



TEA Time: Commissioner Morath's 2018 Conversation with 'The Uninformed Parent' Podcast – January 2019

Host: Welcome to TEA Time, a podcast about all things public education from the Texas Education Agency.

Happy new year, and welcome again to another edition of TEA Time, here from the Texas Education Agency. Today, we have the pleasure of bringing you an excerpt from a conversation Commissioner Morath conducted last year with a Dallas-area podcast called "The Uninformed Parent." Here, he chats with host Keri Mitchell about the A-F accountability system and how he chose the school his child attends.

Keri Mitchell: So initially, when we were talking a while back, I kind of brought up this hypothesis of, OK, so you've got demographic X going to school; you probably will have test scores Y. I mean, this is just kind of a hypothesis I've been toying with. And then you shared with me a story that I loved about what you would tell parents when you were on the campaign trail as a Dallas ISD board member. Can you tell me that story again?

Mike Morath: Well, sure. It's really a question of, what do we think about when we think about school quality? How do we evaluate how good a school is?

Let's hypothesize the existence of two campuses — Campus A and Campus B. All they do is serve fourth-graders. That's all they do. These are hypothetical, fictional campuses. In Campus A, every kid that walks in is performing at a fifth-grade level. Campus A doesn't employ any teachers. There's almost no adults in that building. At the end of the year, we assess the students to see what they know in terms of fourth-grade content. All the kids do extremely well, because they all knew fifth-grade content when they walked in the door. But of course they haven't learned anything. Then you go to Campus B, and in Campus B, again, same situation, fourth-grade, only every kid that walks in, walks in performing as an entry-level kindergartner. We have assembled the best group of teachers on Earth, and they teach kids all of kindergarten and then all of first-grade and even halfway through second-grade. Then of course, we do an assessment to see what they know of fourth-grade content by the end of the year, and all the students fail because they started at kindergarten.

If you're looking just at passing rates at a school, one of these schools has a 100 percent on it; one of these schools has a 0 percent, and what do we think of as the better school? And everybody obviously goes "Well, clearly Campus B is the better school; Campus A didn't even have any adults working in it." But that belies the complexity of, how do we evaluate school quality when most of the information that we have on schools that comes out tells us what kids know in terms of their grade level knowledge and skills?

I'm a parent, so I had to go through this process to pick a school for my little girl. I'm scouring the internet for resources on, which schools am I eligible to get into because I don't even need to look at the ones that I'm not in, and we're not moving. So, you're thinking about geographic radius and drive time and that kind of thing just to get this universe of schools. But some of them don't allow transfers, and they're not open enrollment; some of them do allow transfers and they're open enrollment. Some of them have specific academic programs — so I don't speak Spanish and I don't speak any other language. I have my troubles with English. So I really wanted my little girl to learn Spanish, and so I was interested in an elementary school where they had a lot of

Spanish, like a dual language program. So, I was then looking for, OK, what kind of academic program do they have at the school? So, now I'm filtering by, is pre-K available and is it a dual-language pre-K? So now, I'm down to a narrow universe. And do they allow tuition slots, or is it only for statutorily eligible kids? And then do they allow transfers?

At this point, this is an entire Sunday afternoon I have spent just getting to this universe of schools, and I'm the commissioner of education. If it is this difficult for me — and I haven't even gotten to evaluate school quality; I'm just looking at basic requirements — I just think, this must be impossible for parents in the state of Texas because it's impossible for me. I am a parent the state of Texas. And then I start looking at school quality. I'm in a fairly unique position that I know a lot about the measures of school quality. So, when we look at test scores, there's a couple of different ways to look at them. One is just rates of proficiency. So, let's say you had a hundred percent of kids who are meeting grade level. That's awesome. Very rare, but that's awesome. Maybe it's only 50 percent who are meeting great level or 75 percent or 30 percent of kids are meeting grade level. When parents are trying to evaluate a school, the sort of ambient school quality is important, but what is actually most important for me when I was thinking about my little girl is, how my little girl is going to experience that school. So then I started to look at, which group of students is my girl most like on that campus? How do those students do?

Keri Mitchell: Can you parse that from looking at a school's evaluation?

Mike Morath: Well, the commissioner of education can. It is really difficult for a non-commissioner of education parent to do so, but I could. So there's a school that's about a 15-18 minute drive from our house, met all the other boxes, and then the ambient school quality was about a C. And I would prefer a higher level of school quality than that, but that's what it was. When I did my sort of subgroup analysis — my student group, rather, analysis, what group of students is my kid most like — they were performing extremely high, and so I thought, well, we'll give this one a try. You know, it took me, I don't know, an afternoon to assemble all the data to kind of inform the decision, but I didn't actually make the final decision then. In fact, I would never tell a parent to make a decision just based upon these data sources. You have to actually go visit the school.

Keri Mitchell: And that's coming from someone who really likes data.

Mike Morath: Yes. Yeah, well, because there's lots of forms of data, so observing people is another form of data. Yes. So there were three or four schools that were actually in my short list that I said, OK, these will all work. These have the requisite level of school quality, requisite academic program. So then I visited all three schools. I didn't tell them who I was, because that always freaks people out. I'm just a parent the neighborhood checking things out.

Keri Mitchell: They didn't recognize you?

Mike Morath: Uh, not at that time. I did classroom walkthroughs. So, I'm looking at how the teachers are interacting with their current students, seeing how the kids are treating each other because that speaks to how well the classroom management environment is set up. Of course, my kid at that point was fixing to start pre-K, so I want to see the pre-K and kindergarten classrooms most. And then, from that, I was like, "Alright, it'll work. I think this will be fine."

Keri Mitchell: How's it going?

Mike Morath: She's loved it. She comes home and somebody might have been mean to her on the playground one day, and you've got to sort of deal with that as a parent, you immediately sort of ... I'm going to go address aggressively that other parent, but you know self-control sets in and you're like, what's the most appropriate way to try to address this situation? Every parent deals with this stuff.

Keri Mitchell: Right. You're no different.

Mike Morath: It's the normal stuff of dealing with what your kid's living through in school. There was a meet-the-teacher night, and there was another sort of school-wide night, so I went there and asked the teacher some questions. I think you should definitely feel sorry for the teacher who has the commissioner of education's kid in their class.

Keri Mitchell: I do! I do!

Mike Morath: Because I don't think she's used to getting the kinds of questions that I was asking her. It's just, you know, like, talk to me about the nature of the specific curriculum tool that you're using. How are you progress monitoring your students? What systems of classroom management do you have in place?

Keri Mitchell: This poor teacher. Was she ready for you?

Mike Morath: I think she's great.

Keri Mitchell: I remember that you taught very, very briefly in your life, so you have kind of an empathy for teachers.

Mike Morath: Teaching is an incredibly difficult job. I reflect on it all the time. Now that I've spent, you know, the better part of the last seven years of my life deeply studying this, there are practitioner's guidebooks, if you will, that highlight specific teaching practices. So for example, if you're in classroom teaching and you want the kids to pay attention to you, so you say, "Hey, kids, listen up!" Which is of course what I did in my whopping six months of teaching, and it turns out that's actually a pretty lousy practice because you can't observe the children listening to you. If, however, instead of saying "Hey kids, listen up," you said, "Alright, pencils on your desk, eyes towards me." That is, essentially you're communicating the same thing. It's a transition in the class. I want you to look at me. I want you to pay attention. Everybody pay attention. Everybody listen up. But I can see if you put your pencils down and looked at me. And even like, where in the room you say that — are you saying that in a place in the room where you can physically see everybody all at once or do you have to scan around like sort of a radar thing and as you're looking at one group of kids, you can't see another group of kids.

So when you see real masters of the craft teaching and applying their trade, there are a hundred simultaneous things happening like a perfect ballet or a complicated orchestra. As I reflect on how much teachers have to practice and study, I feel like I'm in the presence of awesomeness every time I walk into a classroom, watching a teacher doing their thing.

Keri Mitchell: That's pretty cool. When parents are looking at schools they look at data points, but you're saying, you know, walk in and and look into classrooms, look at how things are going in a school. You know what to look for — what should they be looking for?

Mike Morath: Well, you know, I think I know what to look for, but there's a sort of Maslow's Hierarchy. Are the kids all safe and acting right? Does the teacher, the way they interact with the student, does it appear to

be an interaction of love or compliance or I want to get out of here? Those are things that parents don't need to be trained on. They know.

Keri Mitchell: It's a gut kind-of feeling?

Mike Morath: They go and they know and they can tell that. That's different than specific acts of pedagogy like, are they managing transitions effectively? Is the content that they're offering on grade-level rigor? To some extent, you can do that, too. So you could ask "Can I see just a sample assignment this this week?" So you look at it, and you're like, "This is too easy for my kid," or, "This is super hard. I really want my kid to learn this." That's the reason you go to do site visits. The data sort of tells you the sum total of all that because, you know, very rigorous curriculum very high highly executed practices that will lead to higher student growth rates and higher proficiency rates, but there's nothing like seeing it for yourself to just be sure.

Keri Mitchell: So I'm a parent. I live in a certain area, and I've got these schools around me. I've got one that's a B, one that's a C, one that's a D. Do I automatically go to the B? What do I do? How do I figure that one out?

Mike Morath: Broadly speaking, what the state measures is the breadth of proficiency. That's different than the depth of proficiency. So, are students meeting a certain threshold of grade level knowledge, and what percent of students are reaching that threshold? You can imagine that a school where that breadth of proficiency is pretty weakly distributed. Maybe only 30 percent of the kids are reaching grade-level proficiency, but 25 percent of the kids are actually going well beyond grade level. So, there is a certain group of students who are extremely high rigor and going very deep in knowledge. If you happen to be one of those kids in that school, then that school's probably a great experience for you. If you're one of the other kids, that school's probably not. The ratings themselves are a good indicator of broad school quality, but the next thing that parents need to decide is, "Is this going to be a good fit for my individual child?"

Keri Mitchell: Right. And that is always the tricky point. You talked about a school, School B, for example, where you've got teachers that spent a year getting kids up two and a half grade levels. Is it possible to see from state —

Mike Morath: That'll be an A campus. That will show up as an A. There's no doubt about it. Because one of the measures of the new A-F system is called school progress.

Keri Mitchell: So I have a third-grader. My third-grader's at third-grade level, but she's in a classroom full of kids at first-grade level. The school is a good school, and those teachers can get those first-graders up to a third-grade level. Should I expect that that then means my third-grader will be up to a fifth-grade level? How does that work?

Mike Morath: Yeah, not really. I mean, if you see a school where they're consistently offering like, a year-and-a-half's worth of instructional gain in a year, your kid's going to be extremely well supported in that school, regardless of their starting proficiency level. It's a logical leap that data doesn't support to say that your kid would end up, you know, an extra grade level above as a result of that.

Keri Mitchell: But it's not as if my kid is going to be held back by the the first-graders?

Mike Morath: So, there's actually a huge body of research that tries to answer this topic, and I think as a parent when I think about it, I was like, well, even if everybody else started as a kindergartener, and they end up as a fourth-grader, if my kid started as a third-grader, my kid's not going to get as much progress in that environment. So, there have been researchers that have actually asked that question. Is that true?

What the research tells us is, one, we don't know at the level of an individual student whether that is true. We do know at the level of a campus that, that is not true. There is not a campus-wide effect in some way that slows down the growth of some students if other students are starting below them and grow pretty fast. So it's hard to get particularly informed causal data on this, but there is, there's a wealth of correlative data that would indicate that that doesn't actually happen.

There is, however, another body of research on the peer effects of education. Being around a bunch of brainiac kids has a positive ambient effect on the overall performance of the school. So there's are these two sort of conflicting bodies of evidence in this case. So that's why I always defer to the judgment of individual parents. You want to check out the school, make a judgment call that you think is best for your kids. You're going to do that better than anybody else.

Keri Mitchell: Right. And not just look at a school's general score and go "no way."

Mike Morath: Yeah. My process was I looked at the overall performance of the campus to inform my decision-making to filter down to a certain number of campuses, and then I went and did site visits. I would recommend that as practice for any parent.

Keri Mitchell: So, you're looking at test scores as the education commissioner differently than you are as a parent?

Mike Morath: Well, sort of, yes, because I think when we look at evaluating a school, there's really two different audiences that are evaluating schools. One is mama and dad, and they are making a judgment call on the school's quality for their individual child. The other are policymakers — think school board members, superintendents, principals, who are trying to say "OK. This is where we were one year. Are we better next year? Are we the same next year or worse next year?" One of those is a process of continuous improvement that you're using to try to inform practice for a whole bunch of adults employed in that system. The other is, I need to know, does this set up my kid for success? So, you're going to then make different decisions based upon that evaluation.

Keri Mitchell: In other words, parents are more likely to send their kids to a school where other kids are looking like them [and] performing like them. There's kind of this guarantee of what the kids are like or what the families are like rather than necessarily how effective a school is according to progress and whatnot.

Mike Morath: There's some evidence to that, but actually again I think it's just because you get different users of this information that are using it for different reasons. Parents are using it to inform decisions for their kids, and policymakers are using to inform decisions to improve the schools.

Keri Mitchell: So, we need to understand that as parents when we're looking at schools.

Mike Morath: The new A-F system has three different domains in it. One that looks at proficiency levels of kids. What's the percentage of kids that are on grade level in that school? What's the percentage of kids that are likely to go on to college and succeed in college? The second is school progress, and that's kind of the impact that the school is having on the kids. Those are two different numbers. They're related, because you're going to have higher levels of student achievement in a school that's more effective. But sometimes you can have relatively high levels of student achievement just because of the kids that happen to walk in the door. The last domain in the new A-F system is called "closing the gaps." That's where we're looking at specific

student groups, and how well groups of students are performing. So, I could then look at that domain and drill down into how well kids who most resemble mine are doing in that school.

Keri Mitchell: Oh so you're saying in the new system, parents will actually be able to kind of parse that knowledge?

Mike Morath: Yeah, we're trying to build tools to empower these choices that parents make as effectively as possible. It's easier said than done, but it's on our roadmap to roll that out. For me, it's a fairly simple process — I'm trying to design a tool that I would use as a parent, and if I like it, then hopefully other parents will like it as well.

Keri Mitchell: And I'm sure if they don't, they'll give you feedback.

Mike Morath: Yes, we try to engage in a continuous improvement process ourselves.

Keri Mitchell: That's great. Thank you for your time today. I appreciate it.

Host: We thank the staff of Oak Cliff's Advocate Magazine and The Uninformed Parent podcast for allowing us to share Commissioner Morath's conversation. We'll have a link to their podcast page online at tea.texas.gov/podcast. For more on this and other education issues, visit our website at tea.texas.gov. For more TEA Time episodes, visit tea.texas.gov/podcast or look for us where you download your other podcasts. Join us again soon for another episode of TEA Time, a podcast from the Texas Education Agency.