**Episode 43: Using Data to Demand Better Schools**

**Erik:** [00:00:00] Hello there listeners, this is Radio free Bay Ridge your all-volunteer hyperlocal Progressive podcast focusing exclusively on beautiful Bay Ridge Brooklyn. I'm Erik your education correspondent.

**Dan:** [00:00:21] And I'm Dan your host and happy first day of school Erik.

**Erik:** [00:00:26] Yes. We are recording interestingly enough the education episode on the first day of New York City Public Schools.

**Dan:** [00:00:32] THE education episode? No, this is one of a series that I think we're going to be doing this fall season.

**Erik:** [00:00:37] I've never been more excited.

**Dan:** [00:00:39] That's why I think today we're going to start with some foundational stuff. But before we get into that, it's the first day of school.

There's a lot of stuff that's been happening in the education sphere for the last couple of months over the summer break. So what was your summer reading? What did you do over summer vacation Erik?

**Erik:** [00:00:56] Goodness. Well, Dan aside from aggressively trying to get through my master's program in education policy at NYU... little plug.

There has been a lot of developments in education particularly in New York City that have been coming down the pike and... it's not being covered very well if I could say so if I could... people can go to my Twitter feed if they want to see how I actually feel about how it's being covered. But for here in the podcast, I'll say it's not being covered very well and there's a lot of nuance going on that is being missed.

**Dan:** [00:01:30] So let's start off with the most vitriolic one, which is the one that kind of popped up first.

**Erik:** [00:01:35] Yes.

**Dan:** [00:01:35] Through the summer. So that's the SHSAT.

**Erik:** [00:01:38] So I call it the Shy-Sat. There's no Y in there but calling it Shy-sat is a easier way to say than S-H-S-A-T.

**Dan:** [00:01:46] What exactly is it? And why is this so controversial and what's changing about it?

**Erik:** [00:01:52] Yeah, so SHSAT is the specialized high schools special admissions test. Basically, what it does is a student takes the test. If they score a certain amount they have the opportunity to perhaps attend a specialized high school. It's a little more complicated than that between the algorithm and school choice.

A lot of things are being weighed. But basically what the test does it allows students to have those specialized high schools as possibilities.

**Dan:** [00:02:16] And that's the only metric to get in.

**Erik:** [00:02:19] Hmm. If you don't have the test you can't get in but once you have the test, there are certainly people who take that test and do not get in.

**Dan:** [00:02:25] Okay, so they take the test and even if they score high it's still not a guarantee. This is a... Based on the number of seats available

**Erik:** [00:02:33] Accurate. Like colleges they have their Admissions and then they also have their goals as an educational institution.

**Dan:** [00:02:38] Hmm.

**Erik:** [00:02:39] Sometimes those goals will override admissions.

So if they want more of X or more of Y or they want to move in direction Z... they will perhaps move their admissions in that way. Now public schools are little more tightly regulated than a private college system, but it's certainly a factor.

**Dan:** [00:02:57] All right. So these are the admissions get into things like Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Tech, Bronx Science...

**Erik:** [00:03:02] The big names.

**Dan:** [00:03:03] So why did they want to change this admissions test?

**Erik:** [00:03:06] So the change suggested y'know writ large is getting rid of it. That's where the controversy began. When people probably saw it on their Facebook feed it was New York City's ready to get rid of this test... err, Ready quote unquote.

**Dan:** [00:03:19] We should say right off the bat: they're not getting rid of the specialized high schools. They're getting rid of the test....

**Erik:** [00:03:25] Correct

**Dan:** [00:03:25] ...To get into them. So how do you get into them? What would be the proposed alternative?

**Erik:** [00:03:29] There were a few floated around and actually it kind of split, even among typically Progressive and or Democratic members of legislature and policymakers.

Some of it was accepting a certain percentage of students in every school. Other proposals were kind of multi metric. It was based on test scores, location. It had a lot of different factors behind it. And the mayor actually came out on one end of thing the speaker aka...

**Dan:** [00:03:57] The current mayor

**Erik:** [00:03:58] Current mayor Corey Johnson came in on one end and education chair Mark Treyger came out on a different end.

Everyone is kind of in different spots on SHSAT, but where the very small counted on one hand education activist community came out is "Thank god let's get this test out of here."

**Dan:** [00:04:18] Why was this test creating problems?

**Erik:** [00:04:21] So like every aspect of gatekeeping in education by and large, it systematically creates barriers for students and more often than not those barriers reinforce the already segregated school system that we have in New York City which continues to be the most segregated school system in the United States.

**Dan:** [00:04:40] I saw a lot of this on my Facebook feeds and it was just like oh, you know, we shouldn't get rid of this because we should be making all schools good!

**Erik:** [00:04:49] Right. That's terrible argument and I want our I want our listeners if any of this gets cut I want at least this part in. It is a terrible argument. Would that we could make all of our schools better and snap our fingers and it was so. Right? If we could Thanos our schools, but instead of getting rid of them we just made them all Stuyvesant... man! What a great world it... That's a terrible terrible argument.

**Dan:** [00:05:12] And what are the metrics by which Stuyvesant is the be-all end-all or Bronx Science or Brooklyn Tech? What is the benefit of going to these schools?

**Erik:** [00:05:22] It's unclear depending on everyone you ask. So the kind of idea that Stuyvesant, for example, is one of the best schools is currently true because we say so. And maybe it was a buildup of certain metrics that we agreed upon in the past. They could still be true, but currently it enjoys the position because we give it the position.

**Dan:** [00:05:46] Which is why we wanted to talk about school metrics and what actually makes a good school because if we want to talk about SHSAT we really should have a grounding in why do we want to get into these specialized high schools, which also feeds into the second thing that happened this summer which was the gifted and talented program.

**Erik:** [00:06:04] Right. So basically what happened was the city commissioned a panel to look at issues of segregation and inequity in New York City Public Schools. They did so. They came out with recommendations. One of those recommendations was to eliminate the gifted and talented program. Yet another thing that the progressive education activists in New York City said, yes, finally we've been talking about doing this for.

Decades and they're finally listening because we're one of the only ones that actually still does it this way,

you know, whenever you're talking about tracking which is basically when you take students in the same grade and put them on different curricular track. Yeah, some people know it is honors program.

Some people know it is gifted and talented. It happens across the country. It happened in my high school and my high school was in the middle of nowhere. It's not necessarily we're the only ones doing it but it is one of those things like the sheis a testing program that. Enforces the segregated nature of our school system

**Dan:** [00:07:05] Some of the recommendations weren't necessarily to remove the programs themselves.

It's this admissions track system within the school system that we call "gifted and talented" because I've seen a lot of blowback where people are like "How dare you not give gifted and talented students the things they need to excel!" And like no we're eliminating the uppercase Gifted And Talented Program system.

That we test kids at four years old for admissions into gifted and talented kindergarten

**Erik:** [00:07:34] Correct. On the bare bones of this we need to not be testing four-year-olds. Maybe I'll get flak on Twitter for it. Frankly, bring it on. It's a hill I'm ready to die on. Let's not test four year olds on their academic prowess.

They finished potty training two... a year and a half ago? And you know, we joke, but I also don't want to accept the premise of some of these arguments. We have a problem of that in the Progressive side sometimes of where, you know, someone will come at us with well.... "What about the gifted and talented people" and we immediately go to "Ah! But this and we kind of lean into that argument.

We're not going to do that and I would just beg my fellow progressives on Twitter and on Facebook and in the real world to stop doing so. We're eliminating Gifted And Talented because a lot of smart people have sat down for the last at least 30 years and said, "Hey if you really want students of color, poor students, and students who maybe aren't proficient in English... Basically marginalized groups, to continue to not do well in school... Keep Gifted And Talented. Keep tracking. If you would like to eliminate those things, their education will get better and the students who were in Gifted And Talented actually will not suffer at all." Our data always says it.

There's a group called Teens Take Charge. It is a education advocacy group that is led almost exclusively by teenagers, you know, the people that education affects, and they are superb. They are top notch on their policy expertise and they actually when they talked about gifted and talented they identified parts of the report that don't go far enough. So, please follow them on Twitter. I don't know if they have a donate page, but if they do, give them money, they're excellent.

 I also want to point our listeners to another podcast, Miseducation. It is run by two students who I believe are in the Bronx. They were the first ones in... Maybe not the first ones in New York City, but they were one of the first media outlets that I ran into that was talking about the inequities of school athletics in New York City particularly in lower-income communities.

They talked about school segregation. If anyone wants a primer on how our education system in New York City is consistently and systematically against poor and students of color they are the people who listen to. They are excellent, please I know they don't have a donate page. But if you have a student who's interested, they love interns, they love other students. They're entirely student-led and I wanted to shout them out right at the top.

**Dan:** [00:10:00] Seriously. We're going to be here. This is a podcast. You can pause and go check things out.

So let's start with the meat and potatoes of this which is... What was the narrative of education and why do we need to be talking about school statistics and metrics?

**Erik:** [00:10:16] Absolutely. So let's go back a bit and we're going to talk about something that we may have forgotten by now, which was the Blue Wave.

**Dan:** [00:10:21] Oh, yes. So let's everyone cheer.

**Erik:** [00:10:23] Hold for applause. It crashed over Shore Road in 2018 and Bay Ridge is in the throes currently of enjoying its new representation.

And just one of the many results that that wave produced is that new schools that were promised are now being planned. The old Angel Guardian site, the Nathan's site, on 68th Street. They've already been presented to the public. And just announced a few months ago now we heard about a middle school coming up right outside the 77th Street subway stop.

**Dan:** [00:10:51] So that sounds great. We are getting new schools. We're done right? Schools were overcrowded. We're going to get three new schools. Problem solved.

**Erik:** [00:10:58] Yeah, that's not even remotely true.

**Dan:** [00:10:59] All right. So crowding will go down. Then we get more funding! Funding was the other part right? Funding and more schools. Then everything's fine. Right?

**Erik:** [00:11:07] Still no, but you know what Dan, if I didn't know better I'd say you were maybe reading from the policy pages of almost every politician leading up to the 2018 election cycle. In fact, here are some direct quotes from the Democratic campaign pages.

 Our new Congressman Max Rose in his education platform called for more vocational education, lower student debt interest, eliminating the admissions test for specialized high schools SHSAT, and better teacher funding.

**Dan:** [00:11:33] More funding.

**Erik:** [00:11:33] Yep. Our new State Senator Andrew Gounardes's page asked to reform specialized high school admissions, more funding, called for alleviating overcrowding by opening a new high school.

Our State Assembly Member Frontus has also asked for, again, more funding as well as an increase in mental health services a request that would require...

**Dan:** [00:11:52] More funding

**Erik:** [00:11:53] More funding exactly right. Adam Baumel, who ran against Nicole Malliotakis last year called for teacher autonomy, eliminating high-stakes testing and passing the DREAM Act.

So in most candidate platforms funding is the main thrust of the argument, followed by a New York City special topic like SHSAT. Or if that's too controversial just general testing.

**Dan:** [00:12:15] Mmhm.

**Erik:** [00:12:15] And in 2018 Gounardes was the only person to mention our districts overcrowding problem.

**Dan:** [00:12:20] Which you would think would be an easy one to mention

**Erik:** [00:12:22] Easy sell. It was Brannan's big old thing.

**Dan:** [00:12:25] At least the Democrats are talking about this! Like, where are the Republicans right?

**Erik:** [00:12:30] So that's actually very interesting. Unlike in many other policies like housing or the environment the opponents for each of these Democrats did not differ very much from them on the topic of Education.

**Dan:** [00:12:42] Really?

**Erik:** [00:12:43] Yeah, so...

**Dan:** [00:12:44] Come on. Donovan. Donovan must have like just at least done a slightly worst job.

**Erik:** [00:12:49] You would think. And you know, that's on brand. But Donovan actually asked for better school funding, more apprenticeships, which is almost a mirror to Max Rose's school funding and vocational programs position.

**Dan:** [00:12:59] All right. So Marty Golden. Come on.

**Erik:** [00:13:01] Called for a new High School in the district as well as funding increases for schooling which mirrored Gounardes's exact call for a new school and more funding. They also both came down on the same side of the SHSAT debate.

**Dan:** [00:13:12] Alright, Frontus?

**Erik:** [00:13:13] Steve Saperstein, who ran against Matilde, asked for more funding and job apprenticeships.

**Dan:** [00:13:18] Nicole Malliotakis. Come on.

**Erik:** [00:13:19] Okay.

**Dan:** [00:13:19] Please.

**Erik:** [00:13:20] So she's the outlier, right? So in 2018 she had zero issues pages on her website that...

**Dan:** [00:13:25] Still does by the way.

**Erik:** [00:13:26] That continues into her Max Rose campaign indeed. No mention of policy only news reposts of her campaign events. And this is actually pretty similar to how she's again running her current bid for New York 11.

**Dan:** [00:13:37] Yeah.

**Erik:** [00:13:37] But I digress, if you look back on her run for mayor she wanted to reform the Department of Education in order to you guessed it redirect more money towards education.

**Dan:** [00:13:47] Got it. So funding doesn't sound very specific.

**Erik:** [00:13:53] Yeah, so it's super vague and politicians are getting away with this all of the time.

**Dan:** [00:13:58] Yeah. So this is a nonpartisan... Don't let them get away with this standard package of "overcrowding, funding and maybe one extra issue" to make it seem like they have some kind of nuance on the subject which doesn't seem to be there.

**Erik:** [00:14:12] Right. We're oversimplifying a little bit on some of their policy pages, but we linked their caches in the show notes. People can go read them themselves.

But anyway you slice those pages this is an extremely narrow set of policy discussions, and there doesn't seem to be movement by either political party to kind of expand the discussion or even deeped in it with data.

**Dan:** [00:14:33] That still seems kind of harsh like, isn't that just what.. They're trying to get for the casual electorate?

**Erik:** [00:14:40] Sure. Definitely. I don't want to sound like I'm giving these candidates no credit whatsoever. So many of these candidates were school teachers, or are currently school teachers, or otherwise involved in education at some point. So their bona fides are not lacking. And obviously their personal stance on education issues is likely deeper than what's on their issues page.

What is clear though is that they thought these stances were what voters wanted to see when they visited their campaign pages. So while transportation and housing enjoyed really specific policies with differentiating positions between the political parties, candidates education policy discussions were well within this kind of narrow and ill-defined window that we've come to expect.

**Dan:** [00:15:21] All right, but surely some progressives have been making bold attempts to push that range of discussion.

**Erik:** [00:15:27] Okay. So let's detach a little bit from the local. I know that's heresy for us. But let's move over to Queens and the Bronx let's talk about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

**Dan:** [00:15:37] I can already hear the veins bulging and the heartrates increasing among some of our more moderate listeners.

**Erik:** [00:15:43] Well and they shouldn't. So AOC's issues page largely reads like a progressive dream. We got Medicare For All, you got the federal jobs guarantee, Clean Campaign Finance, climate change action, criminal justice reform, ending private prisons, restoring Glass-Steagal.

But her education proposals were actually relatively tame. The most radical was her call for a one-time elimination of all student debt. So that's pretty outside of the Overton window that were discussing here. That's only recently hit the mainstream. Initially because of Elizabeth Warren now Bernie Sanders is expanding that policy a little bit.

**Dan:** [00:16:17] Yeah.

**Erik:** [00:16:18] And I believe they're the only two candidates currently on that. But otherwise AOC calls for tuition free public higher education and trade schools. And that's the end of her comments on education.

**Dan:** [00:16:28] Hmm

**Erik:** [00:16:29] Arguably the most progressive voice in Congress has a policy stance that if you delete one or two lines would be indistinguishable from Max Rose or for that matter Dan Donovan.

So I bring these things up because our education policy is only as nimble as our capacity for discussion, which is true for every form of public policy.

**Dan:** [00:16:47] Yeah.

**Erik:** [00:16:48] So when all we hear about is school funding, trade schools, and SHSAT, then we assume that talking about education involves talking about those things... hen in fact there is so much more to explore when it actually comes to making education better.

**Dan:** [00:17:02] What exactly are some of the issues you think sit beyond the horizon of acceptable policy debate.

**Erik:** [00:17:09] Sure. Let's get very out of the box here. Right? So we could talk about colleges refusing to consider SAT or ACT scores, for example. The disproportionate distribution of after-school sports and arts programs. Banning charter schools. Subsidizing books for homeschoolers. We can even talk about things that aren't even typically associated with schools but that still affect education policy: concentrated low-income housing, food deserts, congestion pricing. I could go on for another 30 minutes.

**Dan:** [00:17:35] And we probably will make that an entire episode, "The Things beyond the box", but to make these policies result in good schools we need to expand the discussion on what a good school even is...

**Erik:** [00:17:45] Right.

**Dan:** [00:17:45] ...and how you find the data to reveal the importance of those new approaches. But most of the time the data that would back up a lot of these things... Why would you even want to look at school data? And the only reason I can think of is:

You're a parent and you're about to send your kid to school and you're trying to pick a good school district. Like obviously only parents are the ones who should be even having this conversation. Because they're the ones who would be in front of that data, right?

**Erik:** [00:18:08] So that's true and it's not true.

So it's true in that that's how it's working in practice currently, right?

**Dan:** [00:18:12] Yeah.

**Erik:** [00:18:12] You're a parent you have what used to be the big publication like a yellow pages of schools in front of you. I need to make decisions. Therefore I need data and I'm gonna start looking at this data.

In reality, every single one of us is affected by the schools in our communities.

They are inseparable from everything that ends up happening with those children. Those children graduate. They become part of the workforce. They become business owners. They go to college. They spend money on in-state out-of-state tuition. They go to CUNY. They get internships. They work most internships for free and then they...

**Dan:** [00:18:43] Yeah. Their success is our success as a community.

**Erik:** [00:18:46] Right.

So when we look at the adult literacy rate for America and we see that 1 in 10 people are illiterate and a larger percentage of them are disproportionately illiterate by race and wealth and class then we all need to start caring about education a lot more.

**Dan:** [00:19:02] This is the thing though... Is that whenever I think about the public narrative that is happening around education it seems to be mainly parents who actively have kids in the system and when I see other voices coming in that aren't that... They're usually silenced. I mean, I'm going to be clear. I don't have a kid.

**Erik:** [00:19:22] And I also do not have a child. Right? But I am a former teacher. I am getting my Masters in Education Policy. I have worked in schools for over 7 years and I am still, like you described, excluded from these conversations. So let's talk about some of the ways that that happens right?

First off people are seeing SHSAT and G&T discussions. The way journalists are even framing education policy debate... they're talking to parents exclusively. The Speaker and Education Chancellor Richard Carranza, who's doing a great job, held parent-only town halls in all of the borough's. Non-parents were not invited. The CEC's, Community Education Councils, are exclusively for parents. Whatever kind of policy making even exists at the citizen level in New York City, which is not a lot, and non parents are not allowed to apply. Community Board 10 has an education subdivision. They haven't met in over two years.

**Dan:** [00:20:19] That's not entirely true. They held those meetings about the new schools that were coming in, right?

**Erik:** [00:20:24] Okay. So that's different in that those are legally required by the School Construction Authority. Most of the members of the education subcommittee weren't there because the numbers update so much because they don't meet.

**Dan:** [00:20:34] This doesn't sound very good.

Especially just for me as someone who's on Community Board now.

**Erik:** [00:20:39] Congratulations.

**Dan:** [00:20:40] Thank you.

But the idea that policy makers, people who are mastering, like you are, in Education Policy would be excluded from the debate... There deserves to be a platform for intelligent people who care about stats and care about data and care about performance and more importantly care about kids.

You don't need to have a kid to care about kids. I think that...

**Erik:** [00:21:00] It's a radical concept.

**Dan:** [00:21:01] Like Jesus, like what, is like everyone else a monster? Like, of course I want kids to do really well! And I get it though, some parents though have a lot of experience with the school system as it is right now and are living it day in and day out. So we can't necessarily discount that experience.

**Erik:** [00:21:19] Not at all. But what's interesting is, what will happen is, if you no longer have a student in the system, you're also excluded. Unless you've had two kids. They've gone through the New York City public school system. You've lost about half of your hair at this point because you've just been pulling it out every time you have to deal with... And you hear the word "the algorithm".

Once your kid graduates, guess what? You can't be in CEC anymore or guess what? You can't be on the education policy panel anymore.

These are extremely narrow minded exclusions. And I want to say they're excluding former teachers of whom I know many. They're excluding people who care passionately. And I really do not believe that if you were to go up to a parent of a child in the third grade and say "Hey, do you want the best people ever making decisions about your school?" They're going to say yes. Ten outta ten times.

**Dan:** [00:22:11] Alright.

So let's just say that's something that no one should accept. Like we mentioned at the beginning of the show, and will give no more credence to that. Anyone can care about schools and have important and thoughtful things to say about what makes a school good.

**Erik:** [00:22:25] Hundred percent.

**Dan:** [00:22:26] Except when they don't. Except when they're not taking advantage of the plethora of data about schools that really is available. So let's make that the last half of this show. What can we do to find out how our schools are performing and have really nuanced questions so we aren't just saying "more funding, more schools, more more more."

Where's the first place that you would recommend that we all go to just get a snapshot of how our schools are performing?

**Erik:** [00:22:59] Right. So let's talk about a framework... like quite literally. So the Department of Education, the New York City Department of Education, calls it's assessment of methods for school quality The Framework For Great Schools. Aptly named.

So that's the city metric. Schools are assessed by the Feds, by state, by the city.

**Dan:** [00:23:15] Wait why are so many different groups analyzing New York City Public Schools?

**Erik:** [00:23:19] Well, so each of them has their own pool of money to spend on schools and they need metrics to determine how that funding is allocated or even if that funding is allocated.

**Dan:** [00:23:29] All right, so we have a city framework

**Erik:** [00:23:31] Right. The Framework For Great Schools.

**Dan:** [00:23:33] All right. So how transparent is it?

**Erik:** [00:23:35] Luckily for us New Yorkers the DOE has had generations of public pressure to increase accountability, transparency, and self-evaluation. So as a result School Quality Reports are released fairly frequently along with other supporting material. So you can search for these School Quality Reports in the show notes.

**Dan:** [00:23:52] All right, so go to our webpage www.radiofreebayridge.org, we're going to have links to all of this.

**Erik:** [00:23:57] Great plug.

**Dan:** [00:23:58] All right. So what kind of things does it measure?

**Erik:** [00:24:01] So it breaks down into the following categories. We got to student achievement, supportive environment, rigorous instruction, collaborative teachers, strong family-community ties, effective school leadership, and trust.

It's a lot of things. There is a 15-second throw back button on your podcast app. I recommend, I recommend hitting it once or twice just so you got all those together.

**Dan:** [00:24:21] Yeah.

**Erik:** [00:24:21] These factors were chosen quote "because research shows that school strong in these six areas are far more likely to improve student learning" unquote.

**Dan:** [00:24:30] Okay, but I gotta say, like, "strong community ties", "trust". Those are all really vague. They sound more like mottos than metrics. That's something you would needlepoint into a decorative housewarming gift.

**Erik:** [00:24:42] Right. So each of those categories is really a box that they're sorting actual metrics into. So real data comes from the NYC school survey. It's an annual survey taken by students, teachers, and parents. And with the quality review, which is a report quote "by experienced educators" who do two-day observations in schools. Comparison of these reports over time... and then an explanatory guide to the research methodology and analysis used in these reports.

I just sounded so wonky saying that I felt awful. I'm so sorry listeners. I think I just put them asleep on the subway.

**Dan:** [00:25:17] No, but this is the thing though.

Like, you just mentioned one of the two core things that feeds into these metrics is a two-day analysis of a school by a, one, singular, experienced educator.

**Erik:** [00:25:32] Yeah. I don't want to speak for sure about the one educator.

**Dan:** [00:25:35] I can speak for sure about the one.

**Erik:** [00:25:38] Then we can cut that.

**Dan:** [00:25:39] No no no, I went through some of this because when you had actually listed this in the script a little earlier, I was like.... what?! I looked it up and I went through, like, the guide for, like, the scheduling of what a schedule is like for one of these people going through a school and analyzing it and it's a person when it's under a certain size school.

They do boost it to two people if it's a large school. With the caveat that second person is only there for the first day and leaves at noon.

**Erik:** [00:26:08] Yeah, isn't that wild?

**Dan:** [00:26:10] Interviews with students, and no matter the size of the school, its a maximum of 16 students. It's a six-person small meeting and a 10-person larger meeting for 30 to 45 minutes max, each.

That's all the time they use to spend with students. And this is what they're using to metric out things like... how much your kids being bullied? What is the climate of the school and do they feel that they're safe in their school? Like, are they really getting that from 16 students?

**Erik:** [00:26:35] Right. So the answer is of course that they're not and you know... some things you can maybe trust a little more. So like with the bullying metric, at some point if a student comes to an administrator and says they're being bullied, the administrator has to log that. That data isn't being fed into this report, which is what you're saying.

**Dan:** [00:26:52] Exactly, the city metrics. I went on to the dashboard and it hits you with a ton of data, in the face all at once.

**Erik:** [00:26:59] So if you spend five minutes literally just clicking random things, which is what I recommend in the 21st century in general, you will actually... it is pretty intuitive. I will say that.

**Dan:** [00:27:09] We found some good data, for example, on Fort Hamilton.

**Erik:** [00:27:11] Right. I give you these kind of wonky terms and let's now tie it to a school that we're all familiar with here in Bay Ridge. For the sake of familiarity I chose Fort Hamilton High School, which is of course one of the largest high schools in the district and according to DOE, "the jewel in the crown that is Bay Ridge". I thought that was pretty poetic.

**Dan:** [00:27:28] Yeah, that's an interesting quote.

**Erik:** [00:27:30] So Dan, I could talk about the metrics of Fort Hamilton for literally hours. The dashboard view, as you said, it hits you in the face with a lot of data, but for every traditional data point that education sociologists and policymakers love, there are data points for it.

So we got four year graduation rates. We got college readiness. 90% plus attendance rates with the ability to add in core test scores. Time to 10 credits. Overall attendance. Post-secondary enrollment. The list keeps going on.

**Dan:** [00:28:00] Yeah.

**Erik:** [00:28:01] It is a huge drop down. It also puts these numbers next to citywide and borough-wide results,a as well as a comparison...

**Dan:** [00:28:08] That you can kind of select yourself.

**Erik:** [00:28:10] Exactly.

And these are kind of, like, expected outcomes of schools adjusted for incoming school factors.

**Dan:** [00:28:15] So how did we do? Come on, what's the bottom line here?

**Erik:** [00:28:18] So bottom line Fort Hamilton performs about exactly as well as the city expects it to, which, you can take a few different ways, right?

So it's impact score, which is how it performs against expected outcomes, is almost exactly where it should be.

**Dan:** [00:28:31] All right.

**Erik:** [00:28:31] As is its performance score, which is how well it does not adjusting for student factors.

**Dan:** [00:28:37] All right.

**Erik:** [00:28:38] So in the provided cross-section of measures, Fort Hamilton is almost smack dab in the middle compared to the rest of the city. It's graduation rate is just barely higher, as is its attendance rate.

**Dan:** [00:28:47] All right, so we're fine. Maybe "Crown Jewel" was a little too poetic, but we're fine and unsurprisingly so. Kids of the socio-economic background who attend Fort Hamilton High School are meeting their own expectations for their class and all of that and the school isn't handicapping them nor giving them a massive leg up.

So, are there any more detailed metrics in there that we could be plucking out?

**Erik:** [00:29:13] Sure definitely. So for example, Fort Hamilton outperforms on the college readiness index for those graduating in four years and on its Algebra 1 test scores.

**Dan:** [00:29:22] Okay, so you can go down right into all of those individual tests, which is kind of what you get smacked in the face with when you first show up like...

**Erik:** [00:29:29] A hundred percent

**Dan:** [00:29:30] Are kids really over tested? Go on to this site and see all the tests that they're metric-ing and that's just the tests that they're mandating on the city level. Those aren't state-federal necessarily.

**Erik:** [00:29:42] Right. So because, for example, the city might not actually have access to that data.

**Dan:** [00:29:46] There was that second thing, non-test stuff, like they interview teachers. They interview students...

**Erik:** [00:29:52] Okay. So you're talking about the external School Quality Review, which we talked about earlier. So one of the things that it found that Fort Hamilton does really well at... this is a long descriptor, but stay with me for it...

"It excels at establishing a culture for learning that communicates high expectations to all involved in the educational process and then achieving those expectations." Long story short Fort Hamilton tells students: " We achieve here" and the students say "Heck yeah we do."

**Dan:** [00:30:19] All right, so they interviewed both sides and both sides were in agreement.

**Erik:** [00:30:22] They also praised the school's curriculum, but noted that the assessment of that curriculum was in need. But if you ask me, all school curriculum is in need of dire assessment. But that is a topic for a very different podcast.

**Dan:** [00:30:34] All right. So what about some of the more fuzzy stuff? Like how did people respond in general to a lot of these surveys?

**Erik:** [00:30:45] Yeah, so that's really interesting. So District 20 surveyed, District 20 is our education District that we are in as Bay Ridge, but we include others like Sunset Park, Dyker Heights...

**Dan:** [00:30:55] Gravesend.

**Erik:** [00:30:56] Yes, that survey data was really well responded to. So the response rate was 85% for teachers, 88% for students and 77% for parents.

**Dan:** [00:31:04] That's a pretty good response rate.

**Erik:** [00:31:06] Exactly. Fort Hamilton, however, only saw a 25 percent response rate from local parents. Accordingly it received a really low score on strong family-community ties.

On a five-point scale it scored of 2.27 which is 1.26 below the borough average and 1.13 below the city average. So the lowest subgroup of these school survey questions was parental involvement in the school, which saw 46 percent of families saying they, for example, had the opportunity to volunteer time and sixty-nine percent of families saying they communicated with their child's teachers about their child's performance.

**Dan:** [00:31:42] Alright, well that doesn't necessarily mean the parents aren't engaged with their kid, but could be multiple socioeconomic factors that keep them from engaging with the education system in that way.

**Erik:** [00:31:51] Right. So when they're talking about community bonds, there's a lot of things that makes a person not go to their parent-teacher conference, which is what they're talking about here, right?

They're talking about: did this person go to their parent-teacher conference and, as we Bay Ridgeites know, there are a lot of things that are keeping us busy here and it's a neighborhood that might not necessarily be amenable to that as maybe a school district on the Upper East Side.

**Dan:** [00:32:15] But, in the end that kind of takes a huge chunk out of our city metric of whether our parents care about our kids education!

**Erik:** [00:32:24] Right. So if somebody looking in Crown Heights and they're trying to look at school Education data, and they're like, "Why are 25% of Fort Hamilton High School parents responding to the survey? I thought everybody did this?" Well, they might not necessarily know why that is but the numbers don't describe more in detail why that might be.

**Dan:** [00:32:41] I feel like we're starting to get a feeling that some of the data is there... but it's just not as good or reliable as it really should be.

What about... Teachers have to collect a whole ton of data, and some of that even goes directly to the teacher unions and things like that.

**Erik:** [00:32:59] Right.

**Dan:** [00:32:59] Is that kind of stuff accessible?

**Erik:** [00:33:00] So third-party data. The closest source is the UFT, the United Federation of Teachers. They've partnered with DOE to do a lot of assessments. Most famously the Measures of Student Learning, which is MoSL; and the Measures of Teacher Performance, which is MoTP... or however you want to say it. Bay Ridgeites might be familiar with this relationship as it was the topic of former State Senator Marty Golden's opposition to a bill that would make teacher evaluations and student standardized test scores separate.

**Dan:** [00:33:27] Okay. So this is the kind of stuff that they kind of use to measure teacher effectiveness. They tie grades to the teachers grades and then they use that to, like, judge how effective they are.

**Erik:** [00:33:39] Right. And this is a legacy of, for example, No Child Left Behind, which is infamous for doing this. But at a more local level, obviously. And I also just wanted to point out to our listeners, this is actually how a lot of data ends up happening at the school level.

So United Federation of Teachers is naturally interested in data about teachers. What DOE will do is they will collect that data personally and then give it to UFT in a kind of, "Here is this", trying to keep the relationship active.

**Dan:** [00:34:07] Alright, so this data... it is public because it's given to the DOE?

**Erik:** [00:34:12] No. Um, that's the interesting part. So anytime the DOE is taking data and giving it to someone else... That actually makes it more difficult for the public to see that data. And this is for a few reasons, right?

So let's say for example, somebody got a hold of the UFT data.

One: it undermines potentially their ability to negotiate contracts.

**Dan:** [00:34:32] Yeah.

**Erik:** [00:34:32] But two: there could be an odd data point in there that doesn't make a lot of sense to the general public but that looks really bad. Right? So if they see, like, one school just tanked on teacher evaluations one year. Then they could come out and be like "mah-mah-mah and the teacher evaluations", but they could be missing that, for example, something went wrong with the data collection and the data is going to be available in four months and wasn't in time for the report. For example.

Another example of that: the DOE can only hire so many policy researchers. They have a lot of things to do. They have 1.1 million students to take care of, and a thousand different logistics that come from that.

So what they'll also do: they'll give data to policy institutes like the one at NYU. And they'll say "You have this data because you're working with this project" and the DOE will ask them a question. And in turn the policy group at NYU gets to hold on to that data and not release it to anybody.

**Dan:** [00:35:24] They never release get the actual data set for other people to check and see if it's correct.

**Erik:** [00:35:30] Right, and this is actually pretty common for the policy world. To sanction off data like this and not release it to the public.

**Dan:** [00:35:35] All right. To kind of recap where we are so far: we have a lot of city data which is generated by the city and released and it has been for a long time.

We have privatized things like the UFT or things that the DOE does have but doesn't make public and gives out to third party entities. What about the state and what about the feds?

**Erik:** [00:35:56] So that's entirely different in that they're looking for different things. Right? So everyone in education policy will famously tell you "education is not in the Constitution" and man, they love rubbing that in our faces every time they can. But the DOE does care about things, or used to care about things, like protecting students from being bullied, or protecting students access to sports, for example. Title 9 legislation.

And if a school isn't complying, the federal government can cut off funding to that school.

**Dan:** [00:36:26] So anything that's tied to funding we probably have a metric out there that theoretically is public that you'd be able to grab.

**Erik:** [00:36:33] We actually HAVE to have that metric.

**Dan:** [00:36:35] Got it.

Because I was able to find, for example, harassment data and bullying data and also, you know, sexual assault data, assault data in general, what resulted in a serious injury... you can get all of that for every school down to, like, the grade level. But it's in a totally separate spot and it is on the New York State Department of Education website and its broken down in the most labyrinthine way... in like, massive Excel sheets, which makes it impossible to correlate and if you want to use it to figure out what school your kid is going to as a parent... it's really not useful.

**Erik:** [00:37:10] Right and again, very common.

So the state probably has a series of laws intact and because of the way that they chartered the initial layout of the government's relationship to their school system the state has to have that data... Because if they don't they can't enforce their laws.

**Dan:** [00:37:26] Got it. And the city doesn't need it or want it or really will make it available... because it doesn't really affect their stuff...

**Erik:** [00:37:32] Well because for the city, if the state wants to do something with that, it is the state's responsibility because the state has the data.

**Dan:** [00:37:40] So there are all of these silos and everyone owns little bits of data and it means that... This is kind of making a good argument, in my opinion, for Education Policy experts who have, as their job, the ability to sift through the information. Because as a parent you feel like you have all of this data at your fingertips, but really you don't have much and a lot of it is hidden. And a lot of it is siloed. And you don't even know what you're missing.

For example, like, how many kids are getting hot lunches? What's the quality of those lunches? Like you mentioned, affordable housing, all of these externalities, as an economist would talk about.

**Erik:** [00:38:17] Frankly, we need to ask the question: should parents be responsible for that data?

I am trusting a lot of scientists who have done a lot of work who are telling me that climate change is real. Why then can we not allow parents to parent children, which holy crap is hard enough, and also tell them "Hey, our school system is the most segregated school system in the country. These things fix it. You can help us. But we also need you to trust us."

**Dan:** [00:38:49] And it seems like trust is really hard to come by in the education world.

**Erik:** [00:38:53] Because we are dealing with people's children, which is an understandable high bar to pass.

**Dan:** [00:39:00] And the fact that we've been trying for so long, multiple generations, into just finding a fix and not all of the fixes have worked.

We don't talk about No Child Left Behind anymore, but the metrics that were there to determine its feasibility are still a thorn in the side of teachers and unions and parents.

**Erik:** [00:39:20] Yes. Absolutely. And these things follow us. The Obama Administration was unable to entirely get rid of the legacy of No Child Left Behind.

The base idea of: "You perform well, you get money". In our minds we say "Of course that leaves people behind and of course that's not going to work". But instead what happened was: people saw a Republican ideology during a Republican presidency, and they said, okay sure.

**Dan:** [00:39:50] Makes sense. You're in power.

**Erik:** [00:39:51] Because that was the discussion. The discussion was never about metrics. It was never about data. It was never about what works, what doesn't work. It was never about what teachers were saying, which teachers were talking about, No Child Left Behind, and in some doomsday scenarios. But it was about an ideology because that was the limit of the discussion.

**Dan:** [00:40:07] And we can't start with that. Its that we have to start with: "Think about the data that matters for you. What things do you think make a good school?"

**Erik:** [00:40:17] Step two then, is to say "Okay. I think that instead of four year graduation rate... I think high school should care about six year graduation rate." Because what does that mean? Right? Six-year graduation rate is a metric we always collect. We've been collecting it for a while and it's because sometimes Grandma dies. Or gets sick. And sometimes a student is able to work and their mom is already working two jobs

**Dan:** [00:40:41] Right out of college. They're not necessarily...

**Erik:** [00:40:43] Even high school.

**Dan:** [00:40:44] Yeah. Oh God, that's a high school....

**Erik:** [00:40:46] And that's a high school metric. It's not a high school metric for everyone because sometimes they cut you off at 18, but if a student needs to take a year off, let's maybe not count them as a policy failure. Let's maybe count them as somebody who graduated from high school! Even though they had to work a job and take a year off. And for our listeners sake, it doesn't even need to be 100% wonky.

You can look at your family and say: "we have a proud tradition in this family of being welders and... We've just lived in New York City... we've welded our whole lives and... Man we just got to keep it going because...

Secret listeners welding, is going nowhere. You can continue to have that job and get a lot of money!

**Dan:** [00:41:27] Welders gonna weld.

**Erik:** [00:41:28] Welders gonna weld! And they're going to get paid really well for it!

So they can say, college enrollment rates for Fort Hamilton High School do not matter to me. What matters to me is that my son or daughter comes out of high school and is able to do their taxes or is able to find a job or an apprenticeship in the first six months. That's a metric that we have.

**Dan:** [00:41:51] And that's something we could be demanding that we not only know, but that our politicians boost and make important in the education policy world.

**Erik:** [00:42:00] So let's just, as a final cap on this episode, let me walk through what that might look like, right? Let's say we have a parent. They say "my son isn't going to college. He doesn't want to go. I don't have the money for him to go. We've decided as a family and he's decided as an individual: No college for me."

"The thing that I'm going to care about most", let's say the son is in middle school here, right? "The thing that I care about as a parent is that my son can get an internship or an apprenticeship before they graduate high school." So let's go, and I'm looking and I'm going to pick my High School and I'm looking at the data...

 And I'm looking at six-month job attainment rate.

**Dan:** [00:42:36] Okay.

**Erik:** [00:42:36] Or I'm looking at internship attainment rates, if the school happens to have a program for that. And they say "I really want to stay in Bay Ridge. I went to Fort Hamilton. I want my son to go there... but they don't have that metric or they don't have a program for internships."

Then you go and you're like, "Hey, Justin Brannan!" You get on Facebook. You're tagging Justin Brannan and you're like, you know what? Fort Hamilton should really start looking at how many of their students are getting internships. Or how many of their students are getting apprenticeships. And suddenly, Justin, who used to work at the DOE, says "Here's a parent who KNOWS IT. Here's a parent who's like, who did their work, and they're talking about a specific education thing" that Justin can send an email about that day!

**Dan:** [00:43:22] Yeah.

**Erik:** [00:43:22] And can get on the on the, on the...

**Dan:** [00:43:24] On the horn or whatever. On the red phone that he has on his desk.

**Erik:** [00:43:28] Get on the bird. The blower, right ,as they used to say back in the day. He gets on the blower with his red phone that goes directly to the president of Fort Hamilton, or, the principal of Fort Hamilton and he can say:

"Let's get together. Let's talk about this. Let's talk about this policy." And suddenly we have done education policy and it wasn't even that hard.

**Dan:** [00:43:47] And we're creating data that anyone else can then use. Rest assured if it's important to you, it's probably important to a bunch of other people.

**Erik:** [00:43:53] Look only 30% of students in this country still graduate college.

**Dan:** [00:43:57] Like, in case you haven't noticed with Radio Free Bay Ridge, we kind of do foundational episodes and then we go even further into the weeds. But data literacy is one of the things we usually start out with when we realize that a subject is going to be continual and constant and always in your ear. It's that we want to get some of the basic stuff out of the way and this hopefully wasn't too wonky.

**Erik:** [00:44:20] And to tease our next episode a little bit, in the education sphere, is we're going to look at the people who are actively against all of it. They look at schools and they say "not for me".

**Dan:** [00:44:35] I literally have heard the term that we have "over saturated the area with schools."

**Erik:** [00:44:41] Yes, and one of the things we'll talk about in that episode is why our narrow policy discussion has led to this kind of vitriol for schools in our neighborhood.

**Dan:** [00:44:51] Yeah, because some of the things that they are basing that vitriol on are just the narrow... funding and crowding, and none of the other stuff. And they're not even understanding how the schools are serving people of different socioeconomic classes and backgrounds.

**Erik:** [00:45:07] Absolutely. Thank you listeners for coming along with us on this education wonky data journey!

We were talking about doing this episode for months. I'm so glad we finally did it. Please interact with me on Twitter when I Tweet education things and get no likes. I definitely want to start having this conversation in the...

**Dan:** [00:45:23] Yeah, Erik, are you are here and you are literally one of our local resources for Education wonky policy stuff, and you're not tied to any group. You're not...

**Erik:** [00:45:34] I'm not tied to big Ed, man.

**Dan:** [00:45:36] Big Ed. Well this podcast is all local. It's run by us. It's run by people like you, literally, like, people like you Erik. I'm looking directly in your direction... you just... I mean you started this because you wanted to talk about education in your neighborhood and you just reached out to us.

**Erik:** [00:45:52] If any parents want to reach out to me, talk to me about their schools, please I'd love to hear it. I am always always always ready to talk about schools.

**Dan:** [00:46:00] Yeah, and we will do the analysis. Right now I'm getting some numbers, hopefully, that can be put on the website at some point, that is just the racial breakdown of every single local Bay Ridge school since 1976, which is all available but is incredibly hard to find and incredibly hard to look at visually over time.

So if you have any questions... if you have anything that you want to hear about... Education we know is one of those subjects that everybody cares about so we are treating it very seriously.

**Erik:** [00:46:29] Education in this country is the one thing we all do together. It's the last thing we all do together as people existing in this country. We all do it together. It matters a lot to all of us. Let's keep the conversation going.

**Dan:** [00:46:44] So everyone remember you can always follow us on Twitter at @RadioFreeBR. You can visit our show notes at RadioFreeBayRidge.org. You can also interact with us on Facebook. We have Instagram. You can email us at contact@RadioFreeBayRidge.org... and seriously, comment on absolutely anything and everything. So everyone, thank you so much.

**Erik:** [00:47:09] And as always.

**Dan:** [00:47:10] Stay free, Bay Ridge.