting in which Bill Clinton talked about choice and talked about performance based schools and began to really and talked about higher standards, which was, and then, uh, he and President Bush, uh, worked together, uh, on, on standards, but couldn't obviously work together on, on vouchers.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:12:11](#) That was a very big distinction because our governor, Democratic Governor, Rudy Perpich, saw as his response to the 'Nation At Risk' report in 1983, opportunity and public school choice versus standards. He was one of the few governors who went that direction. Most of them went standards. But now I'd like to come back to 'Withdrawing The Exclusive', the Ted Kolderie paper. So talk again. Now let's go back to Ted Kolderie and how you connected with him, what you saw in that paper. What was it in that paper that got you excited about this as a possible education philosophy or strategy for DLC and PPI?

Will Marshall: [00:12:50](#) Okay. Well what Ted Kolderie was talking about was the next leap beyond the public school choice experiment in Minnesota, which allowed you to choose another public school in another

district. Uh, his argument was that you needed not only that choice, but you needed more choices of schools. You need a new public schools, uh, so that we could bring choice closer to people who couldn't or wouldn't go outside the district. Uh, and, uh, and that, you know, if the other problem with choice was that if you only offered people, I mean, the only with geographic choice, was that if you only offered people a choice of schools and they were all in bad shape, then you weren't offering much of a choice at all. So Ted thought that, uh, what we needed to do was to create new public schools as we call them. And didn't, we weren't calling them a charter at that point, at least at PPI, but that we needed to create new public schools in addition to giving people choice. Uh, so it meant that, um, you know, you would bring choice to people where they lived rather than forcing them to go out of the district. And that was particularly important obviously to the place where the schools were worse. That's in the inner cities where, you know, a lot of families couldn't afford to get their kids out to some other district. So, uh, there was that idea which we thought was terribly effective. It was, it was terribly creative. But what really attracted me to Ted's argument was his analysis of institutional change. What Ted had done was I think thought more deeply about how you change public sector institutions. You know, there was a lot of stuff in there about, you know, in the private sector responding to the Japanese competitive challenge about, you know, bureaucratic misgovernment in the private sector and how institutions weren't changing and how businesses who weren't changing rapidly enough to meet the competitive challenge. Well, people like Ted and David Osborne were thinking about the public sector and how you create incentives for systemic change in the public sector, which was terribly creative. And that was exactly where we wanted to be because we were reform minded Democrats. We were not anti government as uh, conservative critics of the same programs might've been or were, but we wanted to make government work better. We wanted to reinvent government in the phrase of the time. So, uh, what Ted really understood was, uh, that the education enterprise, you had really good people, the teachers, the administrators, but they were trapped in a bad system. A system that did not bring out the best in everybody, that didn't allow for creativity. It didn't allow for local autonomy or control of the school decisions. Uh, there was too bureaucratic, too procedural or process oriented. And he understood that you couldn't change it just by, uh, making, uh, you know, by ordering up a innovative school within the context of the existing structure, of the district structure that, uh, that, that, that innovation would always be constrained and limited by the district imperatives for the, whether it was a school

contract or district wide policy is on, on everything, on buildings, on discipline and everything else. So it was a really brilliant analysis. If you go back and read his 1990 paper for Progressive Policy Institute, a really brilliant analysis of how the public school system took its customers for granted. That phrase comes from, uh, Al Shanker, the former head of the American Federation of Teachers at the time, not from Ted, but he quoted it all the time. That, you know, that basically it was a system constructed around the needs and interest of the adults in the system of education and not around the children. And that he didn't think you could, uh, rely on, uh, altruism, you know, appealing to people to do the right thing for kids. Uh, that would get you somewhere. But it wouldn't be enough to overcome the institutional obstacles to change. So what, what Ted was thinking about was how do you introduce incentives for systemic change in education, public education and public schooling, that would allow for much more innovation, a lot more creativity, um, and much more customized learning and, uh, and would, uh, create the kind of autonomy that any successful enterprise needs to be, you know, uh, to work, uh, to get to get individual schools out from under the dictates of the central school district. And, you know, frankly the limitations imposed by collective bargaining, uh, contracts with teachers. So that's what he was thinking about. And I think that was his single contribution to the, uh, to this debate. It was a theory for systemic change rather than a normative argument. This is how we ought to fix our schools, uh, that asked people to be better than they can be. That asked people to put aside their, the adults in the system, to put aside their, you know, their legitimate self interest. Uh, you really can't ask people to do that. They're not bad people. Uh, they, uh, but you have to get them, you have to align their interests and the kids' interests better than the old system was capable of doing.

- Ember Reichgott...: [00:18:08](#) So system was at fault, if you will. Not the people, right?
- Will Marshall: [00:18:12](#) Bad system, Ted always says.
- Ember Reichgott...: [00:18:15](#) And good people working in a system that was holding them back.
- Will Marshall: [00:18:17](#) Right.
- Ember Reichgott...: [00:18:18](#) And in my perspective as a Senator, as a Democratic Union endorsed Senator, I saw that as a way to empower the teachers in the system to give them more opportunity as professionals to do what they do best.

Will Marshall:

[00:18:33](#)

Exactly. And so did Ted and that was part of his paper, it's a very, it's an amazingly prescient paper, in 1990 we're talking about ah, and it first of all made this argument for not just choice in the original understanding, but choices, that is the ability to create new schools outside the, outside the ownership and control of the, of the school district. So there was that idea, which we didn't even call at that time, a charter. I was trying to get him to call them contract schools because I thought that would anchor the concept, but he wasn't all that crazy about it. So we didn't, we just called them new schools. Uh, but then he had two other elements in this paper, which, uh, again, amazing foresight. One was ah, what he called divestiture. And that meant, uh, the idea that, uh, all, uh, that the central school district would not, uh, would not own and operate any public schools, uh, potentially, that all schools could get out from under, uh, the ownership of the central school district, instead operate on performance contracts, which we now call the portfolio theory or what we're now calling at PPI, the 21st century model for organizing K through 12 education. The third component is what you talked about Ember, that is uh, teacher ownership. Ted was really concerned that teachers would be fierce resisters of these changes and I don't have to tell you how fiercely they resisted them in Minnesota and everywhere else, uh, the choice bills subsequently were introduced in state legislatures. And it's understandable. It's not because they are bad people, but they saw their interests threatened in ways and they didn't see, you know, how they would benefit from these changes. And so it's natural that people are going to oppose them. But Ted thought that there was a real hunger for, you know, professionalism. The teachers wanted to be treated like professionals, wanted to have the autonomy that professionals have. Uh, and that, uh, you could, uh, you could create opportunities for teachers to be owners and operators of charter schools and this would liberate them to control their schools, make more of the decisions that they couldn't make in any district controlled school, uh, and really flourish as professionals and, and, and, and, um, shaping the curriculum, shaping the instructional program and all the policies that make a school effective. And he still believes that, he's still to this day, uh, convinced that teacher owned and operated schools should get more emphasis in this charter school movement.

Ember Reichgott...:

[00:21:06](#)

So we're talking now 1990 about Ted Kolderie's paper, um, 'Withdrawing The Exclusive Franchise', but we haven't passed a charter school law in Minnesota that's not going to pass until May of 91'. What's occurring now between this, this paper? What are you doing here nationally? What are you doing with,

Al From, DLC and Mr. Clinton, uh, as we're back in the trenches in Minnesota trying to pass this thing?

Will Marshall: [00:21:33](#)

Well, first though let me say, we were terribly proud that DLC members, you know, and around that time we were organizing state chapters and state friends, creative young, uh, legislators like you. Uh, and Becky Kelso, your counterpart over in the Minnesota house.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:21:49](#)

Another democrat.

Will Marshall: [00:21:49](#)

Gary Hart over in, uh, not the Senator, but a different Senator in California and other leaders. So we were really happy that DLC members were taking the lead on these kinds of innovations and school choice. Uh, so what we did, it was to work out a division of labor. PPI took the concept. We, you know, we got the, we work with Ted Kolderie on this paper and then tried to get it to, to spread it around the party. And, uh, we had, you know, think tank events. We had debates, we had conversations. We were called upon to speak and defend ourselves. There was not, this was not a popular idea with the status quo forces in Washington, in the party or in education reform for that matter, to put it mildly. So there's a lot of heated conversations. So PPI was pushing the idea of trying to promote and spread the idea, particularly among Democrats, reform on to Democrats. Uh, Bill Clinton and Al From were taken to the road. Bill Clinton was the new chairman of the DLC, to talk about its mission of modernizing the party's agenda around the country and build support for a new vision for reform that included school reform, but many other things besides, and so he was out there, uh, taking these ideas and field testing them, these new ideas of national service and uh, many other, uh, innovations, uh, the welfare reform proposals that he ultimately passed. So he was taking all of these rather radical proposals for change around the country and sort of field testing them. And along the way refining them, uh, as he got feedback and reaction from Democrats and everyone else, citizens everywhere he went. So there was a kind of a back and forth where we would develop ideas, uh, shaped them up in a narrative form, you know, and then feed them into the, the road work that, uh, that, uh, that Bill Clinton and Al were doing to build local chapters, to get attention for what, uh, the DLCs was doing politically. So, uh, and so that's, that's how it worked. And, uh, for all of our issues including, uh, school choice. Uh, and so we waged the battle with sort of, uh, of Washington and the opinion molding, uh, class, uh, the chattering class, while they were out there on the road building support, building grassroots support for these ideas.

Ember Reichgott...:

[00:24:22](#)

Now I understand from you, that Bill Clinton didn't take to the chartering idea right away. Talk about that.

Will Marshall:

[00:24:29](#)

Well, uh, yeah, he had been, as you note, uh, I guess the first state after Minnesota to embrace the, the original public school design, the choice of a district. Uh, and, uh, and he had had, uh, he had some history with his teacher's unions, uh, in, uh, in, uh, in Arkansas. In fact, I think he felt that his one defeat his one loss in running for governor there, in a string of successes was as a result of getting crosswise with the teachers' unions. There were some school reforms that he had pushed in Arkansas. And so he was a little sensitive about the, uh, opposition coming to teachers who as you know, are such an important part of the democratic party coalition and base. And so, um, I think he was getting, uh, he was getting reactions, uh, adverse reactions from folks out there as well as some good ones. But no question. He was getting pressures, particularly from teachers about this charter school or this, this newfangled charter school idea, which, uh, they saw as threatening to take away their tenure, uh, their job security, uh, that they had won through long years of bargaining and, and, and pressure. And, uh, and so there was real concern, consternation among teachers. So he called me up one day from the road and was asking me about this idea and why we were pushing it so hard and why were, we thought it was fundamental to our new democratic project. And so I said, well, look, you know, to us this is a matter of, you know, if our party stands for equal opportunity, then we have to be concerned about what's happening with the K through 12, our basic school system. Because a lot of people, a lot of people of color particularly, a lot of urban and rural people, low income folks are not getting equal educational opportunity. Uh, it's a false promise if you are tolerating year in and year out, systemic failure in your basic public schools. And we were, that's the harsh truth of the matter, you know. Um, and Democrats, frankly, were putting the, uh, as a party, were putting the adults, the needs of the adults in the system over the needs of the kids in this system who are manifestly not doing well by, you know, all, by every means we had of measuring school performance and particularly in the inner city schools and low income rural areas. So we made the argument that if this party wanted to really champion economic, equal opportunity, excuse me, we would have to do it. We'd have to start with school reform that was fundamental to our purpose as a party. And that meant, you know, a systemic change in the, in, uh, in our failing public schools in the cities particularly. And that we needed to make that a part of our reform message to the country. We needed to show the country that the party had heard voters critique of our defense of the status quo that was

failing. And by the way, I'm not just talking about education; welfare, public housing, um, just federal policy in general. There were a lot of policies that people had lost confidence in because they didn't seem to be working. So the need again to reinvent government was across the board. And uh, but we felt very strongly that, uh, we had to get out in front and lead on this and the practical argument we made was that if we don't do this, the Republicans will, um, with vouchers will then have the, the most plausible, you know, the, the, the, the alternative theory for change would be coming from the Republicans. And their theory was to, in a sense, privatized public education and as progressives and Democrats, we didn't want that. We couldn't leave the field for them. We had to create an alternative, a third way as we would always say. Uh, you know, the, the first way was the old democratic way of whenever you had a problem in education, double down on spending. It's always a problem with spending. Let's spend some more, well, you know, we pumped, we pumped a lot of money into public schools after the 'Nation At Risk' report sounded the alarm in 1983. We really spent a lot, and it didn't work because you were pumping money into a failing system in which there were not powerful incentives for change and improvement across that system. So anyway, long story short, Bill Clinton calls me up and he's chagrined about the heat that he's taken about it and wanting to know why we were making such a big deal of it. So I walked him through that logic and, uh, and he thought, you know, he thought maybe we were being unduly provocative and he said, you're just trying to get me in trouble with the teacher's union. I said, no, sir, not really what we're trying to do here. Uh, and, and I think, you know, it wasn't that hard, you know, when we walk through it and when, you know, when, when the progressive argument for was made then, then that suggested to him, I think a path forward that he could take. And nobody again had the, the communication skills of Bill Clinton. He could, he could, you know, he could, uh, make this work for Democrats as well as others. And I think once he had that confidence, uh, he began to warm to the idea and eventually became, you know, uh, an ardent champion of charter schools. And of course, you know, at the national level when he was elected president.

Ember Reichgott...:

[00:29:58](#)

I understand that it got a little tense between you and him.

Will Marshall:

[00:30:00](#)

Well, the conversation did get heated for a while there. And as I said, he, uh, he, his famous temper flared up and, uh, and uh, you know, I guess mine did too. So it was probably one of the most strenuous conversations I've had, I had with Bill Clinton at the time, but it was a constructive one. And, uh, and in the end, I think, uh, uh, you know, to be fair and honest, we were asking,

we were putting him on the spot in a lot of different ways, asking him to take positions that were, uh, difficult for any Democrat to take because they ran against the status quo on a whole range of issues. And so as you know from your political life, when somebody's urging you to, to, uh, to take forward leaning stands that are, uh, meet with stiff and predictable opposition in your own party, you want a damn good reason before you do that. And we were doing that a lot with Bill Clinton in those days.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:30:59](#) The importance of having this national, uh, group, uh, sort of fronting the issue, um, as well as President Clinton, or then Governor Clinton, was just essential for other Democrats. So that gave them a little bit of cover and that...

Will Marshall: [00:31:15](#) It, it worked both ways if I may say, you're right but I mean it worked both ways. In other words, we were making an argument that Democrats should embrace education reform, otherwise we'd lose control of that argument that the, the public dissatisfaction with endemic public school failure had reached a critical mass and that something had to break, something had to happen and that if Democrats didn't get out in front at, with a plausible ideas for change and improvement. Uh, we would let the Republicans control the issue and they had bad ideas that we were opposed to. So, so we felt it was important for Democrats to get out in front. But we were looking at what you all were doing in Minnesota as the proof that on the ground, progressive pragmatic Democrats were taking the lead to fix the schools. And in a way that, you know, that wasn't, you know, it wasn't ah, it wasn't an ideological movement. It was a practical movement to improve schools that weren't doing, that needed improving. So, so, so that the validation that you, that the local reformers got from having a national democratic organization and key figures like Bill Clinton, and it wasn't just Bill Clinton, there was Sam Nunn and Lawton Chiles and Chuck Robb and Barbara Kennelly. There was a whole movement, uh, of, of national Democrats who were embracing this reform agenda, including charter schools. So it worked both ways. You know, we, we, we were inspired by what the reformers, what you all were doing on the ground. And, and to say that it, and to make the argument that it had national implications for Democrats.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:32:45](#) But what was interesting to me is that you are listening to those reformers in the States. So the main ideas coming out of the DLC were state based ideas. They were not Washington based ideas.

Will Marshall:

[00:32:58](#)

No, that's so true. I mean almost everything, all the, all the, the big staples of the new democratic agenda that Clinton ran on in 91' 92' and I would argue essentially govern on, uh, most of them were ideas that bubbled up from some innovation in the States or the cities. Uh, there were things that were happening in the country that we said, this has a really great, this has really powerful implications for a change in national policy. I mean, welfare reform was happening in the States and in cities, again, another broken public sector system and people said, we've got to have a change here. And they were doing experiments with work-based welfare reform and we just kind of stitched a lot of those together and elaborated a framework for reforming, ending welfare as we know it, as Bill Clinton said. And for the kind of work pay social policy that he put in place in 96' and that we've had since. So you're right, uh, the big, the big ideas for change, the biggest, best ideas for change came from the country. It came from outside of Washington and I'll, I'll never forget having a, you know, a conversation with, uh, Washington pollsters and political strategists in the Clinton campaign about that because, you know, they didn't know these ideas. They were used to polling on, you know, the minimum wage and you know, believe it or not, it was a staple of things back then as it is today. There were four or five, uh, chestnuts that they always polled on and they, for example, when I was centrally involved in this, the national service idea we had, we wrote up a little booklet in 1986. It was a basis for legislation and Bill Clinton and others push and eventually got into law as AmeriCorps and um, and these consultants that, what does national service, what is this about? We never heard of it. We never polled it. We have no idea how it poles and they would demand to know how does it poll? We don't know. But when Bill Clinton went into communities, and I mean he went into New Trier Township in Chicago, which was a very high income North of Chicago suburb, got a rapturous reception for his, his call for a national service program. Go into low income working class communities, got the same reception. So it was more important than a poll. But, uh, I'm, I'm straying from your point, which is a lot of these ideas that define the new democratic movement were, uh, ideas that state and local policy entrepreneurs pioneered. And the implications for national policy seemed to us sort of self evidence strong. So we, our job at PPI was to shape them in a national policy proposals.

Ember Reichgott...:

[00:35:34](#)

Isn't that an inherent problem though with politicians trying to do innovation? Because you cannot pull an innovation that has not yet been created, right?

Will Marshall:

[00:35:44](#)

Exactly, no track record.

- Ember Reichgott...: [00:35:44](#) The status quo prevails. And so that always is. And that is one of the things you always ask well, who wants this? That was a question I got all the time. Who wants this? I said, well, uh, you know, once you unleash it, you let citizens take the lead. They're able to find new and innovative ways, but everybody wants to know who wants it and what for.
- Will Marshall: [00:36:02](#) Well, this is always the innovator, the innovator's dilemma that, uh, that the, uh, the community of people who are at risk from change is visible, organized, and vocal. And the community of people that could benefit from change is diffuse, not conscious about the possibilities and not paying attention. You know, this, but this is true across the board. And it was, it was really true here where you have such, you know, you where you have a hundred years of, uh, of a public school structure that was deeply, deeply entrenched, is I should say.
- Ember Reichgott...: [00:36:35](#) Now we're, we're, we're now coming up to the passage of the law in Minnesota in May of 1991. But what was the biggest surprise for me when I wrote my book years later, interviewed you and Al From, was the fact that President Clinton, no, then Governor Clinton, excuse me, DLC chair. And uh, Al From and you were actually promoting this across the country before it went into law. Al From said that he and, uh, Bill Clinton traveled to maybe 26 States and he would be introducing the idea. This was new to me in Minnesota. I had no idea. I don't know if it would have helped our passage or hurt it, but talk about that because for nine months the national leaders were promoting this idea before we even had a law passed.
- Will Marshall: [00:37:27](#) Right. Well, um, that's true. And again, the DLC, uh, we envisioned, and it was a platform for new thinking, for new ideas. Our theory of political change was that Democrats were not gonna be successful in presidential elections until we thought our way through our problems and came up with a new and more interesting and cross cutting and appealing agenda, so that the ideas were primary. We had to define this mission as about real substantive, substantive changes. Because if you went to the public and you just offered a new wine and, uh, old wine in new bottles, sorry, you would, uh, you know, they'd see it, see through it, and you wouldn't get very far. So, you know, this was our way of proving that this movement was about substantive change and was not just about cosmetic fixes for a party. You know we weren't putting lipstick on a pig. Uh, I don't know if you can even use that metaphor anymore, but anyway, that's not what we were about. So, um, you know, so, uh, that was, and that was the substance of Bill Clinton's message. He said, give the democratic party another listen, uh, give us

another chance because it's different. We're a new party. It's not, you know, he called it a different kind of, he called himself a different kind of democratic, different kind of Democrat or later the new Democrats. And you had to prove that in some way, you had to show that there were different and new ideas and those ideas became, they elected Bill Clinton, because they unleashed energy. They inspired voters who otherwise weren't inspired by the old tired ideas we'd been running on. They got a lot of young people excited about Clinton and Gore. I don't know if people remember, but uh, before there was Barack Obama, Clinton and Gore were both young, modernizing pragmatic Democrats and they really, really made a connection with young voters and they took a cross country bus tour during the 92' campaign that got a lot of attention. So, uh, it was our way of proving that this was really a substantive movement for change and modernization.

Ember Reichgott...:

[00:39:29](#)

So let's talk about that. I want to jump ahead, now 25 years or 30 years and talk about those same ideas, those same ideas for modernization, for systemic change. And what do you see today that still is relevant from those ideas?

Will Marshall:

[00:39:46](#)

Right. Well, a lot, but the context has changed dramatically. And the issue set has obviously changed dramatically. Uh, this is a very different political world now and uh, much more ideological, much more partisan and polarized, much more tribal. Uh, the broad democratic center that we were fighting hard to preserve, uh, in some respects has dramatically shrunk and, um, so, um, it's a very different kind of political, uh, reality. But in the end, politics usually does resolve to a question or choice of ideas and governing philosophies, ideas and values in the end are what determine elections in my view. It's not who has the most money or who has the most hard hitting campaign ads. Those things are important, but ultimately people base their votes on, you know, ideas and who shares their values. And on a sense of affinity, they have to trust the political leader that they want to vote for, that they vote for. So, uh, those are the key elements of the transaction of democracy. And so, uh, Democrats in 2018 once again find themselves on the outs. Democrats are in the minority in the state level of politics, which is dominated by Republican legislators and governors and at the federal level of politics, which is entirely controlled by the Republican party. So if anything, the political challenge facing Democrats is more formidable than it was, than the one that we faced in 1985 when we created the Democratic Leadership Council. Then we had a, we had what looked like a permanent lock on Congress. We had most of the state legislatures and we had most of the governorships. So, you know, in a funny sense,

uh, the challenge facing Democrats is even more daunting now than it was then. But you've got to think your way out of it. You've got to innovate your way out of it.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:41:51](#) So let's talk about that. So let's assume today we have a moderate center cause I think that's going to come back eventually, a moderate center in both parties. What principles, what ideas, what lessons did you learn from your experience in bringing the chartering idea forward? That you could tell the policy makers of today to think about how they could generate new innovations and new ideas in education.

Will Marshall: [00:42:16](#) Well, you know, you have to speak, you have to have a language of persuasion. Uh, we have this perennial debate, you know, in politics between the people think it's all about energizing your base. It's all about mobilization of voters and people, uh, who think it's about persuasion. It is obviously about both. This is the biggest false choice in politics yet we debated every election cycle. You gotta do both. You have to energize your core partisans, but you also have to persuade voters to come over. And that requires arguments about facts, about, it requires evidence. It requires an element of inspiration and inspiring hope that a new way of solving a problem might produce better results than the old way. So you have to have a conversations with voters about these things. Uh, there are no set formulas here and you know, uh, if the, if, if you're in the position Democrats are today, that is, we're in the minority in state and national politics, by definition, you have to expand your coalition. And that means you have to make new arguments to voters who are not now voting for you in places that you've not been winning in. The vast red zone in America, uh, between the two coasts and outside the big cities is the terrain on which Democrats are not winning and have to frame new arguments to voters in order to be, to get back into the majority and be able to govern.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:43:41](#) What do those arguments sound like?

Will Marshall: [00:43:41](#) Well, here's, I mean, here's one, uh, that, you know, right now this party has, uh, not really, uh, been the party of jobs for a lot of voters and particularly voters out there in the red and purple places in America, which, in the main haven't benefited from the new economy prosperity from the digital innovation that's been driving much of the growth we've had in the U. S. Economy. So a big question is how do you bring this digital prosperity, uh, to the folks in communities that are left, that have been left behind by economic change, the distressed communities, the job deserts, and obviously this is a big issue in

rural America, which voted strongly for Donald Trump. I think mostly for cultural reasons, but also because the old manufacturing economy has left a lot of these communities in really in bad shape. So you have to have an idea of how you're going to make the private economy strong and dynamic again, how you're going to spread the benefits of the growth that is, you know, we are growing as a society, but it isn't shared, uh, adequately. So you have to have both sides of the equation. How are you going to make the economy grow and be dynamic and how you're going to push out that growth to people in places that haven't experienced it. And that's not what we're talking about in much of the conversation in Washington, at least among Democrats, it's all about redistribution. There's this strange emphasis on how Washington is going to sell, save the, save you bringing you, free tuition or government, government guaranteed jobs or government guaranteed income. Uh, so we have this, so the Washington party offers basically re-distributive, uh, programs in lieu of real economic opportunity. So we're arguing the democratic party has to stand for the champion, the real economic prospects and aspirations of working Americans again. Bill Clinton understood this is, you know, he talked about the Americans who work hard, play by the rules, and don't benefit from, uh, public policies that seemed to always go up or down the scale but never hit the working middle class. So that's something the Democrats have to relearn how to do is to really champion the, uh, the real economic aspirations of working people in this country and places that are not now supporting the party.

Ember Reichgott...: [00:46:06](#) How do the K-12 policies that you're promoting today fit into that?

Will Marshall: [00:46:09](#) Well, uh, look, I mean, uh, unfortunately, Ember we're sitting here what more than a quarter century after Minnesota started this school choice revolution and, uh, and the changes that we both been working for are still kind of on the margins, not, uh, they're not, uh, they don't define our K through 12, uh, enterprise. And we're working to change that we think. We now have enough evidence, a body of evidence that's just irrefutable about the superior performance of high performing charter schools in, uh, in, uh, in, in an organization, in this new organization where in the school district doesn't own and operate the schools, but contracts with schools to provide what the diverse kind of offerings, educational offerings that schools need. So what we're doing, I think I'm gonna, I think I'm gonna get to your point here. What we're doing is trying to make a new case for, uh, for how the experiments of how the charter school. What we're doing now is to make a case for how the

charter school experiments over the last 25 years, uh, show us the way toward a new organization of K through 12 education in America, what we call 21st century schools. It's a radically different way of organizing education. Where in the school district no longer owns and operates all the schools, but does contract or charter the schools that a community needs, different kinds of schools offering customized education, uh, rather than trying to own and operate everything itself. Uh, it's a very different model for organizing uh, public education. But we believe that the, that the best charter experiments in the country, in cities like New Orleans, where almost all the kids are in public charter schools now in New, in Washington D.C., in Indianapolis, in Denver and other, in other places where we've, where these, these efforts to really create innovative and autonomous schools that are held accountable for results. Where, wherever we've got the critical mass of that we're beginning to see overwhelming evidence that they are outperforming traditional schools. So we're working with, uh, other, uh, places, particularly cities to move them along that trajectory, to move them in the direction of what we call 21st century schools. The, the direction, uh, pioneered by the cities I've talked about.

Ember Reichgott...:

[00:48:44](#)

Would this be something toward a charter district? Is that what you're describing?

Will Marshall:

[00:48:48](#)

Well, uh, the, the term of art that Paul Hill, you know, coined years ago, and actually we had Paul wrote this for PPI way back in 2003, was portfolio, uh, schools, meaning that again, all this is, boils down to a radical change in the school district's job. The school district traditionally has owned and operated all the schools, made all the decisions and uh, micromanaged all of your community and public schools. Um, and this says that's the wrong role, that they should be setting broad policy and making sure that services get provided, uh, and defending, you know, basic civil rights, but not trying to, uh, operate every school. Uh, and they should be, uh, contracting with different providers of schools for different kinds of schools that meet the diverse learning needs of kids in the community. So, uh, it's, uh, I'm not crazy about portfolio district these days after the market meltdowns. You know, maybe, uh, borrowing metaphors from, uh, wall street is not the best, uh, way, but we call them 21st century schools, a 21st century way of organizing America's schools. And we think the, the principles are very simple and very clear to us. And that are, you know, autonomy. First of all choice, parents have to have choice. Uh, and secondly, autonomy. These schools have to be able to call the shots. They have to do their hiring and firing. They can't be, they can't be

told, you can't fire a teacher that's not performing or you can't use your resources in the way you think are gonna to be most, uh, best calculated to help you achieve your school's mission and your educational performance goals that you have to meet in order to keep your, to renew your contract. Um, and uh, and then, you know, the other element here is, uh, making sure that accountability is real, that strong authorizing boards hold these schools to their, uh, to their promises and, and to, uh, broad levels of student performance that all schools have to meet. So those are the key elements. So you can call it a portfolio district or you can call it a charter district. You can call it anything you like. And as David Osborne who, who manages PPIs work on charters, on 21st century schools points out, you, you know, there's, there's nothing, there's nothing sacred about charter schools, if you can make this work and a lot of communities are trying in different contexts as innovation districts, innovation district schools, uh, that's fine with us. As long as those ingredients are real: choice, autonomy and accountability. If you've got that than it doesn't much matter what you call it, you've got the ingredients of a different and, and more, uh, innovative system.

Ember Reichgott....:

[00:51:46](#)

So what you're trying to do in some ways are to integrate those elements into the district system and vice versa. In other words, to bring them together in a way that they are all able to have high performance schools.

Will Marshall:

[00:51:58](#)

Exactly. And uh, you know, I, when I was working on the charter board in Washington D.C., uh, it was about the same time that Michelle Rhee was brought in to shake up the traditional public sector schools. Why was she brought in? Well, because the charter school section, that I was one of the people overseeing, was taking their customers. There was winning more students and growing dramatically. Uh, and I always thought this is a healthy development. Charters were creating competition that put pressure on the traditional schools to change and improve. So they brought in Michelle Rhee, turned out to be a very controversial, uh, uh, chancellor. Um, but I always thought, you know, that we shouldn't be at odds. We never much talked about what we were doing on either our respective sides of the divide between charters and traditional schools. I always thought that was a mistake because the charters were developing, uh, ways of measuring school performance that allowed for real accountability. And of course that was the biggest problem in the public sector schools. At the same time, they had all the resources. Uh, we didn't have facilities. One of the huge problems for charter, the charter movement and one of the limits on the growth of the charter movement is facilities.

They had empty school buildings. We couldn't get them. So we thought if we got together, pooled efforts, we could both learn from each other and improve on both sides. That's happened a little bit more and more in recent years, but you still got a pretty, you know, you still got a district that controls everything. And I think what we're envisioning as an evolutionary path, which we hope we can speed, that gets us to a position where the old model of districts controlling and operating everything and calling all the shots is, is over. And this new model of choice, autonomy and accountability is, uh, is, is how most, uh, is how most American school systems are structured.

Ember Reichgott...:

[00:53:59](#)

You've raised a number of points. Uh, and I want to go back to a couple of them. One is the language that we use with charter and chartering. Uh, over the years it's become charter schools. But you know, originally it was a verb. It was chartering, it was a word that described a system reform, not a school. How have you come to use the language and how has it evolved over time?

Will Marshall:

[00:54:25](#)

That's a great question Ember, I, we may be partially responsible for the use of the term, the popularization of the term charter school, because that's how we had to get it down to this concept, to a shorthand that we could talk to people about and so, uh, you all in Minnesota I know use the chartering verb, and we just started calling these schools, charter schools. And of course, the critics latched on to that and, uh, began to really, uh, create an indictment, which hasn't changed much in the 25 years of charter experience. You know, that charters were a secret plan to privatize the public education system that they, uh, that they took money out of the public schools, which they don't, that they were not really public schools at all, that they cream the best students, uh, and thereby intensified the problems with traditional schools and, uh, other, other parts of that indictment. So, you know, uh, there's no question that over time, uh, the term itself has acquired a lot of political freight and, uh, and, but, you know, we needed a way of talking about it. Uh, and, uh, as I mentioned earlier, I think, uh, contract schools is a little cold, a little business like, and uh, charter seemed a good way of talking about the performance contract. And that's all it is. When we're talking about charter school, we're talking about a school that operates through a performance contract. Written down here's what we're going to achieve. Here are the goals we're going to set and we're going to meet and if we don't meet, you should take our charter away, you shouldn't let us operate a public school in your district because we haven't lived up to the terms of that contract. So it seems as good a word as any for describing that

relationship. But there's no question that the opponents of, in the general attempt to demonize the movement have latched onto the words and uh, and they carry freight. And I'll give you an example. So in 1991, the Democratic Leadership Council had a big national convention in Cleveland, the Cleveland convention, and we passed a whole series. It was a real political convention in that the delegates who came weren't pre-programmed. They, they came and were spontaneously asked to vote on a series of resolutions, new, new choice resolutions, we called them. One of which was on, uh, was on essentially on public school choice and charters. But you won't find the word charter in that resolution because, you know, in the negotiations on the floor, like as in any political convention, too many people had latched on to that as something that they didn't like. It had a negative connotation to them. Uh, they connected it to this, uh, this indictment that I mentioned. So even though the resolution endorses the reality of the charter school movement, it doesn't call them charter schools. So we all had to make that adjustment you know, the. At the local level, particularly, there was a sustained campaign, sadly, often spearheaded by the teachers unions against charter schools. And, you know, we, uh, so that sometimes became a trigger. Uh, so charter schools, wait, that's bad, isn't it? And you know, so you had to talk around it, talk about the concepts of autonomy and choice and real accountability, which people, uh, were, uh, want. Uh, and then you work your way back to the title, but there's no question you had to call it something. And for ease we call the charter schools and that, and that may have contributed to the, the freight that it's acquired. But, and we learned this lesson from Ted Kolderie I think, uh, you know, we, the other, the other dynamic that happened was that when you get into a fight with somebody, when you have the other sides saying, 'charters are the worst thing that ever, they are a conspiracy to privatize public education or conspiracy to take money from public schools' or whatever the other critics said, your tendency is to, a little is to hunker down and defend right? And maybe, uh, overstate the merits of charter schools. And we did. That's one, one pitfall we try very hard not to fall in at, at people how we were. Ted made it very clear at the beginning that this was, that chartering was a means to an end. It wasn't the end itself. The means was to create, what he'd call the R and D sector of public education. Create a sector for innovation, sector for experimentation. Uh, so also a controversial word to use in the context of public schools sometimes, but let's face it, we were talking about experimenting with new kinds of schools and um, so that we never tried to get hung up on, you know, the defense of charters because there were not a lot of bad charters you know, over the last 25 years and PPI down the

years has chronicled the charter movement in the States good and bad. When Andy Rotherham, uh, who was an important figure in this discussion was here and actually he was here twice, but in his second, I think iteration, he commissioned a bunch of papers, really close looks at charter schools in Ohio, charter schools in Arizona, charter schools in Texas. States that had very libertarian understandings of what a charter school system was supposed to be. A very market oriented, shall I say, a Betsy DeVos understanding of how, what charter schools means. Very different than our understanding. And these are States with very, that in reality had weak authorizing, sort of wild West anything goes kind of authorizing. Anybody wanted to start a new public school and get public funding could do it. So a lot of people, you know, using the name of the charter school movement, abused, uh, it, you know, the sort of bad schools or mediocre schools, uh, and uh, and gave it a bad reputation in some places. So, uh, what we've tried to do is to keep our eye on the characteristics that make for successful new public schools, uh, and not get too hung up on defending the charter movement as some people have their whole organizations dedicated to that purpose. Uh, but the smart ones know that they have to be critical where the movement has been weak and it has been weak in places. Our mantra, and we've done a lot of work on this at PPI, is we have to, uh, we have to replicate the best practice charters and we have to be absolutely determined to shut down, uh, the under-performing charters of which they have been too many. And in that way, you raise the overall quality of your charter portfolio to use that word again. Uh, and that's, that's the way we see it. But, um, in political combat, you know, people do hunker down and sort of, you know, they overstate the merits of their concept as the other side overstates demerits of their concept. And that just happens in politics.

Ember Reichgott...:

[01:01:22](#)

You were talking about how the language over time has carried up some baggage and I'm hearing that if you were to talk with legislators today, you would say focus on the ideas, focus on the components, the accountability and, and the autonomy, that sort of thing. But I also hear you say, and I see in the work of PPI, that you're focusing on 21st century education, which is something all of us can share with those components. Talk about that.

Will Marshall:

[01:01:51](#)

Right. Well, again, we're not, uh, making a fetish of the word charter or even the idea of charter schools. If a, if a, if a place, if a community can create a variety of diverse, excellent public schools that are autonomous, that meet the characteristics we think make for success in public education, I don't care what

you call them. It's like, Hitchcock colon Macguffin that was his name for the plot, plot device that drove the story forward. Call him anything you want. Uh, but you gotta be real about those qualities. And this is important because we're doing a lot of work, uh, in, in communities that have innovation districts, you know, they, and they call them innovation districts because, uh, because of the baggage that the word charter carries and because of the opposition they got from local actors. So they, they, instead of having charter school districts, they may have an innovation districts and sometimes innovation districts, um, coincide, uh, cheek by jowl with charter school districts. And sometimes they don't. But a lot of places have created innovation districts as a way of getting around the almost reflexive opposition to anything labeled a charter school that they sometimes encounter. Fine. You can call them innovation districts, you can call them innovation schools, but they've got to have real autonomy. And we were about to come out with a report at PPI that looks at some of these innovation districts and finds that in general, they don't have as much root true autonomy because they're still controlled by the district. A lot of their policies are still centrally controlled. They're not liberated to make the basic policy decisions at the school level that they need to make to be efficient and effective. Uh, and as a result, they don't do as well as your high functioning charters. They may do as well as a less high functioning charter, but they don't do as well as the best ones. Um, and so, uh, you can call them different names, you can have innovation districts and that's fine, but if they don't have true autonomy, the characteristics that create high performing charters where we've documented those successes, then, uh, then you've got a problem.

- Ember Reichgott...: [01:04:06](#) And I think that's something policy makers today need to understand and that is you can legislate something and say, innovation districts are those that have autonomy, but it's how it's interpreted and how the department of education and others draft rules for that. Because, uh, in the end we've seen States like Wisconsin have quote "charter schools" that really aren't charter schools cause they don't really have full autonomy, yet they call them that right.
- Will Marshall: [01:04:32](#) Exactly.
- Ember Reichgott...: [01:04:32](#) So isn't that something that's been going on?
- Will Marshall: [01:04:33](#) Yes, it has. And that's why we're doing this new study on autonomous schools zones in innovation. The other name is innovation districts and innovation zones and we're all for of them. But again, you have to look at the fundamental

conditions that are critical to success and whether they're there. The hardest thing and the hardest thing in this, and I know I'm preaching to the choir, but the hardest thing is for institutions that have had power for about a century to give them up. I mean, school districts, the local school districts, uh, there are a lot of jobs at stake. Uh, there, you know, there's a sense of local control. There's a sense of local democracy. Um, one of the tensions that we haven't talked about at all here is between local control and uh, and rigorous, tough authorizing that, that autonomous schools need. Autonomous performance based schools need tough authorizers or they don't work. This is probably the biggest thing I've learned in doing this for 25 years. We, we had, I will say at PPI and DLC, I think a, a, a naive view of, uh, of, of how challenging it proved to be to make, to make these schools work, to authorize them properly, to hold them to their performance contracts, to enforce real accountability. It sounds good. It's hard to, it's really, really hard to do.

Ember Reichgott...:

[01:06:01](#)

So what I'd like to do now is I want to go back to the story and bring it from 92' forward and then at the end I want to talk about the democratic, uh, issue and, and how we, we, we need to, to, to bring Democrats back into this full what's happening today with, uh, the Trump administration and why that's causing some difficulty. So let's go back to the story first of all. Um, in 1992 now we have, uh, excuse me, in 1991 of May, we have passed the first charter school law in Minnesota, which by the way, was severely compromised. And, uh, which had, uh, required, uh, a cap of only eight charter schools and also required two authorizers as well, the local school board and the higher education or the, the state board of education. Uh, so in my view it was extremely compromised and there would never be a charter school ever again, uh, or ever. Uh, but then all of a sudden within just about a week or two after its passage out comes a press release from President Clinton. Uh, no, I'm going to start this over. I'm going to start my part over cause I want to just make this a little cleaner. Um, uh, let's go back to the, uh, the start here in 1991, the bill passes in May, um, I think it's a failure, that there will never be a charter school because it's severely compromised. There's a cap of only eight schools, the teachers have to be a majority of the board. And most importantly, it requires approval by two levels, both the local school district and the state board of education. There's no alternate sponsor or authorizer, uh, yet as severely compromised as it was a week or two later outcomes a press release from Governor Bill Clinton, chair of the Democratic Leadership Council, lauding the passage of this bipartisan bill, which did pass with 56% support from the minority Republicans,

42% support of the majority Democrats. How did that happen? I was taken totally by surprise as the author in Minnesota.

Will Marshall:

[01:08:11](#)

Well, how it happened was we were watching, uh, this was really important us and, uh, you know, the work that you and Becky were doing. Uh, our, our, state outreach people were on top of and keeping up with. But Ted also was telling us, 'Hey, you know, this is important, weigh in', uh, and, uh, and so it was, you know, we, this, we were thrilled by the outcome. Uh, it is not usual where the, uh, the concept comes out before the bill. But, uh, but, uh, in this case, that sort of happened. And so we were, you know, it seemed like a proof of concept, you know, in Minnesota that, uh, yes, real Democrats, real reformers were, uh, going to try to make this work. And I know you feel that it was compromised and watered down and no doubt it was, but boy, you know, you, you, you established a beachhead that was really critically important. Uh, and so we were, we were just, you know, to, to us, you know, our credibility depended on, you know, who, who cares what Will Marshall and bunch of wonks think in Washington. And our credibility depended on showing that there was a political constituency for the difficult reforms that new Democrats were embracing and, and Bill Clinton were embracing in those days. And so, uh, to see it actually get enacted into law as a thrilling event for us. We were, we were, pounced right on it.

Ember Reichgott...:

[01:09:38](#)

Well, and it's sure helped me and it helped me in Minnesota as author, to keep it from being repealed here because all of a sudden there was a national voice about it. But then how important, how important was it that California then passed it in early 1992?

Will Marshall:

[01:09:54](#)

Well, and you know, as we, you know, we went on and as we traveled to California, I can remember meeting with Gary Hart, Senator, State Senator Gary Hart who was the prime mover of the bill in California. And we were talking about the experiences you all had and you know, and how difficult it had been. They also were capped I think, I think they were a capped at, I can't remember how many schools they were capped at, but there was a cap in California. And uh, so we were there to help to reinforce his desire to show him there was political support at the national level and all over the country, from Democrats all over the country for this. But also because you know, the DLC, state and local network of which you were apart was a transmission belt for ideas. We wanted it to be the feeder system for innovation and kind of a learning, mutual learning for our members so that they would glom on to ideas happening in other States and push them. What happened here. You know,

they, they heard about it too and some of them heard about it through the DLC pipeline. Um, and so we were really happy to go out in California and, and work with Gary to, uh, on, on that bill. And then Roy Romer, uh, Governor of Colorado become a, became a really important champion for this. And suddenly we were, there were bills cropping up in a lot of places that we were working on. And, uh, and so that, and I think, you know, going back to my difficult conversation with Bill Clinton, I think that helped him make feel better. Excuse me. I think that made him feel better that, that he wasn't out there, uh, uh, leading, uh, and nobody was behind that, uh, that there, there were people, Democrats around the country who took these ideas very seriously and willing to fight for them.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:11:40](#) You know, I've never thought about the fact that we might have been helping Bill Clinton. I was always thinking Bill Clinton was helping us.

Will Marshall: [01:11:44](#) You were. It worked both, it really did work both ways.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:11:48](#) I really did work both ways. So then in 1992 in May, you had your national conference for the Democratic Leadership Council. I remember being invited as one of your speakers with David Osborne about ideas that were coming around in the States. For me that was like, I was this young legislator and I'm thinking, wow, I get to be before this great big national group. And it was very exciting, but to be there with David Osborne was just a real honor and uh, felt like we were now getting some real momentum. But you have to realize there was not even one charter school yet.

Will Marshall: [01:12:19](#) Yes. The concept, uh, it was running before the reality, but, um, but it, it was so well grounded, you know, and the work that you all had done cause I mean, I know you had been thinking about it for years and you had the choice experiment, Ted, and the Civic League. You know, it didn't just come out of nowhere. Uh, you know, there was a, there was a history there and some ground laying work that was important, I guess. And so, uh, but there was this, but that added to the sense of excitement that, you know, that this was one of those rare moments in politics where the, where the window opens for innovation. Because, you know, I've now been here since 1980. Uh, and believe me, that window doesn't open all that often for systemic radical change just doesn't happen here very much for a variety of reasons. And you'd felt a sense of possibility of movement, of, uh, barriers to an inertia giving way to innovation. And so, uh, that was terribly exciting for us. See, you say it was a heady experience for you, but again, you know, showing people that,

uh, Democrats on the ground were doing these things was vital for us. And so, uh, it was a mutual, mutually reinforcing, uh, loop.

Ember Reichgott...:

[01:13:41](#)

And then in October, as I'm watching one of the presidential debates, when, uh, Bill Clinton as a candidate for president, uh, mentioned, uh, charter schools in his education agenda, uh, it just blew me away. Again, we had at this point, one charter school that had opened up a month before. Um, so obviously you were working with him and you were creating his policies, if you will, that eventually became a book called 'Mandate For Change'. So talk about that.

Will Marshall:

[01:14:10](#)

Well, I, well even before mandate, which came out, I delivered him the manuscript on election day, the day he was elected. That was a fun hand off. But, uh, even before that we had sort of molded together what we call the New Democratic Philosophy and Agenda and charters and school choice and other things, we were also interested in the Standards Movement and, uh, pre-K, you know, but all that was a big part of it. But charters is particularly important because it was a paradigmatic change. It's a big change. And how you thought about going back to our discussion about public sector reform, uh, and, and it helped to show that we were, you know, that he was a real serious about doing things about tackling the failure of public sector systems and, um, making sure we got success, we had higher performing public sector. So that was terribly important. So we were putting all that together in the new democratic credo and message that he was molding and refining on, on the road. And then of course, in the, in the fall of 91', he gave his announcement speech, which I helped him on and announced his candidacy and all this was part of that. Um, and I want to say something about the campaign if I might, uh, you know, in retrospect it looked inevitable that Bill Clinton was, would be the nominee, but it wasn't inevitable when that campaign started in the fall of 91'. And in fact, a lot of people thought he was a second tier candidate from a, uh, from a state that doesn't elect presidents. You know, Arkansas was not your springboard for presidents normally speaking, who had flamed out in a, in his, um, in his keynote address at the 1988 democratic convention. So it wasn't a foregone conclusion that Clinton was our strongest candidate in those days. We, of course, thought so, but not everybody else did. Uh, and I watched him against a talented field of other people running for president that year, including Jerry Brown and Tom Harkin and others. Uh, Bob Kerrey. And, um, he, uh, Paul Tsongas, he won that debate. Uh, he won the Ideas Primary before he won any other primary. And by that I mean he had a coherent body of

new and inspiring ideas that generated excitement and energy among voters. Uh, that showed he was something different. Uh, and in the debates with other democratic candidates, he just, he had, he had thought through the party's problems, he had thought he had developed these ideas with us as solutions to its governing and political problems. And so he had just a much more coherent theory of, for change than any of the other candidates and the public wanted change that year. Um, and just watching that dynamic unfold, it was amazing because they just weren't ready intellectually for the campaign that they had to run. And he had been preparing for it for two years as DLC chairman and thinking about all this. Uh, and so that was of incalculable value to his presidential, his success in getting the nomination in 92'. Uh, and, you know, this, the idea we're talking about was part of that. So, uh, that to me was as vivid a demonstration of the power of new ideas as I've ever seen in American politics.

- Ember Reichgott...: [01:17:42](#) So now the 'Mandate For Change' book you're putting that together, this becomes the platform for his presidency.
- Will Marshall: [01:17:48](#) Yeah. And, uh.
- Ember Reichgott...: [01:17:51](#) And I believe Ted Kolderie was a part of that.
- Will Marshall: [01:17:51](#) Yeah well, I asked Ted to write to, to contribute to a chapter that canvased K through 12 education, uh, apprenticeship, job training and uh, and national service. You know, so a lot of, lot of territory in that chapter, but we did, we did hone in on the core arguments from Ted's great paper for, uh, PPI, uh, in 1990 and restate the case for uh, the new model. And, uh, yeah, so that was an important part of that, uh, uh, of that book, which became the guide for the perplexed, uh, for the new Clinton administration. Uh, because remember Clinton did not, he was an unconventional race. It was led by ideas, ideas that came from outside Washington and that the pollsters weren't even all that familiar with. And so a lot of the, a lot of the people that Clinton then called to form his government didn't know what, he didn't know much about him. There were state experiments that they didn't know anything about. So they all called us up. You know, what does he, what does he, what does he mean by charters? What does he mean by ending welfare as we know it? What does he mean by reinventing government? Um, and we were called upon to explain it. So we, we, we knew that would happen. So we wrote this book 'Mandate For Change' which sort of unfurled the governing agenda. We thought the new democratic governing agenda and, and, and connected it to real action points. Here are the five things we should do. And we

encouraged, I think in mandate. I think we encourage the new, uh, president to embrace the Durenberger Lieberman bill, which is an early pro charter school bill, that happened even before, you know, that happened on George Bush's watch. And, uh, so we had action points. You know, how, how to, how to operationalize. It's not just here's a good idea that you ought to embrace, cause he'd already embraced it, how to get it done. So that's what mandate was. It was the manual, the policy manual for the incoming Clinton administration and media and, uh, members of his own cabinet and foreign observers came to us to understand this new phenomenon. And mandate was the explanation, you know, gave them the blueprint, turned out to be actually a pretty reliable blueprint for how he governed in those two terms.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:20:11](#)

Now you just mentioned the Durenberger Lieberman bill, which actually filled a real gap that we realized in Minnesota, and that is that charter schools needed startup funding to get going and we also found the gap in facilities funding, uh, over that time. And, uh, so Senator Durenberger United States Senator from Minnesota led the way along with, um, Senator Joe Lieberman, who you introduced me to so that we could persuade him to go on board, um, and, uh, together then they worked with President Clinton on that. But when you look at the time that he spent in office from day one to, uh, eight years later, you know, startup funding, facilities funding came through, talk about his role in all of that.

Will Marshall: [01:20:54](#)

Well, you know, it struck a lot of observers as odd that Bill Clinton would make so much of K through 12 education reform because he's running for president. Presidents don't really have control of the basic school systems in America. Uh, and, uh, and that's why you don't hear, you know, often in presidential campaigns K-12 reform. I think, you know, because of the No Child, uh, excuse me, sorry, because of the Nation At Risk report and you know, it was in the air, that had helped nationalize education reform as an issue. But in any event, it was unusual to begin with that Bill Clinton made that a centerpiece of his campaign. Uh, something that is not within the providence really of Washington as much as it is a state legislatures, uh, and governors. And so that was unusual. Uh, and we thought, I always thought this, uh, that, that he, you know, that, that, that we knew that it was going to be a hard sell. It's gonna be a hard sell for Democrats. There's going to be a hard sell for teachers' unions. Your experience it showed that. Gary Hart's experience it showed that and that we did need to create a federal program that A) helped to legitimate the idea, something worth further experimentation and further investment in. Um, and one that

we wanted to also to help overcome obstacles. Because as you noted in almost all of the early charter bills or in many of the early charter bills, there were all kinds of constraints on what could be done because people were trying to get these bills through the gauntlet of interest group politics. And so we wanted a little push from outside to help, you know, create a capital fund for innovative charter schools that could be models that could be replicated in various places to help to deal with the facilities challenges, which turned out to be one of the principle challenges of charter schools. But more than anything else was to give it the imprimatur of a national priority. You know, that this is something that's important to the nation as a whole. That it is a systemic change that we want to encourage all States to look at. Uh, and, and President Clinton and his new and Dick Riley, whom he put his Secretary of Education and Dick was a stalwart, uh, supporter of and defender of this new concept of choice and accountability, performance based schools.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:23:17](#)

Even if South Carolina had never heard of it.

Will Marshall: [01:23:17](#)

That's right. Well, the South had particular problems with this issue, which we can talk about. But um, but Riley got right on board. All the Southern democratic governors wanted to fix our schools. You know, Southern, that was, uh, that was how you got elected as a Southern Democrat in those days. You were going to fix your schools, Jim Hunt in North Carolina had a great record. Dick Riley in South Carolina, a real reformer. And so he was a very avid partner to Bill Clinton in thinking about how the federal government could lend its weight and prestige and backing to the charter school experiments that were fledgling in Minnesota and California. I don't even know if California was passed then. I can't remember. But they, they were coming. So that was, you know, the greatest value of it from our point of view.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:24:04](#)

I think that's really important to note. And it was really that making it that national priority that was so important because the federal government does not have a direct role in education. And, and John Schrader, who was the assistant, if you will, the legislative aid to Senator Durenberger identified a way to make that work where start up funding would only go to those States that passed a particular kind of chartering law that included those key elements of autonomy and accountability.

Will Marshall: [01:24:32](#)

That's right. He was, you know, we were hoping that a little shove from outside or a little push from outside could help get the right kind of experiments going, the right kind of charters

or, uh, schools going. Uh, and that's a, that's a concept that obviously President Obama picked up on in his race to the top program. Very important innovation where he wanted to create strong economic incentives for the right kinds of, uh, uh, school reform efforts in the States, you know, that is replicating good best practice charters and getting real autonomy and getting rid of limits and constraints on schools. So, uh, that concept that the federal government could, you know, help, um, local innovators in effect get out from under the political constraints that they were operating, operating under was a powerful one that I think that, uh, Barack Obama, uh, picked up on and took to an a more, you know, and also creatively move forward.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:25:35](#) So President Clinton had a goal to have 3000 charter public schools by the time he left office after eight years. He got pretty close. It was somewhere in the 2,500 area I think when he left. Um, but tell me more about the impact he had on actually launching the starter, startup program and where that went today and the facilities program where that is today.

Will Marshall: [01:25:54](#) Well, he got in there and fought for it. It was one of his signature priorities. Uh, he and Dick Riley worked it hard, made it happen, uh, because you know, uh, as usual, there's a lot of resistance, uh, in, in the democratic party, particularly in the house. We had more, we had support in the Senate, which is, you know, uh, uh, sometimes easier for reform measures to pass because the house.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:26:20](#) Even Ted Kennedy right away.

Will Marshall: [01:26:20](#) Ted Kennedy came on, which was a shock, to be honest with you. But, uh, we had some good support in this, in the Senate from the, from the DLC Democrats and Joe Lieberman spearheading, but he wasn't the only one. And Ted Kennedy came along and that was, that was crucial because when he came along, that diffused a lot of liberal opposition. But in the house we didn't have that support or as much support. And so the teacher's groups and others, not just them, but education, the educational establishment, which is large and well funded, well organized, uh, in Washington, uh, lobbying groups, uh, you know, all, all weighed in. I used to call the committees, the, the help committee, the hell committee, that's the House Education and Labor Committee. And I call it the hell committee because it was a, a graveyard where reform ideas went to die. Uh, generally speaking it was, it was, it was where the special interest in education just absolutely had a stranglehold. And funny thing that if you wanted to reform an education, you sort of had to bypass the committee that had jurisdiction over that

area. But anyway, uh, but, but he got it done. He was persistent and Bruce Reed deserved credit. But Bruce Reed kept a big Washington post article that appeared the day of Clinton's election, the day after, of all of his promises, which took I think, at least one full page, if not more. Uh, there were a lot of them. Uh, and Bruce, one of Bruce's jobs was to make sure they all got redeemed. And they did a remarkably good, the president did a remarkably good job of fulfilling as many of those promises as he did. And, um, uh, so that he didn't abandon, you know, he didn't let the lack of support in the house stop him. And he kept pushing and with Ted Kennedy's helped, frankly, that did more than anything to diffuse the opposition of liberals in the house. And we got it, got it done.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:28:21](#)

And today there's like 400 million.

Will Marshall: [01:28:23](#)

Yeah, it's gone from, you know, is it 50 million? It was a small, it was a small little seed fund in effect that has now grown to a very robust program. Um, and uh, and uh, again, I want to give, you know, President Obama props cause he, you know, uh, there are some areas in which he, you know, he departed from Clinton's line, but this was one where there was a real continuity.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:28:49](#)

So let's talk about Democrats in the, in the, uh, state legislatures and around the country and how they were impacted by all of this. So for eight years, President Clinton is spearheading chartering. For eight years President Obama is spearheading chartering. Um, President Bush was, uh, George, George W. Bush was supportive. Um, now we're into a new generation, a new administration with President Trump. Um, Democrats are getting a lot of push back in this real, in this administration, even though they're supportive of chartering. Um, maybe you can talk about sort of this evolution of, uh, what has happened to, um, to chartering from the democratic point of view, you know, as we've moved from Clinton into present.

Will Marshall: [01:29:38](#)

Okay. Well what, uh, let me, I hope this is apropos of your question, but if not, I'll get to it in a second. But I think it's important to note that what was happening on the other side during the years where Bill Clinton was leading the discussion, uh, you know, was, uh, was the most important champion for this concept, for the, the concept of, uh, autonomous, uh, performance-based schools, uh, and choice. And so he, uh, but on the other side, Republicans, of course, many of them glommed on to charter schools. Uh, you know, some out of conviction, they thought any kind of choice was good. Where there's public sector, private sector, some opportunistically

because they thought, you know, if you could get people to support the concept of choice, then you had no, uh, principled basis for opposing vouchers. That is choice that allowed people to abandon or depart the public schools and go to private schools. We never agreed with that premise, but certainly a lot of Republicans, uh, and Libertarians felt that way. And as I mentioned earlier, you know, uh, in some States where, you know, we had Republican legislators and or governors, you had very permissive charter school laws that, that had a one way understanding of accountability. That is the only accountability that charter schools had were to parents. And if, uh, if a parent chose that school, then ipso facto, that that could be a public, you know, that that was a valid choice for them and that school would be a public school and receive public money. And we always argued, no, you need two way accountability. This was something that was back in Ted's original paper for us, that the charter concept is to ensure two way accountability, um, to the parents and the families who choose the schools. Uh, but also upward, you know, to the public sector, which organizes and pays for universal, uh, education as a staple of our democratic way of life. So, um, you know, we, we worked through, through the nineties, we were happy when Republicans supported charter schools, not happy when they supported this kind of permissive one, uh, understanding of one way accountability. It was a market based model that whatever the market would bear was okay, if parents opted with their, uh, opted with their choices to put their kids in that school, then it should run based on that alone. No, we'd said it has to perform. Anyway, so we had that debate. But in general, there was broad agreement that more choice in the public sector was generally speaking a good thing. We just came at it from different ways and the Republicans often did it to advance their charter agenda. Um, and, um, so, uh, what's happened now, you know, with the surprising election of Donald Trump is that, um, you know, he's put in place Betsy DeVos in the Department of Education who I think really comes out of that school uhh, the, uh, the market oriented school. That is the one way accountability, if parents choose these schools for their kids than that's enough to say that they should be allowed to operate as public schools. That's enough accountability, uh, because of course they'll know what's good performance and they'll insist that everything turns out well for their kids. As I've already pointed out, I don't think private schools are always great schools and I'm certain that, uh, that model wouldn't have been successful, but any, uh, event, and in fact it hadn't been, but any case I think, and certainly they, she comes from the, um, the school of thought that conflates vouchers and charter schools in a way that we've never accepted. Uh, and that's a danger.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:33:24](#)

What do you mean by conflate?

Will Marshall: [01:33:24](#)

What I mean is that they look at them as equally valid forms of choice. That if you're for choice, you've gotta be for vouchers just as you're for choice in the public sector. Uh, and, uh, they don't, because they don't understand or subscribe to this concept of two way accountability uh, they think that, uh, the choice to take your kids out of public education, put them in a private school is equally valid and therefore the public should pay for it. The taxpayers should pay for it, we just don't agree with that. Um, and so, uh, we believe in public, public education and in fact this whole movement would have been unsuccessful had, I think it's early exponents not made it clear that the idea was to envision the new public school system, not a nonpublic school system, not a system that wasn't, you know, dedicated to the purposes of universal public education. So anyway, uh, that's a ground we've always had to stand. But what happens in, you know, is in some States, Republican governors got identified with charters and vouchers, but with charters, because Democrats weren't embracing them. And so I was always worried to be honest, that, uh, that they would, uh, make this a Republican cause celeb where despite the progressive providence, democratic providence, people like you and President Clinton. So, uh, that was always a danger in States where local teacher and democratic resistance to charters left the field wide open for Republicans to own charters as well as their voucher, a voucher issue. So, um, that was always, uh, a struggle and I, you know, so I would go down, you know, being a, you know, missionary for this, I would go down to States including my home state of Virginia, my native state, and say, well why is it the Virginia that doesn't have a good charter school bill? And I talked to democratic state legislators and I would run into that problem. Well, it's because isn't this a Republican thing? The Republican governors pushed? And I said, well, now here are examples where that's not the case. Roy Romer in Colorado and, and many others. Uh, but the additional problem in the South was race, which we can get back to. But in any event, um, you know, if, uh, because of the local resistance, that left the field open for Republicans to try to be, try to make the charter school idea theirs and we always had to fight that and remind people about how they had started a progressive state law. Thank God charter started in a progressive state like Minnesota. If it had started in Alabama or Mississippi. We'd have been dead in the water. I'm serious. That was something I've always was very grateful for, um, but in any event, uh, so now we have, you know, uh, uh, a Republican administration that has, uh, that treats all, you know, the, the, that treats charters and vouchers as sort of identical, you know, as equally

good examples of choice. We don't agree with that. Uh, and that's potentially discrediting for charters in the eyes of some Democrats. And that's a problem. And then you've got a kind of a reaction on the other side, the democratic side. Um, you've seen more polarization in American politics and you've seen the, the, the left gets stronger and, and the more pragmatic and moderate elements of the democratic party, uh, get smaller. And that has created a situation that's made it more difficult in some places for, for, uh, proponents of school choice and, uh, accountability and autonomy to, to, to operate. And one of the, that's one of the reasons that PPI is really engaged in a project to both remind people of the progressive origins of charter, the charter school movement, choice movement, public school choice movement, and to, you know, to, to build new political support, uh, for, for that, I mean, we had the celebrated case where, uh, was it two years ago, uh, Mayor, uh, the Mayor of New York, uh, Bill de Blasio got into a kind of a flap with Eva Moskowitz, who runs highly successful charter schools in Harlem, uh, and over facilities. And what he and others, I think erroneously regarded as some kind of favoritism or favor, preferred treatment for charters. Uh, and, uh, so anyway, um, that sort of led to a battle between him and mayor, uh, excuse me, sorry. That led to a, a battle between Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo, also a Democrat. And what decided the issue in my judgment was bus loads of parents, largely parents of color, minority and low income parents getting on buses, going to Albany and protesting in the streets against, uh, the Mayor's, uh, initiative. And, um, so, um, but that's an example I think of where, you know, a more, uh, militant left is, uh, oriented around the vindication of public sector activism, public sector solutions. I would even say status kind of solutions. Uh, and so that has reinforced one of the longstanding arguments against, but critics of charter on the liberal side have advanced, and that is that they are not fundamentally, uh, public schools, that they in effect, uh, are private schools masquerading in some ways as public schools, and that they, they take resources out of the public system, neither of which is really true. But, uh, that, that myth dies hard and you, it gets resurrected to a new generation of, uh, progressive left activists and millennials. Uh, and so in some respects, I think, of the, of the public school choice movement as a, as a Groundhog day, uh, experience. Uh, you, you wake up the next day and you find yourself knocking down the same arguments you knocked down 20, 25 years ago, uh, and, uh, are having to deal with the same arguments. Uh, only this new generation is throwing them at you. But I don't want to overstate that phenomenon, that is, that's real, that's happening, that's made the politics of this dicier. But, uh, but when push comes to shove, uh, charters have won a critical

progressive constituency, and that's low income parents of color in our cities where the schools are doing better, providing their kids with good education, they're not giving it up. They, they, they will fight. And they have. And, uh, you know, they're a force that, uh, I don't think the democratic party is gonna be able to withstand.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:40:30](#)

What else can organizations like PPI, uh, like Democrats For Education Reform and other organizations do to help democratic policy makers especially embrace this idea?

Will Marshall: [01:40:44](#)

Yeah. Well, look, uh, A) you know, we have to, we have to be working in those States where charters really doing well to, uh, expand scope for more, you know, lifting charter caps, other limits on them, or again, public school choice. It doesn't have to be charters could be innovation zones. It could be, uh, you know, they could be, they could go by other names, but, uh, where that's happening and where you see the, uh, this new 21st century school model taking root, you want to get there and remove obstacles and, and, and build broader political support. And we're working on that. Um, you also have to be very honest about what's not working. Uh, and you have to be willing, you have to be for a, a rigorous policy of closing, uh, low-performing, uh, charters. Uh, and where that's not happening you have to complain. And you know, in other words, even if you're a, a public school, a public school choice advocate, you've gotta be real honest about where they're mediocre or low performing. And you've gotta say so and, and talk about how you get rigorous authorizers and tough performance standards and a strict accountability regime in place to assure the public that charter schools are, are high performing schools. So, um, you know, I think a relentless effort on raising the general quality and weeding out low-performance has gotta be part of our message and it has been part of what we've said here. Uh, and I do think Ted Kolderie is right, that, you know, maybe ultimately the toughest nut to crack has always been the teacher's union and they're kind of, you know, they've been in general at the local level, uh, uh, opponents of public school choice and, uh, to move toward a system where more teachers are enabled to be school operators and owners, I think it's an important goal for all States that will, uh, be mutually beneficial. It will move teachers more toward professional, the professional autonomy that they crave, although they, that means that they, you know, you can't have both professionalism and tenured, uh, job contracts, you know, something has to give there. But, um, but that, I think if you could, if you could breach that wall, then I think, uh, the most formidable obstacle to a 21st century school system really

taking off and achieving, uh, you know, a much higher velocity of evolution, would have happened. Uh, so I think, uh, Ted is right, we just need to keep working with the teachers, uh, on, uh, creating contexts in which more of that can happen.

Ember Reichgott....:

[01:43:33](#)

So I have just one last question for you. And, um, one of the reasons I'm so grateful to the National Charter Schools Institute in Michigan, uh, for creating a National Charter Schools Library is so that we can preserve these origins of chartering from you, from me, from others around the country, both Republican and Democrat. Um, and I, I'm hopeful that the library through the documents, through the oral histories, will help to educate a new generation of policy makers, particularly Democrats, as well as Republicans about the origins and just the things you've talked about today. Can you tell us a little bit about what you think, uh, of this idea of a National Charter Schools Library and what impact it could have or its importance?

Will Marshall:

[01:44:23](#)

Right. Well, thank you and Ember I think it is, I love the idea of the arc, of the archive. Uh, it's really important. Uh, we have short historical memories in this country in general, and politicians have even shorter memories. That's why I say this debate sometimes has a Groundhog quality. Uh, uh, you seem to be making the same arguments over and over, but, uh, it's really important for people to understand the progressive origins of the charter school movement. This was grounded in efforts in Minnesota to provide kids schooling that they couldn't otherwise get, to expand choices for people whose kids weren't being well served by the school system, uh, and frankly, whose kids were being failed by urban schools that were, uh, a disgrace, a moral disgrace, and, and, and a huge obstacle to, uh, equal opportunity in this country. And so, you know, we have to go back to why it's important to understand how this movement began. It began because Americans began to think that the old 19th, the old 19th century organization or the 20th, early 20th century organization of public schools, which performed a tremendous service for our society in the era of industrialization, was no longer meeting the needs in a different era as we moved away into the knowledge economy and into a global economy. Uh, the old system, Ted Kolderie has a wonderful term for it 'batch processing oriented manufacturing production system', you know, uh, was no longer aligned with the way our economy worked and what our people needed. And as a result, more and more people were demanding different forms of, different kinds of school. They were demanding choices and different kinds of school. They're demanding innovations they couldn't get, you know, they didn't even know what they wanted. Half the time, everybody, if

you're a suburban parent, you wanted a Montessori school, right? And because that's all you knew. But creating the opportunities to create a lot more Montessori's or schools as innovative as Montessori's in other areas, you know, was something that there was a discernible public appetite for. And progressive people like you and others, Rudy Perpich, get a great deal of credit for trying to respond to that public demand for change and for the modernization. I mean, that's what democracy is about. You know, democracies survive because they continually adjust to new challenges and circumstances. Totalitarian societies get brittle, they never change, uh, and they kinda rot from within. Democracies have this amazing resilience and this capacity to change and meet new circumstances. But it isn't easy. You gotta fight and, and I hope that's part of the archive, by the way. And it goes back to your question about my difficult conversation with Bill Clinton. Change requires fights. No one gives up power willingly. Um, all systems don't yield easily to people who want to try something new. Um, and so it's important for people to know the real story of how public school choice got started, who's, you know, the progressive people that really got it going and fought and bled for it. Uh, and uh, and, and that it didn't happen without a struggle. Uh, and that struggle continues today, needs to be, uh, uh, that the, uh, we need a new generation to pick it up of parents, uh, and activist to pick it up. And business leaders, an important part of this reform coalition too, we haven't talked much about, but they were important part of this, uh, to pick up the reform standard and keep and keep, uh, pressing the pace of evolution toward a 21st century school system. Um, so to me it's a wonderful enterprise. We wanna make sure you have all of our, our materials, uh, and that, uh, this becomes a real asset we can use. Now, the other thing I do want to say here is that, um, that the archive I'm sure will do and needs to do is, you know, to be, is to be a source of current information about performance. I mean, the work that PPI is doing now is based on the success of charter schools outperforming traditional public schools in a lot of urban settings in this country. You take New Orleans where people in the city, students in the city are outperforming students in the state. That almost never happens in this country. Uh, you're just getting remarkable results. Splendid charter schools in Boston. Uh, yet we have a cap on charter schools in state law, still the old resistance from the usual suspects. We still have a kind of a class, uh, conflict in charters where liberal elites are the most vocal in their opposition to charters, low income families are their most, uh, adamant in support of public school choice. That's a really important point. And so the battle continues and the growing body of research and evidence that public school choice and the

21st century model are providing better education to all students but particularly those that didn't get it in the past is vital here. In the end the evidence matters and we're not in a fact free world, this whatever they may think up at the white house. And uh, so David Osborne's work at PPI has all predicated on showing a now overwhelming body of evidence that shows success. Students are getting a better schools, that we're closing the educational quality gap, uh, is the strongest, uh, evidence and the strongest force in this argument for, that's going to determine the evolution of this, of this movement. And so I hope that the archive not only remind people of how everything started, but also become an important source of the proof that it is actually working. Here's why I think a national charter school's library is so important. First, people need to know the origins. They need to know the creation story. They need to know how it got started. The local activists, progressive activists in Minnesota, California, who started this movement and what needs, what public needs they were trying to solve. And, and, and, and, and listening to people who are demanding better choices, better schools, new schools. So that's the first thing that this library can accomplish. But it's also important to keep the living record of the day in and day out successes of this movement, uh, to memorialize it and make those facts available to the public and certainly to the policy makers. There's a lot of misinformation still I regret to say coming from the inveterate, uh, opponents of charter schools, and it's important to hit them with the facts, which show that where high practice charters with strong authorizers, reach critical mass, the low income kids, kids of color are finding the quality education that they deserve and were denied for too long. That's something we've got to keep in front of the American people and I hope that this library does that. Event I remember doing a, a trip, a charter school, a trip with Clinton in 2000, Andy Rotherham got me on Air Force One. Yeah. And uh, and we went to City Academy.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:51:44](#) You were in City Academy? That's where I saw you.

Will Marshall: [01:51:44](#) Yeah. And I introduced Ted, and I introduced Ted to Clinton, unfortunately they had never met. Uh, but we also went, I'm sorry, this is not, you asked me about something else, but I'm answering, you know, um, but I just want to tell this story, whether you use it.

Ember Reichgott...: [01:51:59](#) Go ahead, keep rolling.

Will Marshall: [01:51:59](#) But actually I would, if you could get, if you could get tape of this. So we get on Air Force One, and it's about charter schools and Andy Rotherham was former PPI, uh, education, uh, project

leader. Now the President's lead adviser on education, I think had organized us and we flew first to rural Eastern Kentucky, uh, where we went to school, entirely white audience, uh, of, of, you know, working class folks. Uh, and Bill Clinton went in there and talked about charter schools to this audience, and they, they adored it. They ate it up. They really liked this guy. They, they looked at him probably as one of their own who had made good, but you know, uh, uh, he talked about his educational reform agenda to these folks and they loved it. Then we flew up to, to Saint Paul to the, um, to the um.

- Ember Reichgott...: [01:52:52](#) City Academy
- Will Marshall: [01:52:52](#) City Academy, the very first charter school to, to, uh, to open its doors in 90' or 91'?
- Ember Reichgott...: [01:52:59](#) 92'.
- Will Marshall: [01:53:00](#) 92' actually, sorry, in 92'. Uh, and we did an event there with then the governor, uh, Jesse "The Body" Ventura, I think was the governor then, um, and where I had the pleasure of introducing President Clinton to Ted Kolderie, uh, my hero. And, um, but we were there to celebrate what had started in Minnesota. And the president was really, uh, keen to remind people of how it started and, and of how Minnesota made the leap. The all important leap from the first narrow idea of choice as a choice of districts to the idea of choices for new schools, a choice that would allow new schools to be created, not only for parents to choose different districts. And so, uh, he recounted that story, that history there and it was a, it was a terrific event. You know, uh, I remember in, um, you know, having been called to go testify before these hell committees on both the, uh, house side or speak to the staff about these issues. I went to a DNC meeting in Anchorage, Alaska once, uh, and the room was filled as DNC meetings always were with teacher's unions who were delegates or members of the DNC. And I just got raked over the coals about charter schools, you know, and basically the allegation is you're sleeping with the enemy. You're, you're validating this terrible idea of choice, which is all about imposing a market competition scheme to privatize public education. And I said, no, I, I'm here because I want public schools that low income folks in the cities are stuck in, uh, to be forced to be better or to be replaced by schools that are better. What are you doing to help them? So we had, you know, we really had this terrible battle. This is this, you know, and you know, the left always had its alibis. Well, it's just more money, you know, and we, so we battled over why more money by itself wasn't going to create a systemically better, a self

improving school system in Ted's words, you know, system that uh, if you designed it right, could keep improving and not be static once you've just had a different governing system organization. But in any event, it was really tough out there in the early years. The whole education establishment, I can remember a tough conversation with Ernest Boyer who was then at the Carnegie Group, which is one of the leading, uh, leading, uh, education groups in Washington outside of senator's office who will be unnamed. He accosted me on this. Uh, and, and you know, there was this high degree of disbelief that we were really going to push for, uh, what Ted Kolderie called divestiture, for getting schools really autonomous, getting them out from, out from the ownership and control of the district. Uh, and that, that concept was so bold and so radical, uh, to a lot of people that they just couldn't countenance and they couldn't believe that Democrats would be for it. Couldn't see an a, uh, there was this, there was this perpetual confusion of means and ends, that is the Democrats could not distinguish, uh, between the end of a free public education for everybody as a critically important part of the promise of equal opportunity in our country. And the means by which we evolved in the 20th century to fulfill that promise. And the idea that there could be a different means, a different way of making equal opportunity, not only real, but better than what we, either improving the way we were doing it, just struck people as, uh, an impossibility and they, there was a lot of ideological suspicion to it. And then the other part of the, the other part of the opposition was, well, you're just doing this because you think it'll win votes. Uh, and well, you know, look, we, yeah, we want, we want to appeal to people. We want people to think that we have a better idea for schools. So if that's what you're accusing of us, us of, we'll plead guilty to it. Uh, but you know, it was always a debate about what is public in public education? Is it the building? Is it the governance framework? Is it the local districts control? And is that the teachers, uh, contract or is it, you know, the promise that everybody is gonna have a really good education up to the quality that everybody, as your contemporaries define it, not as they defined it 40 years or 50 years or 80 years ago. And so that was a, that was a really interesting debate. It got really brutal. And uh, and I hate to say, but we're all too often, we're still fighting that debate. We found ourselves at a square one all too often when we go out in places where you don't have much school choice activity, uh, and you have to, you have to do it again, but we'll keep doing it because it, uh, uh, because it's working.

Ember Reichgott...:

[01:57:55](#)

When you started this story, I thought you were going to talk about the story where Bill Clinton, maybe this was an AI From

story maybe, but you might know it, where he went into a room, I guess he was late, he only had a few minutes, it was filled with teachers and everybody else. And the one thing he did is he walked in and talked about charter schools and, uh, that and you know, to this like total astonishment of the crowd I mean, do you recall what that story was?

- Will Marshall: [01:58:19](#) I don't think I was there. I think I was probably in California, but I'm not positive, you know, it could have been anywhere, but uh, but I'm sure he did that and I'm sure it was tough, but you know, he stuck to his guns. Uh, he made substantive arguments for it and he would, he would stick to his guns, uh, throughout that primary and throughout that primary. And that really did help establish him as different.
- Ember Reichgott...: [01:58:40](#) And wasn't there a time where at a DM, DLC convention, Jesse Jackson led a...
- Will Marshall: [01:58:48](#) Yes he did.
- Ember Reichgott...: [01:58:48](#) ...protest outside of it. Talk about that.
- Will Marshall: [01:58:50](#) Well it was the Cleveland convention I mentioned that earlier, the Cleveland convention in 1991 where we had, we had over a thousand delegates, Democrats from around the country, a real convention style, and a lot of them were brand new to the DLC. Didn't, had never been to a DLC event before. We'd never talked to them, but they'd heard from somebody that they ought to come. And a lot of them were not, shall I say, moderate Democrats who were going to be well disposed to a lot of the ideas that were on the agenda, including charter schools. So Jesse Jackson showed up and he led protest outside, although I think I, you know, I'm not sure exactly what his specific indictment was, but he called the DLC the Democrats for the leisure class and all this kind of thing and was leading a protest outside and, and other unions were there to protest as well. And that was, that was the, uh, event where we passed these extensive new choice resolutions in real democracy, real time. You know, we had to whip the vote and get people to vote for it. And so the word charter got dropped from the, um, from the school choice language, but the concept didn't.
- Ember Reichgott...: [01:59:57](#) I never realized that they were connected. That's so interesting. So, uh, Will, how do you persuade policy makers to make these changes versus the families?

Will Marshall:

[02:00:08](#)

Well, uh, persuading policy makers is the art in this movement and, and we've spent a lot of time, I'm sorry. I'm not suppose to. We, we spent a lot of time doing that. Um, uh, and it's, you know, it's all about state legislators. They're the, they're the relevant policy maker when it comes to how our schools are organized and govern. Um, although mayors have gotten into the act to more recently, um, look, I mean, uh, again, this is that, this is that collective action problem that any innovator faces. I think Machiavelli wrote about this, you know, the person who wants to try something new has everybody who is invested in the status quo against him, uh, and has none of the people who might benefit from his innovation for him because they haven't seen it yet. They don't know what good it can do for them yet and they're not organized. So this is always the problem. Uh, you know, in any kind of reform conversation with public officials, they have well organized, uh, interest groups at their elbow who are ready to start barking and threatening to withhold money and campaign support if they, um, if they entertain a radical reform idea. Uh, so you gotta show them the, you have to first establish, I call it laying the predicate. The first step to victory in this whole charter debate and any of the new democratic arguments we made back in the early nineties was to show that public sector systems were failing. And it wasn't just the schools, it was a welfare system, it was public housing. We had plenty of evidence that public sector programs, well-intentioned, going back to the 60s and the whole, you know, war on poverty, that too many of them were not working well and that you needed to change. So the first thing is to establish, you know, that you're failing. You're, if you're a progressive and you believe that government can do good for people as we are and do, you've got to, you can't defend government failure. You can't defend dysfunction in the public sector. So you have to first make the case that, uh, the systems are failing people. The people know it, the voters get it. It's the interest groups who don't get it. And you know, so it's not a hard case to make, but you have to show them that there's a potential constituency for change. Uh, and then you have to go to work with that constituency and this is, you know, to, to get them to bring them to consciousness about their interest in the change. Uh, and then you've got to organize them once you've got the reform up and running to be a constant force here. That's why I talked about those parents who got on the bus from Harlem to go up to Albany and protest before the state Capitol of the mayor's, uh, efforts to deprive, you know, the charter schools of public schools, public school, building space in New York City. So I think those are the critical steps for, um, beginning to build political support for something. Ted Kolderie made a great point in our paper and everything he's written on this, that, you

know, we, there's a wonderfully, uh, ruthlessly pragmatic spirit that Ted brought to this and that is, we're not asking people to be saints. We're not asking, uh, politicians to do things, uh, out of sheer altruism just because they're normatively right? We might ask that, but we also know they have to live and work in the real world. They're surrounded by interests and, uh, and, and the vision of the common good is always contested. Somebody's gonna say, uh, you know, the, the, you know, the, your idea is different than theirs and you've gotta mediate among all these interests, something that you know better than I do cause I've never served in public office. But, um, uh, being sympathetic to that and creating, uh, help, helping them frame the arguments to the stakeholders as to how they can benefit from change and not just getting into a, um, getting into a cage wrestling match with them, I think is really important. And Ted understood that, he understood that, you know, this is not about altruism. This is about improvement and a system that will permit continuous improvement. And that starting your argument by indicting the people in the system would be a losing hand that you would never, you'd never win them over for change. So to me, that's really important for both winning constituents in general, winning elected officials over and, and disarming your opponents because the elected officials are listening to the new organized, you know, oppositions, the, the, the people that are vested in the old system and they're not, you know, their job is to listen to them and you have to respect that.

Ember Reichgott...:

[02:04:56](#)

Um, what does reaching a critical point, a tipping point look like and how do we get there?

Will Marshall:

[02:05:02](#)

Yeah, what a great question. We ask ourselves that all the time. I think we may be there, I'm not positive about this, but PPIs work now is predicated on the idea that we now have a sufficient body of research and evidence, real proof, that where a critical mass of people get into schools of choice and autonomous schools that are held accountable for, to meet performance contracts that, uh, you get systemic improvement. You get, uh, uh, improvement across the board. We've seen that New Orleans, we've seen that in Denver. We've seen it in Indianapolis, we're seeing it in Memphis, in Newark. We're seeing it in Boston. So the, uh, we now think that it's, it was easy to argue against charters when they were a promise and when you didn't have the body of empirical proof that they could produce great results, but when those results reach critical mass then, then I think you may be at that at, that tipping point. And so we've spent a lot of time at PPI under the leadership of David Osborne and amassing the evidence, uh, both in, uh, data, but

also the anecdotal evidence, we think is important to talking and interviewing people, parents, administrators, teachers, people involved in these, particularly cities where we've reached critical mass, uh, and telling their stories and, and looking at what the empirical studies show us. And it's all in David's book, reinventing, 'Reinventing America's School', which I hope will have the same impact on this movement toward 21st century schools that his seminal book 'Reinventing Government' had on Bill Clinton and Al Gore and the whole generation of democratic thinkers back in the early nineties.

- Ember Reichgott...: [02:06:49](#) Well, Will Marshall.
- Will Marshall: [02:06:51](#) I managed to get a plug in for PPI finally, how did I miss that earlier is what I liked to know.
- Ember Reichgott...: [02:06:56](#) Will Marshall, Progressive Policy Institute thank you so very much.
- Will Marshall: [02:07:00](#) Thank you Ember, pure pleasure.
- Ember Reichgott...: [02:07:01](#) Incredible history that you have shared, something that needs to be documented for generations to come. Uh, it is, uh, really a window that occurred. Uh, it's a window that allowed chartering to come through, but we need to create more windows, need to create more centrist legislators who are willing to work together over party lines or bipartisan lines, uh, to create these new ideas to work toward 21st century education. We can do that with student centered learning. We can do that with teacher empowerment and teacher leadership in the schools. But the main, the main components are accountability and, and, uh, independent, autonomy and what's the third one?
- Will Marshall: [02:07:45](#) Choice! Don't forget choice, the choice, the choice crusader you, uh,
- Ember Reichgott...: [02:07:51](#) And uh, I'll just say that line, that last line and the key components again, accountability, autonomy and choice. Thank you so much.
- Will Marshall: [02:07:58](#) Amen. And thank you Ember for being a great partner down the decades in this struggle.