

Education Podcast with John Merrow #79 – WE NEEDED SOMETHING RADICAL



We Needed Something Radical

Michelle Evans was appalled by the conditions at her son's middle school – and so she changed them. Using a provision of No Child Left Behind, Evans lead the fight to convert Gompers Middle School to a charter school. Hear Evans, who many call a hero, describe the struggle and success of the effort.

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MICHELLE EVANS

At first it was about my kids. Just my son, my daughter. But then it became about ... for me it became about all the kids and my experience. What had happened to me in public schools. And so, I didn't want my experience to be the same for these kids. And not enough parents were standing up and saying it. And not enough people were educated about what was going on here. So, I was like, you know what? I don't care if it's just me by myself. This is not going to happen anymore. So, I just stood up and started saying, 'uh-uh, this isn't going to work.'

JOHN MERROW

I'M JOHN MERROW. TWO YEARS AGO, PARENT MICHELLE EVANS LEARNED THAT GOMPERS MIDDLE SCHOOL HAD BEEN LABELED "IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT" FOR THE FIFTH YEAR IN A ROW UNDER THE FEDERAL LAW KNOWN AS NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND. IT WAS THE FIRST TIME EVANS HAD ENCOUNTERED THE LEGISLATION, BUT SHE DIDN'T NEED A FEDERAL LAW TO TELL HER SOMETHING WAS VERY WRONG AT GOMPERS.

MICHELLE EVANS

When I came on, the first impression I got was that it was a mini-jail. Like they were gearing the kids to go to prison. It was all gates and boarded up. And dark and

dingy. I mean, this whole hallway by the library was all boarded. And gates. And I was like, oh, my God, what did I send my kid to school at?

JOHN MERROW **STUDENTS AT GOMPERS AGREED.**

SANDY SALY It was crazy. It was chaotic. It was, like, out of control. Students would be all over roaming the hallways. When class started, there was, like, people hanging out in bushes, in playgrounds, like, in the cafeteria, everywhere. Students were just everywhere. And, like the hallways were just so loud. No learning was going on. Teachers would, like, basically give up on the students because they couldn't handle the classrooms. So, it was really wild.

KATIANNA EDWARDS And there was no rules. No rules.

JOHN MERROW I'm sorry?

KATIANNA EDWARDS No rules. We get the, like, don't even have to ask to go to the bathroom. We just walk out. Come back. It was ditching. Riots. Fights. Everything. People getting arrested. And it was just crazy, like.

EDUARDO GOMEZ Like, me, I really didn't want, like, listen to the teachers neither, and I would just walk out because the teachers didn't show much re ... didn't really care.

SANDY SALY Back then, they were never there. Like, if you chose to walk out and ditched your class, whatever, or if you, like, couldn't figure something out, like the work and stuff, they wouldn't even, like, try to help or anything like that. So, it was, like, they gave up on us.

MICHELLE EVANS My oldest son who's eleventh grader got placed at below grade level classes. And the fact that he was African American and just assumed that he was below grade level that they put him in these classes. And that's ... and the fact that it took so many people just kind of nonchalantly didn't even care, didn't even ... look at his grades that were coming in. They're supposed to look at them and then place children in the appropriate classes. So, that's what made me angry that no one cared that a mistake was made, and no one was trying to correct it. So, if they did that to one child, how many other kids

were misplaced or not placed? I called, first very calmly. Speak to his counselor. But the counselor just kept giving me the runaround. Oh, we'll fix it. Give us another week. But by this time, this is two weeks into the school year. Well, give us another week. No more weeks. This is not ... because if you don't get on top of it, it will be a month, two months. And the semester is over. And these things go in their folder. And that's what made me come to the school. And then at that time they told me, oh, you should come to a community meeting, because the school needs to change. We have some important information. And when I got to that meeting is where there's district staff and Director Riveroll, who was then called Principal Riveroll.

JOHN MERROW WHAT HAPPENED NEXT WOULD CHANGE THE LIVES OF GOMPERS STUDENTS. AT THAT MEETING, EVANS LEARNED THAT BECAUSE GOMPERS HAD FAILED TO MAKE WHAT'S CALLED "ADEQUATE YEARLY PROGRESS" FOR THE FIFTH TIME IN A ROW, THE SCHOOL WOULD HAVE TO BE CLOSED DOWN OR BE RADICALLY RESTRUCTURED.

MICHELLE EVANS And so, when they told us that our school was going to close, I was like, Why? What are you doing about it? Why are you just going to close it? I felt like ... that's always the solution for my neighborhood. Just close it down and board it up and forget about it.

JOHN MERROW You got mad.

MICHELLE EVANS Yeah. I was angry with the school district. I was just angry with the school itself ... for being so unorganized. And the best solution you had for the community was just close our school down.

JOHN MERROW It was a pretty big fight, though, to become a charter.

MICHELLE EVANS Oh, yes. They were saying that ... no, don't do it. And, so, I ... I never had so many people say don't do something. And for me that means, okay, then why are you saying no? I need to find out ... what's good about this that you don't want us to do it.

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- JOHN MERROW Somebody says you can't do this, Michelle Evans, and you say ...
- MICHELLE EVANS Why? (Laughs) Why can't do I do it? Who says I can't?
- JOHN MERROW Were a lot of parents with you?
- MICHELLE EVANS At first, no. It was just ... actually it was six parents. Myself and five other parents were saying no. We're going to do something different and better for our kids.
- JOHN MERROW EVANS AND A SMALL GROUP OF PARENTS LED THE FIGHT FOR GOMPERS TO BECOME A CHARTER SCHOOL, ESSENTIALLY A PRIVATELY RUN PUBLIC SCHOOL. THEY BELIEVED IT WAS THE ONLY WAY FOR THE STRUGGLING MIDDLE SCHOOL TO CHANGE.
- JOHN MERROW And by the end?
- MICHELLE EVANS By the end, it was still us six doing all the work, but we had over 700 parents sign our petition that said, yes, something needs to change at this school ... up to 800 parents. And we ... us six parents went door to door, knocking on doors saying we've got to get involved. You have to get involved. If no more ... even if you won't send your child to our school, at least come and support what we're trying to do here. And they did.
- JOHN MERROW Are you a trained public speaker?
- MICHELLE EVANS No. I didn't go to school for anything. I barely just finished high school about 30 years ago. So, no.
- JOHN MERROW Were you nervous standing up in front of the school board.
- MICHELLE EVANS No, I was mad. When you're mad, you don't have time to be nervous. So, I was just angry, and I needed to get a job done. I'm a mom. My first instinct is to take care of kids. So, when you've got a mission to accomplish, it's not about being mad, it's not about ... it's about getting ... getting the job done, which is educating the kids. And getting them to college and out of high school and having that teachers that cared about them and a staff that cared

about them. Not about being nervous, scared or anything.

JOHN MERROW A lot of parents go to the school board meetings?

MICHELLE EVANS Uh, yes, in the end they started coming. Because they knew something different had to be done here. They just didn't know what.

JOHN MERROW Here are all these parents say we want to do something good for the kids. And the school board ... basically was saying no?

MICHELLE EVANS No, they ... yeah. They was telling us we didn't know what we were talking about. They were saying that we were being misinformed, and we didn't have all the information, and ... this wouldn't be good for our kids. And, so ... basically they were saying no.

JOHN MERROW Were you ever tempted to just kind of fold your tent?

MICHELLE EVANS No. Once I'm determined, my mind is made up, no, I'm not that easily persuaded to just give up.

JOHN MERROW **THE WORK PAID OFF. GOMPERS MIDDLE SCHOOL IS NOW GOMPERS CHARTER MIDDLE SCHOOL.**

JOHN MERROW So, how do you feel now? It's two years ... almost two years as a charter school.

MICHELLE EVANS I feel like this was the best thing we could have did. I'm excited and to see more and more parents be involved in their children's education. More parents coming to ask questions, and what do I need to do? How can I help? That's just ... I mean, that's exciting.

JOHN MERROW Is this school different?

MICHELLE EVANS Yes. Very much.

JOHN MERROW How?

MICHELLE EVANS It's different in the fact that we wear uniforms. It's different that more parents come to school. It's different in the staff that is hired here. Everything about this school. The whole ... I mean, it's not boarded up. It's a

place everybody wants to be. Everything about the school is different. There's just no one thing different.

SANDY SALY Well, at first, it was, like, wow! what a drag, like we ought to wear buttoned up shirt all the way to the top and tie buttoned up. You know. Like, where's is to a point where it's choking us. It's, like, wow. I doubt that many students like ... liked it at first. But we got used to it. And it made us look more professional.

JOHN MERROW 'Cause it must have been a big shock. Right?

LILYANNA MAYNES Yes. It was kind of strange because I was used to my street clothes because all of ... all the elementary schools, it was my street clothes, and when I came to eighth grade and ninth grade, ah, to wear uniform. So, I gave my mom a little attitude about wearing it. And then, but, then, I got used to it.

JOHN MERROW Wh ... what do you mean, you gave your mom a little attitude?

LILYANNA MAYNES Like, I don't wanna go to the school because it's gonna have uniforms, because I was used to my street clothes. So, she, like, after I got used to it, then (Overlap)

JOHN MERROW Is it okay now?

LILYANNA MAYNES Yeah. It's much better than what I started out.

SANDY SALY I also agree with ... with Lilyanna said when she said that it not a hassle because we can wake up and go, "Okay, that's our uniform. We're gonna wear that today and not have to worry about what anyone else has to say because we're all in the same thing."

JOHN MERROW 'Cause some places are sort of competition. Right?

SANDY SALY What do you mean by that?

JOHN MERROW Well, who's gonna be better dressed or ...

SANDY SALY Yeah.

JOHN MERROW You don't have to worry about that?

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SANDY SALY No. We don't have to really worry about, oh, this person's wearing this or that. So, there's, like everyone's in the same thing. We look the same, and all we're worried about is learning. That's what the school is based on. So no drama.

KATIANNA EDWARDS Last year, in the beginning the school year, we had culture lessons, and they taught us how to, like, important people come up to us. We introduce ourself instead of just sayin', "Hi, my name is," you say, shake you, shake her, shake their person's hand, and you say hi, say hi and whatever start a conversation. We learned about a lot of stuff.

JOHN MERROW But I thought school was about reading and writing and arithmetic.

KATIANNA EDWARDS It's because it ... we're talkin' about how why we became a charter. That's what the basically the culture lessons was about. Why we became a charter.

JOHN MERROW Are kids unhappy about ... they have to go school longer, for one thing.

MICHELLE EVANS No, we can't usually get them off campus at the end of the day. (Laughs) They ... they love it here. They find reasons to stay. So, no. I think in the beginning they were a little hesitant, because it was a change. But, no, they love it. I have my high school kids who were here last year that are now tenth graders saying, 'guys, we should have stayed another year. We should have high school over there.' Because the kids love it here. Because there are people here who love them, who care about them.

JOHN MERROW A lot of cities are going to ... and towns are going to go through what San Diego is going through. You hit bottom. Eight schools hit bottom, and this year another eleven hit bottom. And that's about to happen all over the country. Now that you know about how difficult it was to go charter, would you suggest trying some less dramatic change? Or would you say go charter?

MICHELLE EVANS That's hard because it's unique to every ... every school is individual. If you have a district that's supporting that the school needs to change, then you might not need to

go charter. But for us, there was no choice for us. Because we needed something radical. You know how, they have cancer surg--, so you have to have radical ... something radical needed to happen. Every school is unique. Some schools can change within their district. Some couldn't, and we were one of those ones that couldn't. But if you feel like it can happen, then, yes, I would say go charter. But you have to really ... it really goes by every situation. I can't just say across the board everybody needs to go charter, because that may not be true.

- JOHN MERROW This happened because it's a federal law called No Child Left Behind.
- MICHELLE EVANS Yes.
- JOHN MERROW Why did it take the federal government to make San Diego do something serious about educating its children?
- MICHELLE EVANS That's what I don't understand either. (Laughs) But I'm glad the federal government saw it, because for so long, African American and Latino kids have been just falling through the cracks. And it shouldn't be happening. I don't know why it took that. But thank God it did. Because now that attention is being drawn, and the kids are really getting the help and the nurturing that they need to go on.
- JOHN MERROW The ... school has not advanced academically to the level it's supposed to. Are you disappointed?
- MICHELLE EVANS Well, this was just ... last year was just our first year. We're still a baby. It's not going to happen overnight. Or not just add water and stir and get a miracle. This takes some work. So, in the five years is where we need to see. And we have made gains over in just one year. So, this isn't something that's just going to happen overnight. We didn't get here overnight. And overnight we're not going to get off the hook. But we are on our way up, and that's what's important.
- JOHN MERROW I'm curious. You're kind of a big deal here. You're on the board, and you're on the staff. And you sparked the revolution and all that stuff. How does your son feel about having his mom ... larger than life? Important person here?

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MICHELLE EVANS (Laughs) I think sometimes he gets a kick out of it. But other times I think he's like ... God, not my mom again. I think more from a different aspect that I can just come in his class whenever. He don't like that part.

JOHN MERROW Are you some kind of radical?

MICHELLE EVANS No. I just want what's best for ... not just my kids, but all the kids that go to school here.

JOHN MERROW THAT WAS MICHELLE EVANS, A PARENT AT GOMPERS CHARTER MIDDLE SCHOOL IN SAN DIEGO. TO HEAR WHAT ALAN BERSIN, THE CONTROVERSIAL SUPERINTENDENT WHO OVERSAW THE BATTLE TO REFORM THIS FAILING MIDDLE SCHOOL, HAS TO SAY ABOUT EVANS AND OTHER PARENT ACTIVISTS IN SAN DIEGO, VISIT PBS.ORG/MERROW (M-E-R-R-O-W). THIS PODCAST WAS PRODUCED BY JANE RENAUD AND EDITED BY CHRISTINE UMALI. I'M JOHN MERROW. THANKS FOR LISTENING.