



## Season 3, Episode 3, “When the Kids Come First,” Oct. 11, 2022

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**Kurt Greenbaum:** From Olin Business School at Washington University in St Louis, I'm Kurt Greenbaum, and this is On Principle. Suppose you've just been hired to fix what's ailing with a broken business. Customers aren't happy. The product doesn't meet expectations. But just as you're starting to execute your strategy, unforeseen circumstances intervene. A lawsuit. A difference of opinion among leadership. Then what happens?

In today's episode of On Principle, that's the story we're going to tell. But in this story, the business's customers are parents and children. And in one sense, you might even say that children are also the product. In fact, we're not even really talking about a business at all. We're talking about a public school district, a district forced by a crisis to confront financial issues, leadership issues, facilities issues and staffing issues. And today, the former CEO, the district's former superintendent, guides us through a difficult episode for this non-business business, and why sometimes it's not always just about business.

**Ty McNichols:** My name is Dr. Ty McNichols. And what I do now is a couple of things. One, I teach online classes with the University of West Georgia. I also do the same for Webster University for their Ed Administration program.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** Ty also works with Washington University's Institute for School Partnership as an executive coach, supporting principals as they develop their leadership skills and their teams. But the truth is, Ty's experience in public education runs the gamut over a decades-long career. He's been a teaching assistant, a middle and elementary school classroom teacher. He's been an assistant principal and a principal. He's been an assistant superintendent. He's worked in wealthy school districts. He worked in struggling districts. He's done classroom instruction and a job training program called SLATE. And, of course, he's been a district superintendent. But we'll get to that in a moment.

**Ty McNichols:** When I went away to college, one of the things that I told the advisor I wanted to do was something with maybe a track coach in psychology because I thought I liked psychology. They said, "We don't have that kind of degree, so maybe you should consider education—secondary." And I knew I didn't want to work at the

high school, not because I don't like high school kids or anything like that. I just thought I can be more impactful at the elementary level. And prior to that, I had worked with the SLATE program in the St. Louis city, and I was a teacher assistant. So I got to work with some very young people and really enjoyed that and thought that was something I could do that can impact the lives of children. Working in that SLATE program, the coordinator of that department had told me that I was working with a young person who wouldn't hardly talk to anyone, and she had complimented me on my ability to get the student to talk and to start working. That sense that I had made some impact, and I was only in eighth grade going into high school, that this was something I probably can do.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** At some point, the superintendency in the Normandy School District came on your radar. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Ty McNichols:** Well, I had never really planned to be a superintendent. My trajectory was to be a college professor, actually, go into an administration, really learn about it, become effective with it, and then maybe go to the college level and teach others how to be a more effective administrator. And so at the time, I was working in Hazelwood. Dr. Nicastro, who was Dr. Wright at that time, had suggested that I should go into, consider the superintendency. And one of the reasons was, she said, I think you could be more effective as a superintendent now than you can as a professor of administration. It has always been my passion to work in communities where I felt I can use my skills as a part of being a social justice approach to impacting education, and particularly students who have the least amount of resources.

And so here's Normandy. I know they're having the issues. I knew the superintendent was leaving. A couple of people had mentioned some things to me about, had I considered that. And I had said that, you know, I was thinking about it. And so then I went ahead and applied to it. Fortunately for me, I got the opportunity to be the superintendent. And so in all of those other communities that I had an opportunity to work in, I was able to go in, build that rapport and turn those schools around within two to three years of my experience working with them. So I felt this was an opportunity to do the same at the superintendency level for a district that was near and struggling. And plus, I have family members that live in that district. And so I also saw this as a way to help give back to the community that my grandmother grew up in.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** A moment ago, we heard Ty mention that, at the time, Normandy was having issues. During our conversation, he was a little more blunt about it. Normandy was in crisis. That was his word. By the time Ty was named superintendent, the district had lost its state accreditation entirely. Now, accreditation is the state's shorthand for how well a school district is delivering on outcomes for students—test scores, attendance, student/teacher ratios, teacher quality, that sort of thing. This district in north St. Louis County, a district where more than nine out of 10 students received free or reduced-price lunches, a district where 97% of its

students were black—well, the state said it was failing. It wasn't helping students progress adequately in language arts, in math, in graduation rates, in attendance. Nothing. It sounds like a rough situation to walk into cold. And, you know, a lot of people might say that's the problem I don't really want. So why did you apply?

**Ty McNichols:** Well, I thought I could make a difference. I thought I could impact the community. And my record had shown that I could. So. And like I said, I guess I got a soft heart for going into communities and learning communities where they're very challenging and trying to make a difference. And to me, this is my way of providing a sense of social justice, because I believe those kids, those communities need a fighting chance for their children to be able to have the same access I've been able to have because of my fortunate sense of being born to parents who have some resources.

One of the things that was clear to me was that the board-superintendent relationship had some cracks in it, and some of that was because the personality between some of the board members and ... and my predecessor were at odds with each other for whatever reason. And I didn't go down that road to try to find that information out. What I made clear coming in is that it was essential that we, the board and the superintendent, work in a partnership. And if there were things that they felt that they didn't agree with, that we needed to have an honest, candid conversation. If the community thinks that the board and the superintendent can't work together, then they lose trust in the school system. And I made it very clear to the board that that was an essential component in changing the culture of the district—is that we needed to look unified. And so if there's something that you don't believe will help children, then let me know. And if you have something that you think might be more effective, bring it to the table.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** So at this point, let's set the stage. In March 2013, Ty is named superintendent of the Normandy School District. Technically, he's a consultant until his contract formally starts July 1. But that's not stopping him. In those first few months, he's making himself as visible as possible. He's meeting with everyone—parents and students, municipal mayors and school board members, district staff and school principals—everyone with a stake in Normandy's success. Ty said those conversations were vital because those relationships would all contribute to the work of improving student outcomes. Then on June 11, 2013, about three months after Ty started, the Missouri Supreme Court handed down a ruling. The case was called *Breitenfeld versus the Clayton School District*, and it centered on three questions. First, can parents who live in failing school districts, districts like Normandy, send their children to a nearby district? Second, is the receiving district required to accept those students? And third, who covers the cost of those students?

**Ty McNichols:** The Clayton School District loses, and because they lose, it opens up the door for unaccredited districts to be mandated or to allow for students to transfer out of those schools and for those districts to pay the cost of those receiving districts for those kids that go. And so now we go from just trying to put structures

and systems in place to turn around a struggling school district to now we could potentially lose major resources and students and potentially staff if enough students left, that could impact the whole organization.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** Have you got that? The ruling is pretty straightforward. Parents can move their kids to a nearby district or a district in a neighboring county. The receiving district has to accept those kids. And the original school district, the district where the student lives, must pay the per-pupil cost for schooling and transportation in the receiving district. And as you'll hear, most of the students who left Normandy chose to attend school in the Francis Howell district in neighboring St. Charles County. The per-student costs were similar to Normandy's. But parents didn't have to pick Francis Howell.

**Ty McNichols:** So if a kid chose to go to Clayton from Normandy at that time, then Clayton's cost per student was \$21,000, and Normandy's cost per student was about 11 and a half. So we would have to send \$21,000 to Clayton for every single kid that would have got accepted and chosen to go to the Clayton School District. So for ... basically ... for every one kid that left that kid took money that two students in Normandy would have normally have had access to. It made it very difficult for us to project financial stability with the uncertainty, particularly in June, of how many kids would be accepted into all these different locations and how many kids would actually leave. And fortunately for us, I mean, fortunately or unfortunately, about 1,200 applied, but only about 1,100 actually left. Some of the students decided to stay and give us a chance as a new administration to work with their children.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** How many students were in the Normandy School District at the time?

**Ty McNichols:** Normandy had about 3,500 students at that time, so we were down to about 2,200 students after they left.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** I mean, that's a substantial percentage.

**Ty McNichols:** It's almost a third.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** You are now two and a half months from starting a school year. What has to happen?

**Ty McNichols:** I took the opportunity to walk outside in 90-degree weather in a suit and talk to families to try to find out why they were leaving. A lot of what I heard was families felt like the central office had not been responsive to their concerns. It wasn't they didn't like teachers. It wasn't that things were totally out of control. They felt central office was not communicating with them, was not being upfront.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** Ty, can you paint me a picture of what it's like for a student at this time who has decided they're going to leave Normandy and go to school in Francis Howell?

**Ty McNichols:** Based on the conversations I had with some of the students and their families, it was mixed. You know, some people were very happy about going because they wanted to be in another learning community, and some were not because of what happened on the news. Once Francis Howell found out that they were going to be receiving our students, there was a negative reaction that became very public on the news, and parents were very hostile to the thought of people coming to their district from an unaccredited district. And so there were parents who were a little frightened about putting their kids, their babies on a bus and sending them out to a district where you could see there was some visual hostility on the news about the decision.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** So you've got students who are getting up very early in the morning to catch a bus, to take it a fairly long distance to a school in the neighboring county, and then taking that bus back to their home in Normandy. Meanwhile, back in the Normandy School District, you've got a staff, you've got teachers, you've got principals. Talk to me about what's happening in your home district while all of this is happening.

**Ty McNichols:** My initial goal was to maintain a positive morale for our community. Even though we were losing kids, we still had 2,000 kids plus that we had to educate. And my focus was, how do we provide these kids such a quality education that part of the 1,100 would want to come back? We had to look at cost analysis. For example, you know, we utilized a lot of the local police officers for a lot of the work. We paid them more than we paid our own security people to do some of the work. We had to look at, well, why wouldn't we just pay our people more and hire more people? So that business part of it was part of those decisions. And looking at the systems, that was the goal. And so that meant we had to build effective instructional strategies. We had to make sure that the curriculum was sound. We had to hire a few new principals that were understanding of the importance of being visible, being supportive and being collaborative with their teams. And they accepted that challenge and they were very professional. We were making that kind of positive progress.

The first couple of months was tough. I was in the buildings trying to see how things look, how things were progressing. When we had our principals meetings, we were talking about what is it that was needed? Not, you know, top down, but bottom up, you know, what are we dealing with? What are the challenges? How do we address those challenges? From a financial side, we had to look at, well, how do we continue to make sure we have enough resources to make it through the year? From the business side of the job as a superintendent, I was constantly meeting with my new CFO to make sure that we were on target to meet our needs financially.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** By October of 2013, two months into the school year, as students and money left the Normandy district, it was clear Ty was going to have to make cuts. Ty and his team planned for cuts in both district staff and school teachers. Some were laid off. Some were offered early retirement. They communicated carefully with all the stakeholders ahead of time, including the teachers union. They closed an elementary school entirely and sold five or six other buildings that had previously been closed. They redistributed students and teachers, reorganized bus routes and communicated all the changes before the end of the winter break and the start of the spring semester in January 2014.

**Ty McNichols:** In any crisis, one learns who they are in regard to what they value, what they believe, what is their priority. For me, as I said earlier, I think I got into this because I have a social justice bent, and I see education as a tool to help children play what I call the game of life. And without an education, there's very few kids, particularly from poor or struggling communities, who could be successful without an education. Because that's what I value, my strength and my determination to try to make things work in that district was obvious, I think, to the community. I think the community understood that I was committed to them and the kids.

**Saint Rice:** I could relate to Dr. McNichols from a personal point of view, because I could see and hear his passion. Right? Many times leaders who work in those ... in those environments work with school districts who have those types of challenges, are very passionate about what they do. It's really not about the money, it's about the impact.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** That's Saint Rice, my colleague at WashU Olin Business School. Saint is the assistant dean and director of faculty, staff and community engagement on Olin's diversity and inclusion team. He's also earned his doctorate in education from Maryville University in higher education leadership with experience in criminal justice, criminology, sociology and the relationship between the classroom and social justice. We talked about the relationship between public education, leadership and business.

**Saint Rice:** Unfortunately, many times our school districts who are in low-income, low-resourced communities operate in crises. And part of that crisis has to do with economic crises. And so you see policies such as we won't deal with disciplinary issues because we don't want to send that child home because we need those tax dollars because of the system that's set in place. Also, crises as it relates to high-stress environments for the teachers and for the administrators and really dealing with a lot of issues because the source of those issues that students are bringing in are a reflection of the issues, the bigger issues in the communities, in the homes. And so many times it's not just the school that's in crisis, but it's also the community that's in crisis. Right? You have a low rate of employment, a low rate of job opportunities that's accessible to the community members. Right? And when I say accessible, they don't have to go a long ways to get to a job, to get to a factory, to get to a place where they can earn a livable wage.

We also have what we call the social strain. And so when we looking at the social strain theory, even when individuals desire to do what's right, but in some communities, that path is not that easy. When I have to think about how I'm going to feed my children, you know, just today, I can't think about, you know, putting into a 401(k) or, you know, planning for a vacation. All those issues, you know, that we deal with in that community are going to be present in that school, which puts that school in a place of crisis. One of the things that Dr. McNichols mentioned was as a leader, he had to really understand and learn what his values were, what his belief systems, why were they founded, and what he stood on in his belief systems. He had to understand what the priorities were. When you're dealing in a crisis situation, everything can't be priorities. And what was he willing to sacrifice and what was he not willing to sacrifice? And I believe that in this day and time, that business leaders, these are questions that business leaders have to have, they're having with themselves. You see more and more business leaders, they are working with life coaches. They're working with individuals who can help them really understand not the business, but how they align with the mission of the business. They have to understand how they are and they have to understand how the leadership team allies.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** What do you view as the business interests in talking about this story?

**Saint Rice:** Businesses are based off relationships. Of course, you know, there's an economic return on it. But if that business does not relate to the community, if their business practices, if their cultural values, things like that, if those things aren't relating to the primary stakeholders, then that business is not going to be in existence very long. And so when we're talking about education, education although we like to think of it from the lens of it not being a business, but it really is. When you think about the things that Dr. McNichols was talking about and he talked about how much they had to pay per student per month, I think it was somewhere like a minimum of \$11,000 per student per month. That's a business case that we got to look at.

He also talked about having properties that were not being utilized—buildings, things like that. That's a business case. He talked about leadership, the impact of leadership in how leadership saw the direction of that district. Right? That's business. So education is more than just centered on students. When we're talking about the amount of taxes, when we're talking about legislative responses and actions, all these things are business-minded entities. We looking at all of these different things we don't oftentimes think about from a business lens.

**Ty McNichols:** The first year, we were able to maintain the financial stability to put in place a lot of systems. And then in June of 2014, the state decided that they wanted to take over. So they wanted to get rid of the elected board. And they wanted to appoint their own board to be the facilitators of what would happen in a district.

And so that changed the whole dynamics of what we put in place. So all those structures, all those systems, all those relationships that we had built to get people to buy in to what we were trying to do, the reformation plan that we had the community to help us produce. All of that energy was thrown out the door when the state decided they would take over. And so the first part of that was all of the staff were fired and had to reapply for their positions. Some of the principals were replaced with new people. So all of the relationships that we have built with the community and with the families who chose to stay were being disrupted by new people who had not had that relationship. We had a boatload of new teachers who had come in, who had no experience and ... and created a lot of unintended consequences with discipline and instruction. And things just went from being very structured, very solid, and the movement toward progress to being stalled because now we were putting out fires of things we had not had to put out fires before because staffing was so significantly different. So it created some tension in the system.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** In less than two years, Ty and his team had weathered quite a bit. At some point during his tenure, however, while the district was still operating without accreditation, the state installed a new school board. The district morphed into what became known as the Normandy Schools Collaborative. And while Ty came out of the experience feeling like he'd made a difference in a short time, he was also realistic about the next steps he'd have to take.

**Ty McNichols:** After 22 months, the board ... appointed board and I ... felt that it was time for a change. There are a lot of people in a crisis, when you are faced with is it me or is it them? And they'll say it's them. For me, it was it's me then. If I have to go for them to be able to be successful, then I'll go. I was willing to sacrifice my career for the sake of the children. I think there were a lot of positive relationships that were built. I think the morale, even though at the year-and-a-half mark when I left, I think the morale was moving in a positive direction with the staff. Kids were starting to learn. The kids who had had teachers that had come back, that were highly effective teachers were starting to reap the benefits of the professional development we had provided.

So I think there were a lot of things that were starting to improve. But some of that was because we did the groundwork the first year. Having gone from being a TA to the superintendent, I pretty much have done all the jobs associated with what a certified person might go through. Because I have that experience, I know the pros and cons, having worked in seven different districts, very affluent districts like Clayton, to very poor districts, challenging districts like the St. Louis Public Schools. Having that span of knowledge gives me a sense of what has worked. And the one thing that's a constant in all of those is that kids are kids, rich kids, poor kids, multiracial kids, black kids, white kids, Asian kids. Kids are kids. They're going to be kids. And so we have to realize that we're dealing with children. We're not dealing with mini adults. They're children. And so as children who might have a variety of experiences, we have to tap into that knowledge base. And to me, that's my



takeaway, and I don't think that's any different than the business. You need to understand the clientele that you're working with. You have to know what do they value and be able to tap into that to motivate them to take the products or to sell or to buy the things that you're interested in. I think that's very similar to being a leader in a school district. Sometimes you're successful, sometimes you're not. Sometimes you're not successful because the powers that be have a different agenda, you know? And if you're not in a position of power to be able to mandate those things, you have to make a choice. Because sometimes you have to go to grow.

**Kurt Greenbaum:** And that's a wrap for this episode of On Principle. Thank you to Ty McNichols for taking us back in time and putting the business issues into perspective for this challenging episode. My thanks also to my colleague Saint Rice for the context and background he lent to the story. We'll link to more information about both Ty and Saint, as well as stories about this period in the life of the Normandy School District. You can find those links and more with the show notes for this episode on our website. You can also find previous episodes of On Principle, so please visit [onprincipalpodcast.com](http://onprincipalpodcast.com) for all of that. Meanwhile, don't forget to subscribe to On Principle in your favorite podcasting app so you get updates when new episodes drop. I also welcome comments, questions or episode ideas by email at Olin podcast at W-U-S-T-L dot E-D-U. That's [olinpodcast@wustl.edu](mailto:olinpodcast@wustl.edu).

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