



## TRANSCRIPT

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### **Title: THE DEEPER LEARNING PODCAST EP. 6 | Public School Funding in the COVID-19 Era, Part 2**

SFX [Whoosh]

MUSIC UP/UNDER

Al Mijares:

A collapsed tax base, a state shortfall of 54 billion new investments to accommodate social distancing. What does it all mean for school budgets?

MUSIC UP

Hi, I'm Dr. Al Mijares Orange County Superintendent of Schools. In this episode of the Deeper Learning Podcast., we're taking another look at public school funding in the COVID-19 era. This time I'm speaking with Molly McGee-Hewitt, CEO, and Executive Director of the California Association of School Business Officials, CASBO, which has more than 24,000 members is considered the premier resource for California school business leaders.

SFX/MUSIC UNDER/OUT

Let's begin right there. Uh, in terms of the work that we do in education, uh, my colleagues can tell you that I always like to use the word sacred around the matter of education. Let's start here. Um, what, what made you want to be in this work?

Molly McGee Hewitt:

Well, I believe that a free and public education is absolutely foundational to our democracy. I, uh, am a product of a, uh, lower middle class working family who believed that you are way up and out in the world was education. Uh, there was never a chance for a private education when I was growing up, but my parents totally believed in the local public schools and that it would prepare me to go to college and that I could achieve whatever I sought, uh, if I, if I pursued college. And so, as I was growing up, I grew up in a home that had a great deal of respect for public schools and public school teachers.

Molly McGee Hewitt

And then as I grew and attended college and did other things, there were a few times where I moved outside of education and I always came back and I believe I came back because that's where my heart is. I totally believe that education is the one industry profession that you have people who have gotten into this profession because we care. And we believe in what we do. And we believe in the students we serve and we believe it's important. And I think it's never, ever been more important than it is today. And I would like to make sure that we return to what I would call the glory days, where people are so proud of their public schools and that that's our first choice for education.

Al Mijares:

Wow

McGee Hewitt

Long answer.

Al Mijares:

But a very, very, uh, poignant in many ways I could tell that it just kind of springs out of who you are as a person. And, um, very insightful and, uh, wished that all those in education had that same, uh, driving force. So let's talk a little bit right now about the budget. Uh, you've seen many budgets and you really are one of the voices, I think that is most listened to when it comes to the world of finance and budget. What do you tell, like a young business official, uh, just getting started? What would be your words of counsel?

Molly McGee Hewitt:

Well, I believe that the budget is one of the most, um, serious and strongest direction setting documents that you have in the district. Years ago, a friend of mine who was a Methodist minister, uh, gave me this advice. He said, you can always tell a person's priorities by their date book and their checkbook, where they put their money and where they put their time. And I've always remembered that. And I look at school districts and school district budgets. You know, when you are a chief business official, you are the trustee of the public's money. And you are the person that is, is designed, perhaps not to make all the decisions about how it's spent, but to administer what's been directed by the governing board and the superintendent. So your budget for the district sets the priorities of the district. It sets parameters of what you can do.

So I look at the chief business official of a school district, large or small as being a key decision maker at the table, with the superintendent, with the board, with other administrators of providing input and providing direction for the district. So I believe that all, you know, if you don't have a heart for schools and you don't have a heart for the children we serve, and you don't have respect for the people who deliver those services, then you shouldn't be a school business official because those are key elements for your success.

Al Mijares:

That's absolutely correct. So Molly as you contemplate this fiscal year and what we are facing in the world of public education with regards to the budget. I heard recently that after COVID-19 every organization now is a startup organization, meaning you've got to go back and look at your vision. You've got to go back and look at the strategic plan that you have for your organization. What are the metrics? And we're doing that right now in the Orange County Department of Education, but so what advice do you have for us right now? And it would be timely, I think because and sagacious, you are a Sage. So it would be timely to hear from you in terms of, if you were giving us words of counsel with respect to this budget, what would you say?

Molly McGee Hewitt:

Well, thank you for calling me a Sage. I'll start with that. I don't feel like it most of the time. Um, you know, this is not my first budget crisis and I know this is not your first budget crisis either, but we have a bit of, of a storm that COVID-19 has put a whole different dimension into it, as well as we have a lot of very different political issues that are addressed, that we're addressing simultaneously. So, and I do agree with you. I believe that all organizations today are almost startup organizations because we have to look at how we do business.

Today the world of distance learning is an absolute reality. The issues of distance learning along with social distancing are just tremendous for us to deal with, you know, way back in the day. I was an elementary school

teacher and I cannot fathom having my students six feet apart. I can't fathom not being able to pat them on the back or to have interaction with them. I think of all the times when we were at a table and they were circled around me, or we were seated on the floor with younger grades working together, this is a whole new way in which we're entering, uh, the education field and the budget just adds to all of that crisis and calamity about us.

I think what I would say to people is you need to be smarter than you've ever been before. You need to make sure that you understand your budget and you understand your reserve. You understand what is being proposed at the state level, and you keep your flexibility as much as you can, that you stay vigilant as to knowing what is available and how it's available. You know, today, as, as we're looking, I know both, uh, CASBO and ACSA, uh, and I believe the State Department of Ed issued guidelines for reopening schools. There's a lot of, um, discussion about how that's going to happen.

Al Mijares:

Right.

Molly McGee Hewitt:

There are some people who feel that having a blend of distance and in-person learning where you might have half a class in the morning, and then the other half in the afternoon that some of those things will be cost savings for schools.

Those won't be cost savings for schools because the same teacher that's teaching in that classroom can't be doing distance learning at the same time. Every time those kids come on campus, we're going to have to sanitize and go through a process for it. So it's going to impact our facilities, our transportation, et cetera. So there are some ideas out there that, that look good at first blush that we really need to look at carefully and analyze from a standpoint of fiscally what's the best thing. Most importantly, what's the best thing for students.

Name one industry that could pivot on a dime like schools did when COVID happened, whether you had distance learning or not, you got distance learning, whether you had cut back in your departments and how, how you use the internet, et cetera, all of a sudden within days you were an expert at it. So I am actually really proud of public schools and how they have met the challenge of COVID thus far.

Al Mijares:

What would be the, the should be the mindset of, let's say a superintendent or, a leader within the education system today. What should be our mindset looking at this crisis?

Molly McGee Hewitt:

Well, I think it should be the mindset of a leader who is doing what they're doing for the good of the organization, the good of the students that they serve and the communities that they serve. I think leadership, especially today is not for the faint at heart. There are decisions that leaders who are true leaders have to make that are often unpopular. Years ago above my whiteboard in my classroom. I had a sign that says what is right, is not always popular and what is popular is not always right. And I have always believed that whether it's in a leadership position in my family, as a parent in my life, that if I'm going to really do what's right, that there are times when I will do something that is very unpopular with folks. So superintendents today and chief business officials are being placed in positions to help their organizations establish priorities.

And those are going to be very difficult priorities. And so I think one of the parts that we have to keep focused on is what is our purpose? What is the most important thing? And that is delivering services for our students and how we're going to do those. And so having the guts or the courage or whatever you would like to call it, to make those decisions is huge. We're also going to need governing boards that understand that this is a long term issue that we're going to be addressing. And so as elected people, that means that there are times where they're going to have to carry the message to our communities, not just our educators, but our elected leaders to carry the message as to why these cuts are being made or why these decisions are being made.

Al Mijares:

I have two more questions. We live in a political world and that's an understatement. But public schools are governed by elected officials and elected officials are tasked with finding a professional staff. How did you handle the politics? How did you handle those situations where you were being pulled in one direction because of the political tides, but you knew that you couldn't go there because that may not be in the best interest of students.

Molly McGee Hewitt:

You know, I have always believed in local control in education, and I have believed that that local control comes with local responsibility. So the role of school boards is to, and I, I, I call it the art of governance. Some people call it an act, but I think it's an art and governance is when the school board and the superintendent come together to assess the needs, wishes, and desires of the community and to try to put those in alignment with the direction of the district. Unfortunately, over the years, I have seen more and more people with very significant personal interests or single interests get involved in governance. And so rather than being elected, because you want to do the right thing for your community, that you have an axe to grind, or you have a particular motive that you, something that you want done, that that was why you got involved.

I believe that more training and trying continually to raise the bar for our, our elected leaders at the local level. So I, I believe that locally elected folks and superintendents, I believe that the most successful are when they are in like think with each other about the big strategies and priorities. That means that you and I can have differences of opinion, but we understand what the, what is that we're all about and why we're doing it. And I think that in communities, we need to encourage good people to get involved and to run for the school board. We need to look at where people are getting money from and there, their elections. Um, you know, I think that a lot of special interest groups are putting a lot of money into local and County elections. I think that is impacting some of the decisions that people are making. I am hoping that good people will continue to apply or to run for the school board and I am hoping that communities will hold them accountable for what they're doing and will question what they're doing.

Al Mijares:

Last question. And it has to do with very simple, what good can come from COVID-19?

Molly McGee Hewitt:

I think the good that can come of COVID-19 is that it forces us to use our technology and our resources even better. I think that there are ways where technology has an advantage for us in education and, and this is allowing us to learn sort of a crash course and making it work. So I think that that's a positive of COVID of COVID-19. I also think that one of the positives of this is it, this time that we have been sheltered in place or a way I'm hoping that it's a time for us to reflect on what our priorities are and to make sure that we are following our priorities and I think for teachers, we see time after time, we see teachers who have gone the extra mile for their students during this time. Teachers have always been doing that, but maybe we needed to be reminded of

how that really is not the exception, but that's the rule. So I think from COVID-19 is whatever lessons we can get, but it's that deep pause. And that's the time to reflect on what's really important and what's not important.

SFX

MUSIC UP

Al Mijares:

We'd love to hear your thoughts on today's episode, you can reach us at [communications@ocde.us](mailto:communications@ocde.us). If you enjoyed this episode, please share it with a friend. The Deeper Learning Podcast is a production of the Orange County Department of Education. My special thanks goes to Molly McGee Hewitt and our podcast team for this episode. We'll see you next time.

MUSIC OUT

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