

LEARNING CURVES: REIMAGINING THE STATE OF AMERICAN EDUCATION—A CONVERSATION WITH US SECRETARY OF EDUCATION LINDA MCMAHON

Announcer 00:00

For part three, please welcome to the stage Linda McMahon, secretary of the US Department of Education, in conversation with Nina Rees, senior fellow at the George W. Bush Institute. [music plays]

Nina Rees 00:14

Thank you. Well great—Secretary McMahon, it's such an honor to moderate this discussion with you today. Pitbull started the conversation with the story of the teacher that impacted his life. I know that you wanted to be a teacher at one point, but you're best known for having been the CEO of the World Wrestling Entertainment. You served as the secretary of the SBA under the past Trump administration, and you also served as a board member on the Connecticut school board. You're a university trustee. You ran for Congress twice, so you have this broad array of experiences. Of all the things you've done, what's prepared you the most for the current role, and what is the greatest misconception people have about the role of secretary of education?

Linda McMahon 01:05

Well, thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here. I think the thing that probably prepared me the most for this role was being a parent, because I've watched my children in school, I have now had the privilege of watching my grandchildren in school, and I think that you can't get any better appreciation for how education is impacting your

family unless you see it firsthand. Now, having said that, I think also that every experience I've had has prepared me for this. I enjoyed being on the state board of education in Connecticut, then in higher education, serving on the board of trustees of a university, so it's kind of given me a real balance of looking. But when the president asked me to take on this role, I said to him, you know, I don't come from the world of education, surely you must be looking for a professor, administrator or superintendent. And he said, no, because my goal really is to dismantle Department of Education. In fact, you will have succeeded when you fire yourself. But what I need is a business executive and a leader, and that's the role that I'm asking you to fulfill in this.

Nina Rees 02:13

That's great. So the discussion on this very forum this morning at 8am was around higher education, followed by a fireside chat with Bill Ackman, who took on the whole Harvard discussion. I know you just sent a letter to Harvard University, so tell us a little about your approach with universities like Harvard, and more specifically, do you think this is about fighting anti-semitism, or is it about the ideology that a lot of these Ivy League schools are espousing just a little bit more left of center, and how concerned are you that a future administration, that may not be a Republican one, will use the same tools to go after private institutions that are conservative?

Linda McMahon 02:57

Well, I think what prompted—first of all our investigation, and it started with Columbia, because we looked at the encampments that were on Columbia. We looked at the anti-semitism, the activities that were happening, the danger of students—that students were being put in. And we looked at the civil rights actions that were, you know—student civil rights were just being pummeled, and so we started the investigation there, but then also looked at, okay, what are some of the things behind the scenes? Are there activist students coming on to the universities? Are teachers teaching more in ideology and not teaching the subject matter that they were brought in to teach? So we've challenged a little bit more in terms of our investigation, especially with Harvard, and asked them about their methods for how did they vet the students who were coming in? Are these activists that are coming on campus? How about the teachers that you're bringing on? That led to us to look at other things as well, which is—you know, under Section 117 of the Higher Education Act, colleges are required to report amounts of money that they receive from foreign donors and also where they came from and how much it was. Many universities are not doing that. So we have a wide range of topics that we're looking at with universities which take federal funding, because taxpayers are footing some of this bill, and they have a right for the transparencies from universities, and we expect universities to obey the law. So if they're not obeying the law relative to civil rights, and they're not obeying even the Supreme Court law, ruling that Harvard, you know, recently experienced about their admissions policy. Then they're—they're not complying with the law, and we should take a look at this federal funding, which is not a right. It's not a right to get federal funding. It's—a you know, it's a bonus to be able to do that.

Nina Rees 05:03

Okay, so very quickly, your initiative to get rid of the Department of Education, there's been an executive order to that effect, this effort requires a vote of Congress and a two thirds majority in the Senate to do that. Let's assume

that you were given the power to get rid of the Department of Education. What would our education system at the national level look like in the next five to ten years?

Linda McMahon 05:28

It would be so much better. I think you heard from the panel that's on before, I didn't get to hear everyone, but I did get to listen a little bit, and I know Cade Brumley and some of the things that he's been able to accomplish in Louisiana, so I am fully on board with how education is best when it's closest to the student. What better audience do you have, or better supervisors do you have than those are right there with the students, parents, teachers, superintendents on the local level, and that's where I think we would see our education rise. Now, let me just point out to you that the Department of Education was set up in 1980. We have now spent as a country over \$3 trillion to watch the performance of our students continue to decline. And as I said in my confirmation hearing, we're just simply not doing something right. I don't think that education that is handled from a bureaucratic position in Washington, DC is best for the states. We'll continue with the funding—of the Title I funding. That's one of the things that's questioned and people are afraid they won't get Title I funding, or our IDEA funding for our disabled and special needs students, that will all continue to go to the states. It might go through a different agency, or it may go directly to the states, but education, I think, is going to have more funding going directly to the students, which is where it should be. So the administration or the President's budget—increased the allocation for the charter schools program to 500 million that program would conceivably be sent to states for them to decide how to spend the funds. How confident are you in a state like Connecticut to still use the money to support charter schools? Connecticut has not been a state that has embraced as much as I would have hoped, charter schools. I may have the number wrong, but it's 9 or 11, I think, at this point, over a long period of time, but many states that will utilize these funds and have seen improvement in their educational levels, the more choice they have. I think Governor Reynolds in Iowa has said more choice that they have had in schools, and she was able to get universal school choice passed this year. She said it has raised the level of public schools as well as given—you know, many parents the choice of where to send their children. And you know, when we get education the way I think it should be, in these funds, going back, there are many governors and superintendents of both—both sides of the aisle that are going to do a better job than others. They're going to use best practices. They're going to do their research. And hopefully we will be able to hand off as we close down the department, best practices to the states, the tools to implement a lot of those best practices, and I can convince Congress at that time—with through transparency, to say this is how the students will be better served with this plan. And hopefully we'll have—can get them on board for their vote.

Nina Rees 08:38

Great. So the President has signed a record number of executive orders, a number of them in the field of education. Can you tell us a little bit about some of the lesser known executive orders? Specifically, there are three of them that I'm curious about. So you can pick one of the three, the one on artificial intelligence, workforce development, and college accreditation, since they're all kind of connected to workforce readiness. What are these initiatives meant to do? And to the extent you have the power to execute them immediately, what will look differently in the next 100 days?

Linda McMahon 09:13

Well, I'm not going to pick one, because I think they're all three great. Artificial intelligence is really to make sure that we're incorporating that more into our schools and our plans. I mean, it was a long executive order on artificial intelligence, really making artificial intelligence part of the curriculum, teaching students at a young age, because not only is that going to benefit them and their learning expertise, but we have to do it to be competitive in the world—you know, no different than any other technology that is, that is evolved. You have to embrace it. You have to learn it. You have to become good at it. You have to become expert at it. And the more expert you can become, the better you're going to be. And then if we looked at a couple of the others, like workforce initiative, you know, we have to change a little bit the culture of our thinking that you don't have to have a four year degree for all jobs, and that there are many jobs that you can start in middle school or even in high school, pursuing something you really enjoy, hands on, skill based learning. I mean, I was recently at a robotics convention and was blown away, not only by the AI development that they had used, but how these students from all over the country and from—I forget how many countries from outside of the United States—and these students were all hands-on learning, building computers from lower school, middle school, and upper school, and beyond that were this big, and then some that weighed 150, 200 pounds. And we're doing complicated tasks and competing in an arena like a sporting event. And when you can do those kinds of things and build towards developing a specialty in a trade or a skill, you really elevate—the you know, that level of education.

Nina Rees 11:05

So one of the first agencies that the Department of Government Efficiency eliminated before you were confirmed, is—the National Center for Education Statistics, which administers the National Assessment of Educational Progress Test. I know you're a fan of this test, and so my question to you is, in—the next year or so, how do you envision that office, you know, changing hands, and what will look different with the NAEP and some of the other functions in that office?

Linda McMahon 11:36

We plan to continue NAEP, and it's right on pace, you know, for 2026 but there were a lot of other exams that were all built in to that particular office. And we were spending, I think, almost a billion dollars in contracts for all of these tests that were going on. We may need to relook that number and double-check it, but that's pretty close. So we wanted to make sure that we kept the test that was the most important to compare apples to apples year over year, and that is the NAEP test. Other tests may stay or come in place, but we did stop the contracts for a lot of the other tests that we don't really think you know were necessary.

Nina Rees 12:20

So you're going to bring it back?

Linda McMahon 12:22

It'll stay. It's on pace.

Nina Rees 12:24

Great, good. So let's pivot to civics education. So in a world where a lot of people are making choices—selecting public, private, religious, Catholic schools and or micropods, you know, schools of their choice, small schools and whatnot—how do you believe that school systems can still bring kids together to focus on civics education and prepare our kids to live in a democratic system?

Linda McMahon 12:52

Wow. Well, we're not teaching them today, you know. And I think that we really have to just make an effort. It has to be part of the curriculum. Civics has just been removed from so many schools, curriculums. And I was just—you know, a little bit earlier today, I was over at Prager University, and they were talking about a program initiative that they were doing relative to July 4, because they don't really have a mechanism today where my students are told about the history of their country and families. So they were producing films and other aspects of it. And I thought, wow, that is such a good idea. And they actually were equating it to Seder in the Jewish religion of how Passover dinner, you know, once a year, the families share the stories, you know, of their heritage. But we don't do anything like that outside of Seder. And so to have a similar kind of a program—boy that kind of brings it back to, let's start it at home, and then let's—let's spread to all of the different schools that we have.

Nina Rees 14:02

Great. Thank you so much. Secretary McMahon for being with us today.

Linda McMahon 14:06

Thank you.

Nina Rees 14:06

I hope you will come back and have a longer conversation.

Linda McMahon 14:08

I enjoyed it very much. Thank you.

Nina Rees 14:10

Thank you very much. Thank you. [Applause]

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