

RICHARD: Everyone wants the best education for their children, but parents and teachers don't always agree on how to get there. In this episode, we talk with two education leaders whose visions clashed when they first met. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Gisele Huff is a philanthropist and longtime proponent of school choice, including charter schools. Becky Pringle has spent her career in public education. A science teacher for three decades, today she's President of the National Education Association, or NEA, the nation's largest teachers union.

RICHARD: Becky and Gisele first met through Convergence Center for Policy Resolution, which brought them together with other education experts to agree on a vision to transform education for America's kids. Convergence encouraged them to leave their entrenched mindsets at the door.

ASHLEY: Gisele is a Holocaust survivor who emigrated to the U.S. as a child and got a shot at the American Dream. Becky wants every student, regardless of background, to be able to do the same. I started by asking Becky about how she got interested in teaching and education.

BECKY: I always wanted to be a teacher, always. From the time I forced my two sisters to play school on the front steps of my North Philly home, I just had this calling to teach, and against my father's wishes. He did not want me to become a teacher. He had already seen the diminishment of respect for teachers. Certainly, I was never going to make a lot of money as a teacher, but most especially, my dad saw for me, a Black woman, following in the footsteps of so many before me, because it was the most traditional of careers for a woman and for a Black woman.

My dad had fought a long, hard battle for me to be able to major in science, and when I told him I wanted to become a teacher, he was really disappointed in me. But a teacher I became, and I'll never forget when I got elected as an officer of the NEA back in 2008, my dad came up. He was at the convention, and he said, "Rebecca, I was wrong. You're now in a position to have impact far beyond the confines of your classroom."

RICHARD: Gisele, tell us about your background.

GISELE: I was the Executive Director of a small family foundation in San Francisco for 22 years and started my career, the first half of it, looking at school choice as a solution to the problems with education in this country. And very much among those ideas were vouchers and charter schools and all of the choice ways of looking at making education more effective for our children.

So it was a reform movement, and we were supporting all of the organizations that were fighting these fights in the States. In the context of that, it was very much anti-

union, and I'm saying this here because we're sitting in the room, virtually, with the head of the NEA, which is the biggest teachers union in the country.

So that was the beginning of my career, the first half, and then, in the middle of it, I became interested in the introduction of technology as an integral part of the curriculum in an industry that is a very large industry, \$700 billion a year, that was ignoring the power of technology as a tool. That's the place I was in when I was approached to participate in the experience that Becky and I shared.

ASHLEY: Becky, when you first met Gisele, just how different did your views feel from each other? Can you give us a sense of that?

BECKY: Well, I think she did that in her introduction, so really different. What she didn't get into as much is the whole technology piece. So, certainly, as an educator, I wasn't against technology, but given her background with vouchers and charters... And, by the way, this will be interesting story to tell, too, around charters because Gisele and I talked about that. It was one of the ways we were kind of going at it when she tried to push a little bit because I reminded her that unions started charters. We were trying to figure out a way to innovate from within, and so we started that. Then it got away from us and, from our perspective, became this industry that really became more about destroying public education than innovating from outside and informing the system.

But nonetheless, when I heard technology, all I could think about was the billions of dollars in technology and another effort to supplant educators, to diminish us in education and our role in that. So it became another flashpoint for us, and we didn't, certainly I didn't, I'll speak for myself, didn't necessarily embrace it from the place of how we could actually get at some of the challenges and issues that we're having in reaching every single student, but I thought about it as another challenge versus an opportunity. So, for me, when I thought about technology becoming so widespread in our system, I'd worry deeply about the inequities in the system and not addressing those before it became so widespread that those gaps of inequity grew and grew and grew for those kids that had been marginalized forever.

RICHARD: Gisele, Becky said you went at it. In what ways?

GISELE: Well, actually, I don't recall the experience quite in the same way because the whole concept behind the Convergence meeting was, from the first day that we started working on this, leave all your ideas behind. You are not a representative of charter schools. You are not a superintendent of a district. You are not the leader of the NEA. You are not a conservative thinker from an institute. You are looking at this from the future and trying to establish what ought to be. So get rid of your luggage. Don't think about the things you're bringing into the room.

For me, that was the most exciting part of the experience because it took a lot to let go, and from my point of view, our relationship, Becky, developed the way it did

because we let go, because we were able to see each other as people. And the authenticity of our passion, even though they were not the same passion, was enough to bring us together despite the distance between our ideologies.

That's what I recall most of all. I mean, I found you so much of a person that I was able to relate my thoughts about what we were grappling with to the kind of respect I had for you as a person. I think that's the thing that's so lacking these days, that no one respects each other. If you don't give people credit for being a human being and for listening to how they present themselves and what their beliefs are in a genuine way, you can't get anywhere.

BECKY: I could not agree more, Gisele. When I used that phrase, we "went at it," I say it out of love, for sure, because here was this strong, powerful woman. So, when I say it that way, it's totally out of respect, for sure, but it was a challenge for me to be able to show myself and to let go, to let come. What was so unique, for me, anyway, is I did it in the presence, and I mean presence in the big presence, of this powerful woman who had this incredible history.

So it was out of respect for that, but also what I loved about it... That's me. I'm North Philly born and bred, fight. I'll never forget going to Pitt and the guys on the campus saying, "You must be from Philly because you just have an attitude, and you're not even approachable." That's right because I'm going to come at you if you even think. But I saw that feistiness in you that I so connected with.

But you are absolutely right. It was the push. Convergence kept pushing us to go toward that aspirational vision, and that's what helped us to try to let go of where we were and let come that beautiful vision that we came to together.

RICHARD: Becky, you're sounding very positive, but you said you had an attitude going in. Were you surprised by what happened coming out?

BECKY: I was because here's the reality. Gisele's right. I mean, we all had to show up from our lenses, our experiences, and all that and try to let that go. But I'll be honest. I did feel like the union, more than any group individually, was under attack. So, when you're under attack, you show up in that way.

But honestly, I approached the work from a place of having that to some degree but also, to Gisele's point, I wanted to show up as that 10-year-old teacher on the steps of North Philly. Why did I do that? Why did I become who I am today? Because I cared about kids, and I wanted to answer that calling for me. When I became a union leader, that didn't change, and I wanted them to see that heart and that passion for kids, for all kids. Then I had a responsibility as an educator and as a unionist and as a racial and social justice activist. I had a responsibility to show up in this space and do my best, certainly, to invite the best from others.

ASHLEY: Could you give us a bit of context about the circumstances in which you met? Tell listeners, this Convergence process, what is it, and did you come in skeptical? I'd love to hear a bit more about how it works.

GISELE: I was very skeptical. I'm not a committee person. I've always been a one-woman office, and I'm very independent. I don't believe in committees. I get very upset when long meetings go on and nothing happens, just a lot of lip flapping. And because of the fact that I was a big proponent of technology and I was one of the few people in the foundation world that was talking about that, they asked me to join.

I thought, "I'm going to do this because I don't believe anything will come of it. I want to make sure that what I think is important is represented at the table. Let me just have a seat at the table, and never mind how little people care about technology or don't understand it or have different ideas, I'm going to be there to speak about it," just as you, Becky, were saying that the unions were being put upon, and you wanted to be there to represent the children and what you care about.

RICHARD: Becky, what's your view of the Convergence process?

BECKY: I could not agree more. I was very highly skeptical, but if we're going to talk about education, then we need to be there. But I believe that the facilitators, they took the time to understand who we were. I know they were very thoughtful about who they wanted to have at the table. They took care to talk to us in between, to continue to coax us to stay.

Then, this was interesting, for me, anyway. Gisele, you and I talked about this. They actually created a space for us to not only let go and come but also to have ownership. So one of the things that we did towards the end and continued after was, "Okay, now you have this beautiful aspirational vision. What is your responsibility from where you are? What is your responsibility?" And what that caused us, the NEA, was to really dig into that vision and say, "Okay, I do feel a responsibility to do this, to make this real for us."

So it birthed that next piece of it, the pioneers who had actually started or wanted to start the learner-centered system. That was exciting, too. It wasn't just about talking, and it wasn't just about articulating a vision but about seeing ourselves in it and what our responsibility was to make it so.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Becky Pringle and Gisele Huff on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: This episode is co-produced in partnership with Convergence Center for Policy Resolution. It's one of a series of podcasts that Common Ground Committee and Convergence are producing together.

RICHARD: As you are hearing in this episode, Convergence brings together key stakeholders of an issue to work out policies that deliver the most value to the greatest number of people. Their projects emphasize collaboration and often result in friendships among people who come into their first meetings with opposing views. Now more of our interview.

ASHLEY: Gisele, I know you've had some fairly recent experience of facilitated meetings through your work with your new foundation, but that was online because of the pandemic. So, when you think back to your meetings with Becky through Convergence, you were physically together in the same room. What was that like?

GISELE: There's no comparison. There's no comparison because when you're in person... We got together. In my case, the first get-together, I did not attend. That's when they changed the format somewhat. There were five get-togethers that I attended, and they were for two and a half days each. So, just like Congress in the old days when they used to go out and have a drink at the end of a session, we had dinners together. We had breakfasts. We went to places and talked to each other. It was a completely different experience, and that is what I can say, without any question, that it was like night and day.

ASHLEY: So the online experience just couldn't bring that same closeness.

GISELE: There was no way that I could establish a relationship with anybody as I did with Becky during that period, no way. Virtually just doesn't... First of all, they were much shorter. You can't keep people in front of a computer for more than four hours. We were together for two and a half days.

RICHARD: Becky, what are your thoughts on that? How important was it that you were face to face in the same room, eating together, meeting together informally rather than just sitting in front of a computer and being remote the way all of us have been during COVID?

BECKY: Gisele and I had this seminal moment. That could never have happened through technology. When I asked her to step outside the room and just talk to me, you can't do that in a virtual setting. You have breakout rooms, but you kind of have to organize those ahead of time. You can't just reach into the box and say, "Could you step outside with me?"

Anyway, my point is those moments where you have the opportunity to connect one-on-one, there's just nothing like breaking bread together, to Gisele's point. There's just nothing like it because you just start talking about your family. I learned more

about... She had shared that in the group, but I learned more about her history. We both suffered a tragic loss, her of her son and me of my husband, and just talking about that over dinner, there's nothing like looking in somebody's eyes. Makes me cry. There's nothing like that, just nothing like that, looking into somebody's eyes.

When you do that, you see their humanity, and that is what allows you to connect to that larger human experience and vision that we all want for our kids, that we all want for our families, that we all want for this country, honestly. You can't replicate it over Zoom. I love seeing you, Gisele, right now, but I can't wait until I get to San Francisco and see you.

GISELE: Hugging is the thing I missed the most during that year and some months that we were separated from each other. That hug, that ability to just take somebody in your arms or be taken in someone's arms, it's humanity. It makes you feel like you're part of something bigger than yourself.

BECKY: There you go.

ASHLEY: They both fear something's been lost during the last few years as culture wars escalate, and people with different perspectives don't meet face-to-face, don't even talk to each other sometimes. When Becky thinks back to their group meetings with Convergence and the vision they all came up with for the future of education, she's proud.

BECKY: One of the things I loved about it was the ending where it talks... Well, all of it, but it talks about students being constructive members of the communities, understanding that they need to fulfill their full potential as empowered individuals. So we talked about them, each child, their rich diversity and brilliance. But it also talks about them as part of a community, and it also talks about them being engaged citizens of the United States and the world.

RICHARD: What are some other concepts that you came up with as a result of this Convergence process?

GISELE: The concept of getting thinking people together and getting them to drop their prejudices and moving forward on ideas that speak to the future is what's missing from the human experience. The whole idea that you look at problems holistically and you think about what would be the best thing if there were no constraints whatsoever, and I was asked to create the best society, what would it look like? Really, the focus was giving the children agency. Of all the things that we talked about, many, many things, but understanding that we have to empower the children to participate in their learning experience in a way that they were in charge of it as they progressed, giving them the tools to be able to do that.

BECKY: I would add that one of the things we really tackled was that, when we think about the development of students, we have to think about it in three domains. We generally think about knowledge. That's what we generally think about, but we have to think about skills, and we have to think about dispositions.

Then we broke that down into five pieces or elements, and Gisele talked about the one that speaks to me more than any, and that is student agency, the whole concept of students owning their own learning. But we also talked about the learning and skills and dispositions being competency-based and being personalized and relevant and contextualized. We also talked about their experiences being socially embedded and open-walled. Those two things, those last two things, especially, after this year, wow.

RICHARD: Our podcast is called Let's Find Common Ground. Any advice from both of you to others on how to find common ground and what common ground means to you?

BECKY: Where Gisele started, I'll end, and that is you have to pick yourself up out of the current reality. Current reality will always pull you back to what you know or think you know and the way you've always done things. And you can free your mind to imagine what's possible. So, when you're trying to find common ground, it is about that aspirational future and trying to stay in that space even as you got to move. You've got to take action to get there, for sure, but you've got to ground yourself in that common vision and never take your eye off of that.

GISELE: For me, it's everything you've said, Becky. It encapsulates what we went through, but remember that we also said, at the beginning, what is the purpose of education? The famous why question, right? If you can agree that there's a why. For instance, let's say we agree that everybody loves their children, everybody wants the best for their children. That's common ground. It's only when you talk about process that you get a lot of disagreement. But when you're talking about the whys, as I said before, we all have the same aspirations. Nobody wants to be hated. Well, maybe a few, but in general, people want to be respected, they want to be liked, they want to participate, all of the things that human beings want. If you can get to that root thing, then you can build on it and move forward.

ASHLEY: Thank you both so much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground today.

GISELE: Thank you for having me and Becky. We are so happy to do this together.

BECKY: Always. Thank you, too. Than you, Gisele.

RICHARD: Becky Pringle and Gisele Huff. The learner-centered vision of education that Becky, Gisele, and others in the Convergence created was named Education Reimagined, and later it spun off into a nonprofit in its own right.

ASHLEY: Today, schools all over the U.S. are part of this movement to transform education in their areas. That's our show for today. We'll be back in two weeks. You can check out all our past episodes at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.