Transcript: The Lost Decade of Education Reform with Steven F. Wilson

(00:00) Introduction and background

Susan Pendergrass: Well, Steven Wilson, thank you so much for coming onto the podcast. We were just speaking before we started recording about how long you and I have been kind of working in the—you completely in the charter space and me somewhat adjacently in the charter school space—and have just seen things change and evolve over time in ways that... some are great and some are less great.

You have a new book out, *The Lost Decade: Return to the Fight for Better Schools in America*, which is fantastic. You know, 20 years ago, I thought charter schools were going to be part of the answer—to competitively spur non-charter schools to do better and to give parents options and lifeboats in some of our worst urban districts. There were so many high-flying charter school networks emerging, like KIPP—the Knowledge is Power Program—that were like, "Look, it's not the kids."

These kids can do as much as any kids—even if they're poor, even if they are in an urban district, even if their mom is single and has two jobs. We're not going to give them excuses. We're going to have high expectations and we're going to instill discipline. And they started this whole "no excuses" thing. And I thought that was such a great thing for kids. Then... I don't know. Please, you tell me. I'm sure you know more than I do.

(01:10) The shift away from academic excellence

Steven F. Wilson: Well, first of all, Susan, I'm delighted to be with you—and I'm even more delighted that you've read the book. That's thrilling.

Yes, I think your introduction really nails it. We had found a once-in-a-century educational intervention that had extraordinary effects: the so-called "no excuses" school. (Terrible name, by the way—maybe we should clarify that for listeners.) Around 2000, or in the few years leading up to that, urban charter networks were posting extraordinary effects. They were beginning to show a way out of educational inequality in this country—and then they lost the thread.

They turned away from the North Star of achievement—of great instruction—which is what drove them and their success. And they began to embrace another ideology, another purpose, that I think has been quite destructive. That's the theme of the book. I refer to it as anti-racist education or social justice education.

Look, we all thought we were doing social justice, right? We thought we were doing anti-racism. We thought that by providing an instructionally effective path—where children could enter the middle class and not be consigned to a life of the minimum wage—we were addressing inequality in America. But we've unfortunately turned away from that.

I called the book *The Lost Decade* because we are now exactly halfway through it. We need to make a sharp pivot back to what was working. My book is really a call to action—a call to return to what works, and pick up where we left off.

(03:47) Mislabeling structure as racism

Susan Pendergrass: So when you say the anti-racist movement, I think what I remember hearing is… making kids stand in line is racist?

Steven F. Wilson: Yeah, that's right. So a whole lot of things were labeled racist when, in fact, they were just creating the conditions under which children could be safe, respected, and have an opportunity to learn—conditions where teachers could teach.

People forget what the urban classroom looked like 30 years ago when all this began. There's a book called *Let the Lady Teach* by Emily Socker. She was an education journalist who taught for a year and took stunning photos. You see New York City classrooms with graffiti-covered walls, broken desks—a scene of abject neglect and contempt for students.

The founders of the no-excuses schools did two things. First, they established order. Children needed to feel safe from gangs, violence, and low-level disorder. The balled-up paper no one picks up, the broken pencil, the kids talking over the teacher—all that had to stop. That was the foundation for joyful, effective learning environments.

Second, they adopted the pledge of no excuses. As professionals, we agreed to stop blaming poverty, racism, or lack of resources for why students weren't learning. Those challenges are real—but we cannot let them prevent us from doing our job: educating children. That was an ennobling cultural decision—and it drove the successes that followed.

(06:38) School uniforms and equality

Susan Pendergrass: I also remember how those high-performing charter networks were some of the first public schools to require uniforms. At the time, people said, "You can't make low-income students wear belts," and yet… they did. Schools helped them. They found a way.

Steven F. Wilson: Exactly. Uniforms did a couple of things: they created a sense of order and purpose and they eliminated status anxiety about clothes or sneakers. They created a level playing field where all kids could feel safe and focused.

(07:54) Why charter schools changed

Susan Pendergrass: So why did things change around 2005 or so? Why were charter schools so susceptible to this shift?

Steven F. Wilson: Good question. My view—and it can be contested—is that charter schools were uniquely susceptible because of their reliance on young, novice teachers, and because they experienced higher staff turnover than traditional districts. So you had more new teachers arriving, often from elite universities. These teachers had been acculturated in anti-racist ideology and brought it with them.

With 20 to 25 percent staff attrition over four years, you can essentially have a whole new faculty. These new teachers weren't part of the early TFA generation who felt called to close the achievement gap. Instead, they came in animated by the ideas of Ibram Kendi, Robin DiAngelo, and more radical voices like Tema Okun—who claimed that objectivity and love of the written word were traits of white supremacy.

So teachers began to question whether enforcing discipline or holding students to high standards was racist. Some networks—like Success Academy and Brooke Charter Schools—held their ground. Others capitulated. They didn't make the case for their methods or explain how they aligned with a true liberal arts education.

(11:35) Parental demand and satisfaction

Susan Pendergrass: And these were the very things that parents wanted, right? The structure, the discipline?

Steven F. Wilson: Absolutely. These schools conducted annual parent surveys—Ascend, KIPP, Achievement First. Satisfaction rates were consistently above 90%. I've never heard of a parent asking for more anti-racist programming. What they wanted was a better education and a secure path to college and career. That path has eroded horribly over the past five years.

(14:52) Test score declines

Susan Pendergrass: So what were the actual outcomes of the shift?

Steven F. Wilson: In New York City—the nation's largest market—urban no-excuses charters used to dramatically outperform traditional schools on state tests. That performance premium eroded by two-thirds over five years. Now, many of them perform just slightly better than the city average. But the networks that stuck with their methods—Success Academy and Classical Charter Schools—have either maintained or improved their results.

(16:29) Can "anti-racist" schools succeed academically?

Susan Pendergrass: And you couldn't find any high-achieving schools that had adopted the anti-racist framework?

Steven F. Wilson: I looked, and no—I couldn't find any.

(17:24) What should we do now?

Susan Pendergrass: So what now? How do we turn this around?

Steven F. Wilson: We need to have honest conversations—conversations that have been avoided for too long. And then we need to win the contest of ideas. The no-excuses model works. RAND found that students who attend KIPP middle and high schools have nearly the same college completion rates as white students nationwide. That's an astonishing result.

There's growing recognition that the ideological shift hasn't worked—but fear still dominates. I think that will change within the next year.

(19:47) DEI and illiberalism on both sides

Susan Pendergrass: Meanwhile, terms like “equity” and “DEI” have been politicized. What’s your take on that?

Steven F. Wilson: I support DEI—when it’s done right. Diversity, equity, and inclusion should foster a sense of belonging. What doesn’t work is dividing people into affinity groups or pushing a worldview of oppressors versus oppressed. That’s deeply harmful.

And the answer isn’t to fight illiberalism with more illiberalism—banning concepts, censoring teachers. That’s not how we solve the problem.

(22:24) Accountability, data, and racism claims

Susan Pendergrass: In Missouri, we’ve got very low accountability. Our state system gives almost every district an “A.” When we created our own school grading system, we were told assigning D’s and F’s is racist—because those schools mostly serve Black and Brown students. But parents *know* when their child’s school is bad. They want a way out.

Steven F. Wilson: Right. The claim that it's racist to report poor outcomes is a distraction—usually from the teachers’ unions or anti-reformers. They say schools are just reproducing structural poverty and racism. Horace Mann would roll over in his grave.

We need competition. In many communities, the majority school systems are unreformable. The faster path to success is to build new schools around them.

(26:05) Urgency and action

Susan Pendergrass: I hear "fix the schools we have" all the time. But people have been trying that for decades. If your house is on fire, don’t just stand there—build something next door.

Steven F. Wilson: Exactly. People cling to the existing system out of habit or emotion. But it isn’t working. And as you said, we need urgency. That’s another value some now call “racist.” But if your kid is in a broken classroom, you *feel* that urgency.

High-performing charter schools acted on it. They made staffing changes midyear. They reopened quickly during COVID. They didn’t let failure sit.

(28:22) Conclusion

Susan Pendergrass: Yes, and that urgency made a difference. Our unaccredited districts have been that way for so long a child could attend from kindergarten to 12th grade without any improvement.

The Lost Decade: Return to the Fight for Better Schools in America couldn’t be more timely. Steven, thank you so much for coming on.

Steven F. Wilson: Such a pleasure, Susan. Great to see you.

Susan Pendergrass: Same. Thank you.