

A Conversation About Minneapolis Public Schools with Chris Stewart

Member, Minneapolis Board of Education



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Mitch Pearlstein, Founder & President, Center of the American Experiment: I spoke with Chris Stewart briefly by phone several years ago, but the first time I actually met with him was last August, during his campaign as a DFLer for a seat on the Minneapolis Board of Education. A mutual friend said he was first-rate and urged that we talk at greater length. We got together for breakfast and our friend proved correct: Not only did I find Chris intellectually most interesting, I also found him intellectually and politically brave, and came away personally hoping—especially as a long-time Minneapolis resident—he would win in November.

Well, he did win, though seemingly a half-minute later he became the center of a large controversy when it was revealed he was partially responsible for a website that was meant to satirize the views of Tammy Lee, the Independent Party's candidate for Congress in Minnesota's Fifth District. The site also was meant to stay private, but once it blared everywhere, let's just say few people found it nearly as funny or acceptably biting as Chris and his fellow parodists intended.

Calls started streaming, editorially and otherwise, for him to resign the seat he had just won, but he refused; by my lights, correctly and fortunately so. Instead, he honorably accepted responsibility for his "moral failure," and commenced a new campaign, this time explaining and apologizing, never dodging or rationalizing. Frankly, what bothered me most about the episode was how it would drain him of credibility and clout when he was exactly the kind of school board member who ought to carry plenty of both.

We spoke again by phone at the end of November when, again to his credit, he sought to touch base individually with friends he feared he let down. This led to our getting together for

another breakfast a few days later where, once again, I realized how much he had to offer in his new position. How to make policy leaders, parents and others in the Twin Cities, I wondered, better appreciate his promise?

I suggested that we get together once more a week later, this time for the purpose of recording a follow-up conversation on the things we had been talking about: tough and complicated educational issues such as rigor, order, safety, culture, desegregation, choice, unions, and achievement gaps. That 90-minute session was held on December 8, 2006 and the pages that follow are the edited product of that very good exchange.

I'm grateful to Chris Stewart for his candor and insights, and not least his humility and courage. I wish him success in a terribly difficult assignment, and we both welcome your comments.

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Pearlstein: Before moving to other topics, let's speak briefly about the Tammy Lee website satire and the campaign season controversy that ensued? You got hit for it—and deservedly—and I've been impressed by your taking responsibility and apologizing. What has bothered me most about this, frankly, wasn't the website in and of itself, but the extent to which the controversy might have subtracted from your credibility and hindered your ability to make the kind of contribution I know you can make as a public official. But having said that, I very much appreciate how you've taken responsibility.

Chris Stewart: Well, I've talked about how identity politics completely drive me up a wall. There's a lot of stuff that was floating around

throughout the Fifth Congressional District race. There were three candidates: I liked Alan Fine, I liked Tammy Lee, and I liked Keith Ellison. All of them had different things that I liked, and they were all, for the most part, running completely clean campaigns before the primary. But then Alan Fine lost me when he stood up and said, “As a Jew ...” because I don’t vote for people because they’re Jewish. I don’t vote for people because they’re women. I don’t vote for people because they’re black or because they’re white. And I don’t think that American government is going to do well with people who run as women, Jews, blacks—any of that type of stuff. You lose credibility with me the instant that you run as an “identity” candidate. So Alan Fine lost me; I was pretty upset about that.

And Tammy Lee had been running what I thought was just a very energetic campaign based on issues, and she had said multiple times that rolling in the mud was not going to get us anywhere. Then it was reported that she made this comment about Keith Ellison being chosen because he was black—that liberals couldn’t get over themselves because he was black. And that, to me, was identity politics. To me, that was really insulting. And it was worthwhile, to me, for someone to say something about it. I understand how there’s this idea that liberals want to promote those type of things, but it wasn’t as if it was “black day” at the DFL. It wasn’t like just any black guy could have shown up and gotten endorsed that day.

Pearlstein: You didn’t think the fact that he was black maybe helped a bit?

Stewart: There are a lot of blacks in Minneapolis, and the majority of them couldn’t get elected through the DFL. Parking tickets, campaign finance stuff, that type of stuff, to me, is fair game. I understand the politics are such that you make hay of whatever you can with your opponent. I’m fine with that until you stamp an identity on it.

Pearlstein: So how, more specifically, did the website come about?

Stewart: There were multiple folks involved, but there were probably just about four who were involved in the hard stuff. E-mails were bouncing back and forth, just in general, joking about all this stuff. It was a hot season of that. There was a lot of activity back and forth, and people just discussing these types of things.

Pearlstein: Who were these people?

Stewart: Some of them were bloggers; some of them were just people who were grassroots activist-type people.

Pearlstein: All right, so at some point, there was this “Big Bang” and the website came to be. How did that happen?

Stewart: Well, a friend actually put together several things into one—it wasn’t a Web page yet, but it was kind of a compilation of things people had said, and that became the Web page. And that’s what I’m taking responsibility for, in the end, because it came out of my group.

Pearlstein: If you were to sum up this episode in a paragraph or two, what would you say?

Stewart: Well, the real short answer is that it was a failure. I mean, it was a moral failure. You’re going to have these things in life, and mine was perfectly public. Everyone can scrutinize it. At the end of the day, my carnal nature would be to fight my case and say that I have the freedoms and the rights in the United States of America to get into the marketplace of ideas however vigorously I want to, and that people should stop being so delicate with their feelings. But when I put it through the filter of my faith, which I have been, all of that disintegrates. In the larger picture, you just have to admit it was outstandingly bad, and it was a moral failure.

Pearlstein: We talked a week ago as the direct result of your calling me, as you’ve been calling others, to apologize for the campaign controversy. But let us indeed move on.

You and I spoke briefly a number of years ago about school vouchers, and then about four

months ago we met to talk about a variety of issues. You're a newly elected member of the Minneapolis School Board. Some folks have not been pleased about that. I am very pleased, first of all, that you were elected and, secondly, that you decided to stay elected and serve. And I say that because you bring a distinctive, critically important voice to education, to the school board, and to this community and state. What do you want to do?

Stewart: Well, my main focus is on safety, order, and rigor. With the Minneapolis public schools, well, it would be kind to say that some of our schools are absolutely defunct. We're putting kids in certain schools where it's almost virtually ensured that they're going to be less competitive. With the bigger picture, what motivates my work is what I have to look at every day in my job as a business services specialist with the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, which is the future workforce. And there's no kind way to say it: we're just in trouble.

Pearlstein: When you say "we," who are we?

Stewart: America. Minnesota. Minneapolis. As local as you want to make it, we are in trouble. Minneapolis is in trouble because we're in stiff competition with places like Portland and Seattle and other cities, and we're not generating what we need as far as a diverse, qualified, skilled labor pool that's going to carry on our main product. Minnesota's main product now is intellectual work—it's brainpower work. What we had in the past was a mix. We had agriculture and some manufacturing and some other things. Don't get me wrong: We are going to have advanced manufacturing, but I see a 50/50 picture for Minnesota. Fifty percent of it is fantastic. I mean, we have some things going on that's going to be very exciting—the bioscience stuff and some of the new business that we're drawing to Minnesota is going to be great. Who we're going to fill those jobs with is the hard part. That's the other 50 percent. When we look at birth rates in Minnesota—when we look at who is going to comprise the bulk of our new

people—we are doing a lousy job of training them.

Pearlstein: What do you mean, more specifically?

Stewart: When you look at birth rates, the majority population's birth rate is going to go flat, at some point. It's just producing less of the workforce that we're going to need for the future, and most of the growth we're going to see is going to come from minorities. So you would think we would have a targeted appeal in education to get those folks into the economy. That should be a no-brainer for us. Our schools are where that starts. And when you look at a school system that has one-quarter of Latino kids graduating and somewhere around one-half of African-Americans graduating, and when you think that they're going to comprise a large portion of the future workforce, it should give everybody pause.

Pearlstein: Why are those numbers so low?

Stewart: Well, that opens up a bigger conversation.

Pearlstein: That's why we're here.

Stewart: You have racially isolated, low-performing, high-poverty schools, and they turn out a consistent product year after year. Now, we can all argue about why that is, but the fact of the matter is, if money were the problem, then we would just add more money. But the state has done that lots of times, and those schools are still racially isolated, low-performing, high-poverty schools.

It could have a lot to do with culture. This is something I talked a lot about in the campaign: We're going to have to have an honest conversation about race, but beneath that honest conversation, there's also going to have to be an internal, intra-group, black conversation about culture.

That conversation usually dips between, "it's institutional racism" and "it's personal responsibility." That's the range of the current

conversation. The problem is that institutional racism doesn't impregnate teenagers. Institutional racism doesn't stop black kids from having books in their homes. Institutional racism doesn't stop black kids from being read-to another 45 minutes at night. As a single dad, I knew all those things, and my son has turned out to be a high-performing kid. It wasn't because I had a silver spoon, or because I had a lot of money, because neither of those was true. It wasn't because I lived in the suburbs, because that wasn't true—I lived in the inner city. It wasn't because there was something special going on in my household that couldn't go on in other households. So that's a cultural issue.

Also, segregation, to me, is still an issue. A lot of my work has been dealing with businesses and working with human resources people. And some of the things, culturally speaking, that pertain to the workplace are things kids need to be trained in earlier. But there's a better chance middle class kids are going to have access to the social capital that's going to give them the soft skills, not just the hard skills they'll need to succeed in majority-run corporations and businesses. So looking at a gap between where we are culturally as African-Americans and where the business world is: that's cultural. And that has a lot to do with being in some sort of social exile, where you live, where you go to school.

There are two schools of thought on that. There are people who believe, no matter where you live, you can get a high-quality education as long as you have high-quality teachers and you're in a high-quality school. I reject that idea. I think your teachers can be high quality, I think your school can be high quality, I think all those planets can be aligned, and you can still not be trained, socially speaking, to interact with the majority of society because of your social isolation and your cultural isolation. I'd prefer everybody to be trained early about how to interact with the larger world.

Pearlstein: How do you do that?

Stewart: Desegregate. I have to go back to a theory that I have: The more you concentrate of

anything, you get more of it. So you concentrate poverty and maladaptation into a part of a city, and you'll get more maladaptation and more poverty. You concentrate wealth and well-adapted, healthy individuals into a situation and you'll get more of them.

Pearlstein: There seem to be two major options: One would be housing desegregation; the other would be school desegregation.

Stewart: Keep going.

Pearlstein: And you can break down school desegregation, either in old-fashioned ways, meaning going back 50 years or so, to busing—voluntary or otherwise—magnet schools, and so forth. Or, in a much more voluntary way, through real school choice; specifically programs that involve private and religious schools. Where do you come out on all that?

Stewart: I think real school choice is a part of desegregation. What if the really great school is in Woodbury, and all the Section 8 housing is in north Minneapolis? I think we have to step back and just admit that poverty—and the concentration of it—is an industry.

Pearlstein: What do you mean by that?

Stewart: I mean that there are benefits and incentives to running poverty. You run a racially isolated school and more money comes through those doors. So you start taking out some of the top-end programs and start just catering to the bottom.

Pearlstein: How, specifically, does the school bring in money by having more poor kids?

Stewart: Well, you get more Title I funding the moment you get over a certain number of those kids in one building, so there's a financial incentive, once you start getting towards the tipping point, to tip on over. Because if you have, say, below 40 percent of those kids—and the optimal number in any school is definitely below 40 percent—you put 40 percent poor kids in a 60 percent middle-class school, and they're going to benefit from the social capital of those

60 percent of parents who are in that school. You start tipping, you hit a tipping point and you doom the school. But there's a ten percent gap, say, between 40 and 50 percent, before you can get that Title I funding, so it's almost an incentive to go ahead and tip on over completely and you get all that money, and then what starts disappearing from that school are these top-end programs. So what happens then? Middle class people move out of that school and more poor people, racially isolated people, move into that school.

Pearlstein: When you suggest that these school officials go out of their way to bring in more low-income kids in order to bring in more money, even though it might lead to lesser education for those kids, do they agree with you? Or do they accuse you of simply being wrong, or malicious, or what?

Stewart: Let me be clear about this. I don't want to put motives on anybody who's currently in power. The system has operated this way for a long time. And as for the housing: Where the Section 8 patterns have come together, that has happened over time. It used to be more scattered throughout the 494/694 loop. But somehow, over time, Section 8 homes became concentrated in Minneapolis. Anybody who's in any position of power right now has inherited years and years and years of this happening. This has been a long-term trend. And now, there is a reassessment within Minneapolis, saying maybe this wasn't the right thing to do.

Throughout the campaign, everybody wanted to know about the achievement gap. That was one of the questions that we all got, no matter where we went. So in talking about the achievement gap, this is what I would bring up—one of the things that I thought had contributed definitely to the achievement gap. And we talked a lot about segregation, and people applauded. People, especially people who are directly affected by it, are starting to get it, I think. You have some resistance. I think you have some people who just want to go to the school that's closest to them, whether it's low-performing or not, but I don't think that they make up the majority.

I mean, people are desperate to break out of what's in their neighborhood school. That is why you're starting to hear about charter schools—charters came up over and over again. You're starting to see a shrinking number of African-American students in the district, even though they make up the plurality. Our Latino population is expanding, but we're even losing a lot of them to alternative schooling. We're even losing a lot of Hmong families to alternative schooling. So the idea that we can no longer do what we're currently doing is clear.

Pearlstein: Have you heard, in these past few months, any increased receptivity to vouchers, to allowing more tax credits, to making it possible for low-income kids to attend private and parochial schools?

Stewart: “Vouchers” is a dirty word, so nobody says vouchers. All the discussion is couched in the terms of school choice, because school choice is a larger concept. Of course, the realm of school choice goes from public schools themselves offering magnets and IB programs to creating different types of schools, all the way to vouchers—that's the range of school choice.

Minneapolis is greatly divided, I think, on the topic: I think that in the minority communities, you find more desperation now for whatever is going to work. I mean, you have Reverend McAfee starting a charter school. And, of course, there's a religious theme there.

Pearlstein: You can have a religious theme in a charter school? I don't think the Legislature would be pleased with that.

Stewart: Well, let's put it this way: a religious subtext. These things come out of desperation. You talk to the African-American community and find they're open to a world of possibilities now. We no longer believe this system is actually going to do for us what we need to get done. That's the sentiment that you hear over and over again.

But they don't go as far as saying vouchers, though. I have to be honest about that. They don't go as far as saying vouchers.

Pearlstein: Sure, that doesn't surprise me. To what extent do you think that's because vouchers are identified more with Republicans and conservatives than with Democrats and liberals?

Stewart: Well, I think there are fair and unfair questions about vouchers. I have what I consider to be fair questions about vouchers—just tactical, fair questions. And then there are other questions about vouchers that are directly connected to the motives of the individuals who push them. Just to be very honest with you, I think that Republicans and conservatives have done an awful marketing job, just a terrible marketing job, to the very communities that they assume to be proposing advancements for.

Pearlstein: How?

Stewart: When you insult the people to death on one hand and then offer a solution on the other. It's kind of like slapping somebody with one hand and handing them a piece of cake with the other.

Pearlstein: How do conservatives offend or insult minority communities?

Stewart: Let's say you and I are friends. And let's say you exhibit characteristics that I just think you would be better not to have. There are two ways you and I can talk about that. I can insult you to death about those things, kind of like a nagging spouse or a parent who never finds good in you, or we can have a constructive conversation about those things. I think too much right-wing marketing sounds like the nagging spouse or, even worse, the parent who never finds good in what you do, rather than the friend who would have a productive conversation with you.

As a conservative myself, I face an awful lot of suspicion about my motives. From the get-go, minority communities think I must be coming to damn people and to point out their flaws. Yet I am coming more like a family member than an outside critic. If you have an uncle who's fall-down drunk and you say it, it's different than if somebody who doesn't know your uncle says it about him. And there's probably a different way

you would say it, and people would assume your motives are good.

Everything I say that's critical about the culture of poverty and folks within poverty, I am saying to make a breakthrough with those individuals so they can get into the majority economy—but not so that we can have a permanent argument back and forth.

Maybe that's harsh criticism for the right, but I know that, for myself, the moment I say I'm a conservative, defenses go up and I have to answer all these questions.

To be honest, I walk a really fine line as a conservative, and especially as a conservative Democrat. I'm not conservative for no good reason. I'm not right-wing. I'm conservative because I think the ideas are sound and if we practice them, we will do better as a culture. It's just that simple. I think that if minorities were to practice the ideas of conservatism, it would save us, because the ideas are sound. They're meant for a good life. If you put faith, family, community, and country all in line as priorities in your life, if you follow a set of tenets from conservative ideas, and if you follow conservative philosophy, that could be your saving grace. I really believe that.

But there's a whole other political element that just makes no sense to me, because it gets really personal—kind of aggressive.

Pearlstein: Such as?

Stewart: Well, there's a difference between, say, Bill Buckley and Sean Hannity, okay?

Pearlstein: I agree.

Stewart: When I was 16 years old, my dad had been a Black Panther. My mom was a hippie. I turned out a conservative. So our family had this really interesting situation. But at 16, I read *Revolutionary Suicide* by Huey Newton. A teacher saw that I was reading it and gave me a Bill Buckley book to read and told me, "If you really want to be challenged, you'll read both of these."

You know, it blew my mind. I didn't get it while I was reading it. But it gave me a better grasp on the idea that there was more for me to learn about language. So it caused me to challenge myself about how I speak and about how I write.

I read that Buckley stuff, and I did not believe or agree with any of it, but I couldn't stop reading it because it was making me mad. I was getting mad but I couldn't refute a lot of what I was reading. But I came to a certain point where I just discovered—even if you looked at Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and some of the folks who were considered radical in their times—a lot of them, by the way they lived their lives, were modeling certain things that would be considered conservative. They were religious individuals. They thought their faith was driving them. They were family men. They kept their families together. They had children who they knew all the names of. These are things that seem almost novel now.

I look at Buckley and at George Will and at people like that who write eloquently with really strong ideas. Whether you agree with their analysis or not isn't even the point. They're gentlemen in the way they speak. I don't have to agree with them, and I don't have to be the same color as them, and I don't have to have the same colorful background to understand the weight of their ideas, because they're committed to delivering their message in a way that is about the message and about the content of their speech. It's not about scoring points on one another. And that's the difference I see.

I see a huge difference between being right-wing and being conservative, and I do think there's a generational issue in that. You're young, you're aggressive, you think it fits your identity, you think it fits in with your lifestyle, and you think it gives you license to say that everything about other people is wrong.

And I think it's possible to be authentically black and conservative without being a black conservative. What does being a black conservative mean? Who created this crop of black conservatives and why? Why would you put an identifier like black in front of

conservative? There's something fraudulent about the whole thing. You're either a conservative or you're not, and you don't need an identifier in front of it. That's the part of the marketing that I think breaks down. You see people from within your own community who come back, well-heeled, disconnected from your community, waving their fingers at you, and telling you what you need to be doing with your life. And then you look at who signs their paychecks, and it makes you suspicious in that that looks like a criticism industry.

I think it's important for me to be at the table in some of these conversations that go on, as a rational, thinking individual who is authentically connected, does care, has worked with people in poverty, and sees a way out. And I truly believe it's through conservatism, but I'm not a "black" conservative.

Pearlstein: Got it. Let's move back to what you hope to do on the school board. In practical terms, what do you hope you'll accomplish?

Stewart: Safety, order, and academically rigorous schools.

Pearlstein: How are you going to make progress in those areas?

Stewart: The first step is just to ensure safety in the Minneapolis public schools. There are discipline policies already, but they're not applied evenly throughout the district. There are a lot of behaviors and activities in our schools right now that, if we tolerate them, we tolerate too much. There are cell phones and iPods and things that you wouldn't think may cause a big problem, but, in a way, they do cause a big problem.

It's the one-broken-window theory. You start tolerating this, and it starts causing decay. And that has happened in a lot of our schools. If you were to walk through one of the hallways of some of our schools, I can point out which ones—as a middle-class person—you would never think of as an environment for your children if you wanted them to succeed in life and make it in the economy. If you and I would

agree with that for our own kids, we should agree with that for those kids who are there right now.

I sat with a group of kids—the Citywide Government kids—and they, in no uncertain terms, said, “As adults, this is your job to do this. I’m sick and tired of sitting in a class where 15 people behind me are making it so that I can’t finish my work in class, and so that the teacher doesn’t have enough time to answer my questions because she’s spending so much time dealing with those kids.” Now, this is an inner city kid who wants to go to college, who’s saying, “I don’t understand, from my viewpoint, why you, as adults, can’t get this straight.” And I’m sitting there as an adult thinking, “I agree with you.”

Pearlstein: I want to hire that kid.

Stewart: You should really talk to them. Because these were kids who, if you saw them at a bus stop, you might lump them in with a whole group of kids who you might assume weren’t on the ball. I think it was shocking to all of us that this student was so forthright about saying we—adults—need to take control of schools. And all the other kids agreed. And these kids are in schools where they really are trying to get the education, but it’s interrupted, it’s constantly interrupted by other kids.

We right now are dealing with the suspension policy in our schools. Eighty-four percent of the kids in Minneapolis don’t get suspended. But teachers spend so much time dealing with groups of kids that really do disrupt order in schools, that it affects the majority of kids, especially in racially isolated, high-poverty schools.

There are kids in those schools who really could participate in the things that will go on with bioscience in the future. They really could participate with all the prosperity that we have here in downtown. But they’re sitting in a situation where it doesn’t even matter if they’re highly motivated to get the most out of their classes, because their classes are disrupted by small groups of individuals.

Pearlstein: Okay, so that speaks to order and safety.

Stewart: That speaks to order. Safety is a real issue.

Pearlstein: All right. Expand on the topic of safety, please.

Stewart: We have teachers mugged in this district, with their foot on the steps of the school that they’re entering--mugged! We have schools in areas that have the highest concentration of sex offenders in the state. Where you locate schools has a huge impact on the community and the kids. You know the iPods and the phones I mentioned earlier? Well, we’ve had situations where kids make phone calls to people outside of schools who come into the schools and bring in unsafe situations. I mean, those are safety issues. That’s different from order. For me, order is just how the hallways look, how the classrooms look--are the kids sitting in their seats, do the teachers have command of their classrooms, do the principals have command of their teachers? That’s order.

Pearlstein: Why do you think, as that student said, the grownups in the system have been so unsuccessful, maybe so lax in assuring order and assuring safety, or at least in making stronger efforts in assuring order and safety? Why do you think the adults involved have failed?

Stewart: I think we’ve become an incredibly permissive and tolerant society, and no place is that more exhibited than in schools.

“Tolerance” is always a positive word except when you use it in the context of tolerating wrong things for too long. And we’ve been an incredibly permissive and tolerant society. And, of course, I’m not calling for corporal punishment, but we have gone so far off the path.

There’s this idea that we should educate every single kid who comes into our schools, and I agree with that. However, we’ve come to a point in our society where we have to get back to the notion that schools have a core function of imparting knowledge, and anything that

interferes with that has to be removed. We have to get firm, and we can't let go of that. Our schools are not doing their core function. They're being threatened by all kinds of outside factors, and we have to get back to where schools are not social service agencies. Really, the function of a school is to impart knowledge. So that's the safety and the order, and if you're not getting those two correct, you can't get to the academic rigor in the school itself.

Pearlstein: Let's talk about the academic rigor.

Stewart: Academic rigor is really the next part. The governor has influenced the passage of some really strong and aggressive math and science measurements that are going to kick in in 2011 and 2012. Yet we are already not meeting the standards that we need to meet right now. When those aggressive standards kick in, we're *really* not going to be meeting those, so I am advocating that we load our kids up with the math and science, and with extended time in at least the core functions of our schools, and take a look at removing some of the social engineering that we're doing in our schools.

Pearlstein: What do you mean by social engineering?

Stewart: We have lots of fluff, things in our schools that take up time throughout the day and reduce the amount of time we're spending on core subjects. Things like "diversity" curricula and electives which really aren't driven by labor market needs. We do have some career and tech ed in our schools, but they're not all aimed at industries where there are going to be greatest opportunities in the future. So we are not really preparing kids for the world they're going to inherit. We're preparing them for who knows what? We're just doing the things we've been doing for a long time, and the amount of actual core subject time has decreased, little by little. And if you were to do an audit throughout the district and find every single program that was not a core curriculum program, there would be an awful lot of them.

Pearlstein: What classes, what topics would you describe as core?

Stewart: Math, science, literature. These are things which are going to prepare kids for the life they're actually going to inherit.

Pearlstein: What about history and social studies? What about computer science? What about foreign language?

Stewart: I'd probably put computer science before some of the other ones. I do think civics is an essential part, but we have to prioritize right now and, for me, that means math and science. At the end of the day, it's math and science and then English mastery. Those are my three.

Pearlstein: I want to get to vouchers again, or, more specifically, religious schools. In your conversations with school officials and school board officials and others, how are folks responding to this agenda of yours?

Stewart: Well, I mean, there's been suspicion about what the true motivations are beneath what I'm saying. Very few people can argue with the fact that we need safer schools and that we have a cultural problem in Minneapolis that hasn't been worked out. There's an audience for that. People hear that. But when you identify completely as a conservative from the get-go, they have a checklist of other things that they want to make sure that you're not for. The voucher issue is interesting, and, you know, I am all for school choice. I haven't made it to vouchers, just because I think I still have fair questions about vouchers.

Pearlstein: Such as?

Stewart: Well, there's a capacity question. I mean, what do you do with the kids who are left behind? There's not the capacity right now. If we had vouchers in place right now, there's not the capacity . . .

Pearlstein: The short answer is if the voucher's value is big enough to make it economically possible for private schools to expand and new schools to get built, the supply would meet the demand. There's no question.

Stewart: But it's not there. That's my point.

Pearlstein: But it would be. Well, let me put it this way: If great numbers of kids try to escape the Minneapolis public school system or any other public school system really fast, what would that tell you about their satisfaction with current arrangements? Wouldn't it be unfair to prevent them from escaping?

Stewart: Well, they're escaping already. You will always, in my opinion, have a problem with the left-behind kids. The kids who are leaving the Minneapolis public schools, in a lot of cases, are kids whose parents have the flexibility or the mobility to make it happen, and the school system will always have to deal with the core group of kids and very hard-to-educate kids, too. The school system will always be left with the very hard-to-educate kids.

Pearlstein: Well, there are two arguments in response. One would be that there's research to show that competition actually improves the performance of kids in public schools. That's exactly what's been happening in Milwaukee. The other argument is that, to a very significant degree, choice programs don't lead to creaming the best students. It's really quite the opposite. The kids who are having the biggest difficulty are frequently the ones who transfer out to another school. When you think about it, if the kid is doing well in school, you'd rather not mess things up. It's traumatic to leave a school. So it's the kids who are having difficulty who wind up leaving.

Stewart: Well, I mean, there are so many issues to it. One is that parents don't always choose vouchers when they're available to them. There are a lot of people who believe in the public school system, and this is probably where I'm more of a Democrat.

Jump over, for a second, to public libraries. Libraries, for me, have always been the one thing American government has gotten right from the beginning: free and open access to information in every city that I've ever lived in. And they were always the safest place to be. No matter what neighborhood I lived in, I could go to a library and it was like kryptonite for thugs. So the American public library system, for me, has

been a saving grace. It was such a safe place with open access to information; it was my doorway to democracy. It made me the person that I am. I feel the same way about the public school system—except that it has not had the same success as the library system in the United States.

Pearlstein: Not by any stretch, if 50 percent and fewer kids are graduating in inner cities.

Stewart: But they should. They do well with majority population kids, and this opens up another argument. You have majority-population parents whose kids are doing just fine and getting great educations with the same stimuli, the same teacher. One kid is getting an A-plus, and the other kid is not. That is the deep question we have to ask, and I don't think that's a question about vouchers. I don't think that's a question even about school choice.

Pearlstein: I agree. It's culture. Of all the school choice advocates I know around the country, I'm the one who focuses most on the culture. Family breakdown, peer pressure, media, and so forth. And given those constraints, no matter how good a voucher program or school choice program might be, it can only accomplish so much. Yet I think it can help and, in terms of what public policy can do, the best thing we can do for all kids is indeed to expand educational freedom. But I don't think for a moment that a voucher program will fully erase achievement gaps.

Stewart: No. And I think the reason people are so resistant to vouchers is they hear in that argument an implicit blaming of the schools and the professionals who run the schools. The thing I didn't say earlier that I meant to say was, having safe, orderly, and rigorous schools is the first step. The second step is having the right teachers in the right classes with the right kids. And that's a union contract issue that's going to be tough this year, because I fully intend for Minneapolis to be the first urban school district that substantially challenges its union contract and gets the contract it needs, rather than one that's offered. That will get a lot done for us.

That said, with the vouchers argument, I think people hear it as an implicit indictment of the professionals and the educators and the school system itself. And whether they're liberal or conservative, from being on the front lines, they know there's this other story going on that you mentioned, this cultural story, which is possibly why I've been successful in Minneapolis as a conservative. Even liberals, now, have to admit that there's a cultural problem that comes from the home into the school.

Pearlstein: It's true; it's been obvious for a long time.

Chris, this has been excellent. I'm very pleased that we did it. Thanks. ■



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