Interview of Joe Nathan

Summer 2019 | Interviewed by Dr. Darlene Chambers

Dr. Chambers: 00:06 Hello. I'm here this morning with Joe Nathan, the newest inductee to the National Alliance for Public Charter School's Hall of Fame, a well-deserved honor. I'm Dr. Darlene Chambers, Senior Vice President of the National Charter Schools Institute. Joe, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 00:34 Thanks for thinking I have something that would be useful for other people.

Dr. Chambers: 00:38 You've been in education a long time. The two of us have been in education a long time. How did you get involved in educational policy and could you help me understand the history of your educational walk today?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 00:57 Sure. When I was a teenager, I was in a junior high school class one day when a man named John Howard Griffin came to town. I was growing up in Wichita, Kansas. Griffin had written a book called Black Like Me. Griffin was a white man who had dyed his skin dark, and then had gone throughout the South, and had experiences, and then wrote about it. It was a stunning and shocking book for many of us who were white. So he came to Wichita and was speaking at a prayer breakfast for the Conference of Christians and Jews. I wanted to go hear him. It was okay with my parents if it was okay with the school, but it was not okay with the school. They'd thought, like a lot of other people thought that he was a dangerous communist out to destroy America. So they said, "Absolutely not. You may not have permission to leave."

Dr. Joe Nathan: 01:38 I was stupid at that point. I was too stupid to skip and I remember sitting in my first period class, which ironically was a government class, where the teacher lectured at us for about 25 or 30 minutes, and then told us to spend the rest of the time reading the chapter and answering the questions at the end of the chapter. I remember sitting there in this Wichita, Kansas public school classroom thinking, "School is getting in the way of my learning." From that moment, I really began to think, "Are there some ways that we could do learning, and teaching, and schooling better?" So that's about age 13. I was involved in the Southern civil rights movement. We can talk about that in a
Dr. Chambers: 02:15 Amazing. This was in junior high.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 02:18 This was in junior high.

Dr. Chambers: 02:19 So did you have the seed or the feeling that maybe education could provide more for students?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 02:27 Absolutely.

Dr. Chambers: 02:28 So you weren't as engaged or perhaps interested, and so these ideas captured your attention when you were 13 years old.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 02:40 Right, right. I really thought that there needed to be another way to do things. Also, my mother was the Headstart director in Kansas. In Wichita actually. She was one of the first 20 Headstart directors in the United States and the first one-

Dr. Chambers: 02:54 I was going to say.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 02:55 And the first one in Kansas. I remember going to a meeting with her where there had to be police present because she insisted that it was going to be a racially-integrated program. Headstart was going to be a racially-integrated program. That was very, very controversial in Wichita at that point. Many people don't realize that Brown v. Board was Topeka, Kansas. Brown v. Board wasn't Alabama or Mississippi. It was Topeka. So anyway, that was a very controversial idea. I was very proud of my mother and I really thought it was a good idea to bring kids of different races and income levels together. I also thought that it was a great idea to start some kind of new program that had some research behind it. That was also when I was a teenager and I remember thinking, "There are other ways to do things. Maybe we ought to spend more time thinking about other ways to do things."

Dr. Chambers: 03:41 So this was in the 1960s decade.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 03:43 It was, yeah. I've been charged with being from the '60s and I'm guilty.

Dr. Chambers: 03:49 So am I. So you graduated from high school.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 03:53 I did.
Dr. Chambers: 03:54 And you chose a profession. What was that profession?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 03:57 Well, just let me say before I chose the profession that I was involved in a number of civil rights activities when I was a teenager. That has certainly had an impact on the rest of my life.

Dr. Chambers: 04:09 What type of activities?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 04:10 Marches and other activities. That really had an impact. One of the poems that I sometimes distribute is Langston Hughes' wonderful *Mother to Son* in which the author talks about how “Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. It's had boards and tacks on it, but I don't sit down. I keep going. Don't you sit down, honey, because I'm still going. I'm still climbin' and life for me had been no crystal stair. Langston Hughes' poem, which I read while I was a teenager, really influenced me and said, "You can't just accept things. You have to try to do something about it." That was certainly the attitude that my parents encouraged me to think about.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 04:49 So I went to college. I was mostly bored at college. I went to college in Minnesota, but I spent the Fall of my senior year in Chicago. That was the Fall of 1969, which was a time of huge activism. I went to an institute with a guy named Saul Alinsky, who was a community organizer. His strategies had a huge impact on the way I've thought and acted for the last 50 years. So that was very valuable. That three months, four months in Chicago was arguably the most valuable part of my college. So I became a conscientious objector in 1970.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 05:26 I did my alternative service at an alternative school in Minneapolis for the 50 junior high kids that the Minneapolis schools most wanted to have outside the traditional schools. These were all kids with criminal records, all of them, young men and young women. More than half of them had been found guilty of assault. Some of them had been found guilty with assault with a deadly weapon, and these are 12, 13, and 14-year-olds. Some people called them hardcore. I have always disliked that term because I thought everybody's sort of the same inside. Some people have been treated really badly and reacted, responded badly, but anyway, we did some things at that school that were unconventional. I took these kids to Northern Minnesota on a canoe trip, and they had never done that before.

Dr. Chambers: 06:12 Early outdoor education.
Dr. Joe Nathan: 06:13 Yes. And the school had never done that before. They were wary about letting the kids out in Northern Minnesota. These were very tough, angry, alienated kids, but it was really interesting to get them out in the woods. They were scared of bears, and coyotes, and other kinds of things, but they had a ball. It was a really wonderful experience. I also was really interested in service-learning. Anyway, I spent a year at that place, but I decided it was a really bad idea to have all of these kids with no other role models. They actually competed to see who could be the most troublesome, who could be the most difficult in the school. It was not a good school climate, as far as I was concerned. So I worked with some other people to try to help create a new option within the Minneapolis schools while I was working at this school.

Dr. Chambers: 06:56 With the district school at the time.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 06:58 Right. I was at a district school. I was at a district alternative school, but I was working with some other people that would be open to all kinds of kids that would use a number of progressive learning principles. We were making progress. We spent six to eight months on this when all of a sudden, the District announced that it had received a huge federal grant, and was going to create a series of new public schools in another part of the city, which was sort of frustrating because we had done all of this work. We had proposals, and we had ideas, and it was real community engagement, all the kinds of stuff that educators say they’re in favor of. But then quietly, two or three people from the University of Minnesota and some people from the school district had written this proposal with what we could see was virtually no community input. They got the money and rather than saying, "Well, we can try some of your ideas and some of our ideas," they said, "No. We're going to try all of our ideas. Sorry, but your stuff isn't going to happen." That was frustrating.

Dr. Chambers: 07:48 Was this in the 1980s?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 07:51 This was the school year 1970/'71. So I applied that Summer to work at the Southeast alternatives, this program in the part of Minneapolis, but I also knew that there was a parallel effort going on in Saint Paul to create a new public option, a K through 12 option. A group of mothers, African American, American Indian, and white parents who had known each other, and mothers, explicitly all mothers who wanted a K through 12 school-
Dr. Chambers: 08:18 We know mothers know best.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 08:21 Well, I have learned over many years if you can work with, and listen to, and learn from mothers, it's a good idea. So anyway-

Dr. Chambers: 08:31 That's because their kids matter.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 08:32 Absolutely. Absolutely.

Dr. Chambers: 08:35 But continuing your story.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 08:35 So we created this new K through 12 public school within the district and fortunately, I was one of the people selected to work in the school. That was a great opportunity. I was blessed to have, as a wonderful mentor, the director, a guy named Wayne Jennings, who has gone on to do terrific things including creating this school. So I worked for seven years at this school in various capacities. I became program coordinator. The school received an award from the U.S. Department of Education as a carefully evaluated, proven innovation, worthy of national replication. So I directed a project for a couple of years to help other school districts do some of the things that we were doing in this school.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 09:11 Then I decided I wanted to work with more traditional schools and see what I could do. So I earned a Ph.D at the University of Minnesota, became an assistant principal at a very traditional school. It was a very frustrating experience, which I actually described in the first book I wrote called Free to Teach in which I said... This book came out in 1983 in which I said, "The cards were stacked against deviation and innovation." I encouraged policymakers to give teachers a chance to create new kinds of public schools open to all.

Dr. Chambers: 09:43 Remind me again what year did you-

Dr. Joe Nathan: 09:49 1983.

Dr. Chambers: 09:49 1983. You didn't know perhaps at the time, but you were in the beginnings of school choice-

Dr. Joe Nathan: 09:56 Well-

Dr. Chambers: 09:56 ... alternative ideas.
Dr. Joe Nathan: 09:57  Well, actually, I was in the beginning in 1971 because the K through 12 option that I worked at was a public school of choice so it's-

Dr. Chambers: 10:07  And it was within the school district framework.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 10:11  That's right. Anyway, Free to Teach came out and it was pretty tough about traditional school districts in general and Saint Paul in particular. I had already had some battles in Saint Paul, which are described in this book. I'll give you one quick example. We had a group of kids at a junior high where I was the assistant principal who'd worked together to raise money to go on a field trip to Chicago. We had worked, and worked, and worked for months on this. We had African American, and white kids, and Hispanic kids, and American Indian kids that all worked together to raise the money. We submitted the necessary paperwork to the school district. The school district had a process where the school board had to approve an out-of-district field trip. We were notified one day that, unfortunately, the assistant superintendent forgot to submit the material to the appropriate person in the school board's office. Anyway, so we were told that the trip was off because this was-

Dr. Chambers: 11:05  At the last minute.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 11:06  At the last minute and the kids had worked for many months. So the principal and I had a conversation. I think it's sort of a hand-of-God theory here, but one of the school board members from the community walked into the school that afternoon. The school board meeting was going to take place in the evening. We talked about it. She said, well, if one of us wanted to come to the school board and talk about this, she would be glad to support us. Now, the principal didn't want to come, but I said I was available. Anyway, I came. The school board said, "Well, this is a great activity. Of course, we want to approve it," but the superintendent and the deputy superintendent were furious with me. I was called into the... this is the deputy superintendent's office the next day, and read the Riot Act, and told I was going to go on the trip, and if anything happened, I'd be fired.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 11:47  Fortunately, the trip went well, but this is part of what I'm talking about in the book about the cards are stacked against deviation and innovation. This is something that the school district should have said, "This is terrific," and instead, I got into trouble for just trying to follow the process. And when the process didn't work, got in trouble, but it worked out. But I was
also threatened with the loss of my job if there was any problem on the field trip.

Dr. Chambers: 12:12 Was there any moment then that you felt like leaving education because you were so frustrated? What kept you in education with these barriers that you had to provide education to those that weren't afforded the classroom, the typical classroom conveyance of knowledge? Why didn't you walk away? What kept you in the teaching field?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 12:40 Part of what kept me in education was this poem, *Mother to Son*, which I've already referred to. So I'm going to just read a little bit of it. It's quite short. It's *Mother to Son* by Langston Hughes. "Well, son, I'll tell you: Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. It's had tacks in it, and splinters, and boards torn up, and places with no carpet on the floor— Bare. But all the time I've been a-climbin’ on, And reachin’ landin’s, And turnin’ corners, And sometimes goin’ in the dark Where there ain’t been no light. So boy, don't you turn back. Don't you set down on the steps ‘Cause you finds it's kinder hard. Don't you fall now— For I' se still goin’, honey, I' se still climbin’, And life for me ain't been no crystal stair."

Dr. Joe Nathan: 13:16 All during this time period that I was growing up and that all these things were happening, African Americans and then women were stepping forward and saying, "The country is not operating the way it should. We need to do better. We can do better." I wanted to be a part of that. I thought I could make some, hopefully, some contribution to it. It seemed like a good way to spend a life. I'm not sure that I consciously decided to stay in education explicitly. In fact, after as I'll say in a minute, after *Free to Teach* appeared, I did leave the Saint Paul public schools.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 13:57 I'll tell you about that in a minute, but I still stayed in education as far as I was concerned, but I did leave the Saint Paul Public Schools.

Dr. Chambers: 14:04 Explain how you stayed in education and not be in the traditional district. It sounds like we've worked our way through the 1970s and you're starting to approach the 1980 decade.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 14:17 Right.

Dr. Chambers: 14:18 You're still in education, but in what capacity?
In '83, this book appears and I was looking around for something else to do since I was married, and loved my wife, and we had two little twin kids, and-

And you needed an income.

Needed an income. She was working also outside the home, but we really wanted to have two incomes. Anyway, a friend of mine liked the book and brought it to the attention of a local foundation official who grilled me for an hour on who in the world did I think I was that I could make a difference in education, and why did I think this, and there was such powerful forces, and I was just one person. This went for an hour. It was more intense than the Ph.D examination I'd had a few weeks earlier. And so, I thought, "I don't need this. I'm already feeling not very good about the situation I've put myself in and I really don't need this foundation president coming after me," but anyway, at the end of this hour, intense interview, he said, "All right. Well, I only have one question. I've seen a couple pages from you about what you liked to do. I don't think you're paying yourself enough. Why don't we pay you more than you proposed?" So I was kind of shocked at that. He basically gave-

That's a good problem.

Yeah. He gave me about a year fellowship-

Oh, wonderful.

... to basically work on the kinds of things that I wanted to work on that I had discussed in there. Meanwhile, the book came out, and a man named Checker Finn, who I had met earlier brought it to the attention of Lamar Alexander, who was the governor of Tennessee. Lamar Alexander was about ready to become the chairperson of the National Governors Association. So we exchanged emails. Actually, that's not true. We exchanged phone calls, I guess. This was way before email. We exchanged phone calls with the staff, and they invited me to come to Nashville, and I did. Alexander invited me to coordinate a project for the nation's governors, which became this report, *Time for Results*.

Talk to me a high-level overview. What did that contain?

High-level overview, there were seven task forces of governors. The governors were deeply involved in this themselves. They didn't delegate it to their staff. They were very, very interested
in education. In part because what had happened to the southern governors like Lamar Alexander in Tennessee, Bill Clinton in Arkansas, and Dick Riley in South Carolina was that they had had done to them what they had done to the North, which is they had taken out ads or their economic commissions had taken out ads in *The Wall Street Journal, Business Week,* and *Forbes,* and so on, and said, "Move to the South. We've got lots of golf. We don't have unions. We have low wages. You can put your plants up here." Well, that's what some of the Southern states had done in getting businesses to move from the North to the South.

**Dr. Joe Nathan:** 17:06 Well, that started to happen to Southern states. People in Central America and people in Asia put out the same ads that said, "Move to Malaysia. Move to Mexico. Move to Central America. Bring your plants down here. We don't have unions either. We have much lower wages." These governors realized quickly that this process of low wage, not particularly effective schools was not going to work for them. So the governors, specifically Governor Alexander, who was Republican, Governor Riley, who was a Democrat, Governor Clinton, who was a Democrat, and others, these Southern governors-

**Dr. Chambers:** 17:42 So both sides of the aisle.

**Dr. Joe Nathan:** 17:43 Both sides of the aisle.

**Dr. Chambers:** 17:44 This wasn't Republican. This wasn't democrat.

**Dr. Joe Nathan:** 17:45 No, no. They all decided that they really needed to improve their schools. So they put together seven task forces of governors and I was the coordinator of the overall project. As I said-

**Dr. Chambers:** 17:56 What year?

**Dr. Joe Nathan:** 17:57 This report began in 1984 and was presented in 1985, in the Summer of 1985. Among other things, it suggested what we in Minnesota had called Postsecondary Options, which was a new law that some of us worked on in 1985 that allowed high school students and allows high school students to take free college courses in the college and university. So that recommended that.

**Dr. Chambers:** 18:22 So here we were in Minnesota. I'm hearing terms like Postsecondary Options. We've got governors beginning to get involved in educational policy, education. They're interested.
They're seeing for their constituency and states that education matters, and you are part of that initiative. You start meeting Checker Finn and others, but Minnesota, that state on the Canadian border sounds very progressive for the time.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 18:59 Well, I asked-

Dr. Chambers: 18:59 How'd that happen?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 19:00 Well, I asked Governor Alexander if he knew that I had been a conscientious objector and he said, "Oh, yes. We had you checked out."

Dr. Chambers: 19:06 Oh, so they knew about you.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 19:08 They knew about me. There was a lot of interest in doing things differently. In 1983, the same year that my book, Free to Teach, had come out, there was a report called A Nation at Risk.

Dr. Chambers: 19:19 Oh, I... 19.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 19:19 That report had-

Dr. Chambers: 19:20 Yeah, I remember those.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 19:22 Yeah. That report urged what we call the more agenda, more homework, more requirements, more telling people in the schools what they had to do and my book-

Dr. Chambers: 19:34 Why?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 19:34 ... had quite a different-

Dr. Chambers: 19:39 Why did Nation at Risk ring these bells about-

Dr. Joe Nathan: 19:39 Well, there was a lot-

Dr. Chambers: 19:40 ... oh, whoa?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 19:40 Yeah, there was a lot of concern about the United States, has been a lot of concern over the years about how well is the United States competing. The latest version of those concerns was the report the Nation at Risk report in 1983. I ended up on a lot of radio, and TV shows, and some national TV shows too because my book had a very different approach to what ought to happen. And for whatever reason, Alexander decided to hire me. He liked the book. I proposed public school choice. I
proposed post-secondary options. I proposed shared facilities, what are now called community schools where social service agencies and schools share space. I proposed what are called service-learning where students combine classroom work and community service. I’d had some classes that I’d taught like a class that solved consumer problems and adults referred to the kids. We had a class where five to eight-year-olds built a playground and studied math to understand area and perimeter.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 20:31 Anyway, I proposed a lot of these things, and he liked the book. So he hired me. I got to go around and meet with governors. It was really fun because the governors didn’t want to have hearings in Washington. The governors wanted to have hearings in Boise or Sacramento or Nashville or wherever the state capital was. So I urged that we do that and Alexander liked that idea. He liked the idea that they would have hearings about what should be done in each of these key seven areas. We proposed dramatic expansion of early childhood. We proposed public school choice and some other things in here.

Dr. Chambers: 20:59 Wait a minute. Did I hear you say public school choice?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 21:04 Oh, yes, absolutely. That was a strong recommendation.

Dr. Chambers: 21:05 What did that mean for you? This was before the first charter school law in 1991.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 21:13 Yes.

Dr. Chambers: 21:14 And you just said the term public school choice before the legislation was initiated?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 21:20 Well, we had, and Senator Ember Reichgott Junge was deeply involved in this, as was Governor Rudy Perpich on a bipartisan basis. We had both Republicans and Democrats in Minnesota interested in public school choice. The first law that we passed was the so-called Postsecondary Enrollment Options law that allowed high school students, 11th and 12th grade to take courses on college campuses with the dollars following the students. That was an ’85 law, and that was, came out, was adopted just about the time that this report came out. That was one of the things that was recommended in here.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 21:53 There were also alternative schools. We had begun a discussion. We had begun a discussion about cross-district public school choice in Minnesota, and some other states. That was also-
Dr. Chambers: 22:02 Cross-district.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 22:02 Cross-district. That was also recommended in here, but Governor Alexander had a very interesting idea, and this was his idea. He said in here, "The governors are ready for some old-fashioned horse-trading. We're ready to regulate less if you're willing to be more responsible for results." In other words-


Dr. Joe Nathan: 22:23 Well, this is 1985. This is before anybody's talking about charters. This is before Ray Buddy comes out with his book. This is before Al Shanker says anything. The governors are talking about giving more authority to the people at the local school level if the people in the schools would be more responsible for results. In fact, the whole report is called Time for Results. So what the governors were saying here was, “We're willing to try some things differently if you as educators are willing to be responsible for results, Time for Results, we'll give you more authority.” That was one of the central themes for Free to Teach. Let's give educators more authority at the local school level if they're willing to accept responsibility. So these ideas, back and forth, these ideas were promoted in the mid-1980s by the nation's governors.

Dr. Chambers: 23:17 It sounds a lot like autonomy and accountability. Accountability, you get autonomy. Freedom if you produce performance. It's almost a forerunner of the words that you hear now in charter schools and in legislation that allows charter schools in the various states, accountability, but you will have autonomy if you get performance, you get results in the '80s before the '91 law. There's a term you've not mentioned. Was open enrollment any part of the early Minnesota law? You had options, Postsecondary Options. You had Time for Results. You had some alternative choice in the traditional district frame. Was there any open enrollment discussion at the time?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 24:16 Yes. Governor Perpich, who was a Democrat, gave a speech in January in 1985. He said that he wanted to see Postsecondary Options, which you've already discussed and he wanted to see cross-district public school choice. If you're interested, I can tell you the story about it, but Perpich had a very strong personal belief that it was not okay for people who could afford to move from one district to another to do so, and low and moderate-income people couldn't have choices. So he had a very strong personal belief about that. He proposed both cross-district
public school choice and Postsecondary Options in January in 1985. All hell broke loose. Everybody said it wouldn't happen.

Dr. Chambers: 24:56 Why?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 24:56 Well, it was very controversial. You were actually going to empower families and you were going to say, "You can move from one district to another, and the dollars follow the kids, and you as an 11th or 12th-grader can take courses on a college campus, and the dollars are going to follow." That was very controversial. Virtually every major education group, except the Elementary Principals, was strongly opposed to it. In 1985, the Postsecondary Option did pass. 1987, a law passed that was part of this idea, which allowed students who hadn't succeeded in one school to go to another school across district lines. In 1988, Open Enrollment, which was K through 12, open enrollment for anybody was adopted. That said if a school district had room, kids could move there. You couldn't put any admissions tests on the kids. That was a core part of our idea is these ought to be schools open to all.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 25:45 Anyway, that was 1988. Then Ember and some others were very courageous and said, "We have choice, but we need choices. That is to say, we need to have more options." I had worked with a foundation, northern Minnesota, the Blandin Foundation. We had helped to create some schools within schools in various parts of rural Minnesota. We thought a building doesn't have to equal a school. So there were actually two or in some cases even three different schools in the same building. As far north, International Falls right on the Canadian border, they had two different schools right in the same building with help from the Blandin Foundation.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 26:17 We had worked on that, but we needed more choices. We needed, frankly, to empower educators. We needed to give them a chance to be true professionals. So part of this idea, "free to teach" was if you're going to create a Montessori school or a continuous progress school or more traditional school, you need to allow the families to say yes or no to that. So that was part of the idea, more opportunities for educators and more opportunities for families.

Dr. Chambers: 26:42 You mention Senator Ember Reichgott Junge, who sponsored the first charter school law. Where were you? What was your involvement during that time with Ember and others?
Dr. Joe Nathan: 26:56

There was a group of people including Ted Kolderie, including Ember, Elaine Salinas, and others who got together periodically and talked about these ideas. There was an organization called the Citizens League that was having a study group to talk about these ideas. They ended up in the 1980s, 1988, coming up with the recommendations that led to the first charter law. So there was a group of us who were meeting and talking about these kinds of things. There was also a conference sponsored by the Minneapolis Foundation in the Fall of 1988. That conference involved both Al Shanker and Sy Fliegel.

Dr. Chambers: 27:36

Was that Itasca?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 27:36

That was the Itasca conference, right. Shanker came in and talked about the charter idea. He used the words, although, what Shanker was really talking about was what had been done in New York City in District 4, East Harlem. Sy Fliegel, who was the assistant superintendent, came in and he talked about how groups of teachers within the district had been empowered to create new kinds of public schools. That's really what Shanker was proposing. Shanker was proposing giving teachers within a district, if both the union and the school board agreed, the opportunity to create new options within the school district.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 28:12

We had another idea in Minnesota. We wanted to build on the Postsecondary Options model and Open Enrollment model. We wanted to allow kids to move across district lines and as Ted Kolderie said in his pioneering essay, “The States Will Have to Withdraw the Exclusive,” we wanted to say that other organizations could authorize and then hold accountable these schools. So our idea was always a chartering idea, which was not just let's create new schools within a district. It was let's build on some of the basic freedoms in America. We have freedom of speech. We have freedom of press. And this basic idea is let's do three things. Let's give people a chance to think, and dream, and create, number one, as long, number two, as they're willing to be responsible for results. And number three, as long as we recognize that there are going to be some limits to their freedom. So those ideas of opportunity, responsibility, and freedom within some limits are fundamental to America. You think about freedom of speech, freedom of the press. You can't do anything you want, but you have a lot of freedom. Those were ideas (that) were applied to chartering. That's what we had in mind. We'll give people expanded opportunities as long as they're willing to be responsible for results and as long as they operate within certain frameworks.
Joe, the word charter confuses people. Why is it called charter? You referred to it several times in our conversation, the idea of chartering, chartering, chartering. Why the word charter? What does the word charter mean to you?

The original law was not called a charter law. It was called Outcome-Based School law because, at that point in Minnesota, we were having a lot of discussion about graduation requirements based on outcomes, which I actually think was a good idea, although, unfortunately, Minnesota messed it up. That's a whole other story, but we called this. We wanted to build on the idea of outcome-based schools. So the legislation was called Outcome-Based Schools initially and-

Time for Results, Outcome-Based Schools, paying attention to performance, but giving people (a choice) where they go.

Right. And giving educators an opportunity to create new kinds of schools within some limits. The schools had to be non-sectarian, and the schools had to be open to all. The term charter came from a document about... an educator from the Northeast named Ray Buddy had written that came to the attention of Al Shanker in 1987 or '88. I don't remember which. He wrote one of his ads. He had ads every Sunday in The New York Times and he wrote about this book. He said, "Let's give these teachers a chance to charter," using the word charter from what had happened when European kings and queens had given a charter a contract.

Proclamation contract.

A contract saying, "You go explore. If you discover something, then you can keep part of it and we'll take part of it." That was the word charter. Henry Hudson had a charter for Canada. Columbus and others had charters, contracts for what they were going to do. Now, of course, when they were quote discovering people, there were actually already people living in places that they "discovered." So that's a whole other racist way of thinking about it, but in any case, the word charter came from the idea of giving people a chance to explore as long as there were some trade-offs and they were willing to be responsible for results.

Let's go back to the passage of the law. It sounds as if it was very reasonable in Minnesota with all the initiatives that built up to Senator Reichgott Junge sponsoring the bill. It must have been really easy to pass. Was it?
Dr. Joe Nathan: 31:56 No. Ember's written a terrific book about how it passed. It's a great book. I strongly recommend it. I also wrote a book in the early 1980s called Charter Schools Creating Hope and Opportunity in American Education. I plead guilty to helping, unfortunately, promote the term charter schools. If I'd do it again, I think it would have been chartering because we really wanted to present and we still want to present this idea of chartering. Chartering like free speech is going to produce a lot of things. Some of them great. Some of them okay. Some of them not so good. Of course, we want people to use free speech responsibly. Of course, we want people to use the concept of chartering responsibly. We also recognize not everybody is competent and some schools are going to have to be closed. Anyway, so I wrote this book and Ember wrote hers. We talked about how the legislation was adopted, but it was enormously controversial because-

Dr. Chambers: 32:53 Why?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 32:54 Well, not only was the dollar, the money going to follow the kids, which was still controversial in 1991. In fact, the bill was defeated in 1989 and 1990. We finally got a very weak version of the law-

Dr. Chambers: 33:10 So the senator tried three times.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 33:12 Yes. Yes. Finally, in 1991, by one vote margin, the law passed. I remember talking with Ember, and we were both really depressed. We thought almost nothing was going to happen because there were like five schools allowed and only local districts could authorize, which was not our idea. The only compromise on that was that one district could authorize, or what we called sponsor at that point, one district could sponsor a school in another district. We thought, "That's never going to happen."

Dr. Chambers: 33:42 You said there was opposition.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 33:44 Opposition was enormous.

Dr. Chambers: 33:44 Strong opposition for three years. Where was the opposition coming from?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 33:49 The same people who opposed the Postsecondary Options, the unions, the school boards, the superintendents, the major education groups.
Dr. Chambers: 33:56 But the law passed. Third time was a charm.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 33:59 That's right.

Dr. Chambers: 33:59 What happened in those early years right after the law had passed? Because sometimes, laws can pass and then there's no action. So what happened and where were you in that landscape?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 34:12 Sure. I was, at that point, directing a Center for School Change that, once again, the Blandin Foundation and some others had organized and asked me to create. In 1988, they asked me to do that because I decided not to work for the National Governors Association anymore because I loved working with governors, but it involved flying all over the country. That was very exciting work, but I had a young family, and I love my wife, and I loved our kids, and it was not fair to my wife and our kids if I was gone 80% of the time running around the country. So I came back to Minnesota and I created a place called The Center for School Change. I was writing newspaper columns. I started in 1989 writing a newspaper column for the Saint Paul paper and I began writing about these.

Dr. Chambers: 35:01 So you were a journalist as well.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 35:02 Yes. I started writing weekly newspaper columns for the Saint Paul Pioneer Press. I wrote a couple of columns for The Wall Street Journal. Part of what I was writing about in the early 1990s was the public school choice, post-secondary options, and the chartering law. I had stayed in touch with Bill Clinton, contributed some ideas to his campaign, had worked very closely with him. He actually had me come to testify in Arkansas about the post-secondary options and the cross-district public school choice, which he liked a lot. I submitted some materials. Ted Kolderie and Ember submitted some materials. They can tell you much more about this, but they were very involved with the Progressive Policy Institute, which is one of the groups that Clinton was involved with. He asked me to send him some material. I did. I helped write some speeches.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 35:50 He became president. One of the first things that he did when he became president was ask people to look into this charter idea because he thought it was a great idea. And so, Ember, taking the lead and I, helping a little bit, arranged for a meeting in Minnesota in 1992 or 1993. We had people from all over the country. The U.S. Department of Education provided a small grant to fly people in. We talked about what the U.S.
Department of Education could do. A guy named Dave Durenberger, who was a U.S. senator said, "Well, what can I do?" Some of us said, "Well, why don't we have some startup money?" Because I had been an educator and I knew that it would take some time and resources to get some schools started. So Clinton said, "Yeah, let's do that." And Dave Durenberger agreed. He sponsored the legislation and Kennedy said, "Yeah, let's do it. We like this idea of public school choice. We like the idea of non-sectarian. We like the idea of schools open to all." So we were off and running.

Dr. Chambers: 36:45 So we had Kennedy and Clinton in support-

Dr. Joe Nathan: 36:49 And Durenberger. Durenberger was very important.

Dr. Chambers: 36:49 And Durenberger.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 36:51 And Jon Schroeder needs to be mentioned. Jon was the policy aide for Dave Durenberger and Jon had brought this idea to Senator Durenberger. Senator Durenberger had actually given a copy of this book to every U.S. senator. So he and I had talked a number of times. Durenberger is really critical to all of this because he had really brought the idea to the Senate. He was a Republican and Clinton was a Democrat, but they worked together.

Dr. Chambers: 37:16 Did you say Republican and Democrat working together?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 37:18 I did.

Dr. Chambers: 37:20 The outcome was positive. Were you surprised that the law that passed in Minnesota, and you and the senator were, it sounds like a little discouraged about what the opportunities were going to be, suddenly, went national?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 37:38 Two things about your question. First of all, I wasn't a little discouraged. I was devastated. I felt like three years' worth of work had produced a law that was outrageously weak, and I was wrong. One of many times in my life I was wrong. The idea-

Dr. Chambers: 37:53 Were you glad you were wrong this time?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 37:54 Oh, I was very glad I was. Very glad. But the idea was so powerful, the idea of giving teachers an opportunity to create new kinds of schools was so powerful that despite the fact it was a weak law, people stepped up right away. In Saint Paul, a young woman stepped up named Milo Cutter, who had been
creating an alternative school, but she was frustrated with the district and she wanted to create a school independent of the district, but at that point, you had to go to school district. So she went and Jim Scheibel, who was the mayor of Saint Paul, said, "I think this is a good idea. Let's give her a chance to do this." The union didn't like it even though she still had to be under the district control, but she didn't have to be a member of the union. Now she could if she wanted, but she didn't have to. Interestingly enough, the Minnesota Education Association had a big full-page article, actually two full pages about her, because she was a union member. She kept saying to the union, "This is a great thing. Why don't you get on board?" We'll get to that in a minute.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 38:52 In any case, (Milo) stepped forward and she created the first charter that went into operation. About the same time, a group in Winona, Minnesota, which is in southeastern Minnesota on the Mississippi River, had a Montessori school that was a private, non-sectarian Montessori school, but they wanted to be able to enroll anybody who wanted to come. So they converted their private, non-sectarian Montessori school to a charter school. The first school to be approved was actually the Montessori school, but the first school to actually operate as a public charter school or chartered school was City Academy in Saint Paul.

Dr. Chambers: 39:27 You hear confusion sometimes about whether these charter schools are public or private. Where does this come from, Joe? In these early days, I've heard you say they were public schools. Where's the confusion even back then perhaps that these are not public, but they're private?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 39:51 Sure. So let's-

Dr. Chambers: 39:52 Why is the public confused?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 39:53 So let's look at the facts of public education, not the theory. Let's look at the facts. In a number of cities in the United States including New York, and Boston, and Chicago, school districts are not run by elected school boards. But most people have in their mind the idea that a school district has an elected school board, but the facts are in a number of the largest cities in the country that's not the facts. That's not the way it works. The mayor or someone else appoints the school board.

Dr. Chambers: 40:23 Appoints.
Dr. Joe Nathan: 40:23  
So the facts are that "public schools" are not always run by school boards. That's fact number one. Fact number two, in many states, about the same time in the mid-1980s, there were statewide schools being created in math, and science, and art. And same time that the charter law passed, 1991, they also passed... or Postsecondary Options, I think. It was 1985. Passed there was a statewide school adopted, an art school adopted. That didn’t operate under a school district. North Carolina had such a school, and Illinois had such a school, and Louisiana had such a school. A number of states had statewide schools. Third example of fact is that we've had, in most states, a statewide school for the deaf, a statewide school for the blind, and those haven't operated under elected school boards, but those are all considered part of public education. So the facts are, although it's not well-known, it's not thought about a lot, that there are many examples of public education that are not under the control of elected school boards. However, most people have in their minds that's how it works.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 41:27  
Opponents of chartering have relentlessly insisted that chartering is not public education because it's not under the control of local school boards. They've spent enormous amounts of money presenting the idea, but the facts are quite different.

Dr. Chambers: 41:41  
It's no longer 1991. We're a few years down the road from then. Are you still in the world of charter schools and in the world of education?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 41:55  
So the answer-

Dr. Chambers: 41:56  
What do you do today?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 41:57  
The answer to the second question is yes. Our Center has been around since 1988. So we've been around a long time.

Dr. Chambers: 42:04  
You're still at the Center?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 42:04  
Yes. We work at the school, community and policy level. That, for example, means that we have projects with individual schools, both district and charter. We had projects to help increase the number of youngsters who are earning dual credit from, in schools that are predominantly low-income or predominantly students of color. So that was a project. We had a project to work with district and chartered schools in Minneapolis to help increase family involvement, increase academic achievement. We've had a whole series of projects...
throughout Minnesota. The Gates Foundation asked us to work in Cincinnati. We were able to work with the union very closely and very successfully, and the district. We increased the overall graduation rate of African Americans by more than 25 points. We closed, not just reduced, but closed the graduation gap between white and African American kids at a time when Ohio was making it more difficult to do. So we've done extensive work at school level with both district and chartered public schools.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 43:03 At the community level, I mentioned that I've written newspaper columns. At one point, I was writing for three of the four largest daily newspapers in the state of Minnesota, a weekly column. For the last 10 years, I've written columns either it used to be every week. Now, it's twice a month for a group of suburban and rural newspapers. Anyway, I've done a lot of newspaper columns. I've written for The Atlanta Constitution, The Detroit News, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So lots of newspaper columns. Been on about 400 radio and TV programs around the country. So we work at the community level. We worked with journalists. We work with community groups. We do a lot of alliances to work on things. Right now, for example, we're working on an effort to reduce homelessness in Saint Paul. We have district and chartered people working together-

Dr. Chambers: 43:46 Thank you for that.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 43:47 ... with the City government, and the County government, and social service agencies. We've got a terrible problem with homelessness, and it's a district-charter collaboration. We had a historic hearing recently in Saint Paul where youngsters from both district and chartered schools testified about the impact of being homeless. So anyway, we work on various projects involving district and chartered public schools, and we produce publications. We did a publication about multiple measures, which is one of the central ideas of chartering. We wouldn't rely just on the standardized test and just on graduation rates. We want to have a whole series of more applied performances. So we did a report at the request of the U.S. Department of Education that described how district and charter public schools were using multiple measures. We did two reports about the idea of community schools where social service agencies and schools share space. Once again, we had both district and charter examples. So we produce publications. We work with journalists. We do collaborations with community groups.
Dr. Joe Nathan: 44:43 Then at the policy level, I've testified in about 30 states. We had a collaborative project with the National Governors Association after Time for Results ran out or Time for Results was published. Worked with about 30 governors from Hawaii to New York to help them-

Dr. Chambers: 45:00 Spreading...

Dr. Joe Nathan: 45:01 Spreading these ideas.

Dr. Chambers: 45:03 Let's reflect back. This is your pioneer story. You've had some hard lessons, great lessons learned. Pick your top lessons that are in the front of your mind as you look back this long legacy of Postsecondary Options, alternative schools, working hard for the have-not students to have choice. What's been the lessons learned?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 45:31 Here's several: persistence, hope, collaboration, humor, although I haven't been very funny this morning. Sorry. Humility, willingness to listen to other people, to learn from other people. Could give you a couple of stories about that, but recognizing that all of us knows more than any one of us, and that it's often wise to sit down with a group of people, and say, "Here's what we're trying to accomplish. Does this goal make sense? Then how do we work toward it?" So humility and not feeling like you have all the answers. And in fact, recognizing that you can get more done if you're working with a variety of other people. That's one of the Alinsky lessons. Then a deep belief in the power of young people and the value of young people and families, and a deep belief that educators, in many cases, deserve the opportunity to think, and plan, and dream, and have the opportunity to create public schools that make sense to them as long as families are allowed to choose among them. Those are some of the lessons.

Dr. Chambers: 46:38 Great lessons. As you look in your crystal ball, starting tomorrow, and you look to the future of education because you've been a long pioneer in teaching our kids, what do you see, Joe? What are you excited about, but what also causes you concern?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 47:01 I think that as King said, "There's not a straight road to progress." There's bumps-

Dr. Chambers: 47:09 Martin Luther King?
Dr. Joe Nathan: 47:10  
Dr. Martin Luther King, right. Thank you for that clarification. Frederick Douglas talks about how people who favor freedom have to recognize that there's going to be conflict, and so that doesn't surprise me. Having people call me names doesn't surprise me. Just this morning before I came to this interview, people were calling me names on the internet. Very well-known, national writer. I'm not going to say other things about her, but a very... calling me names and some other people were calling me names. I think that you have to be willing to be criticized. You have to try to be open and listen to some of the criticism.

Dr. Joe Nathan: 47:54  
So I see several different scenarios. I think we've got huge inequities in this country economically, and I have tried in some ways to work with other people who are working on problems outside school as well as problems inside school. I'm hopeful that we can make significant progress in the next 10 to 20 years on reducing income inequities, having more jobs, having health care, which is really critical. I should have mentioned that I had a heart attack in 2015, almost four years ago today. I had a heart attack and came within 15 minutes of dying. So one lesson I learned is that I spend five or 10 minutes every day doing things that I would do if this is the last day of my life because one day it will be. I will be encouraging people when I talk with them tomorrow to think about what would you do if today was the last day of your life. How would you spend five minutes?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 48:51  
Anyway, I see several different scenarios. I see one possibility is continued polarization. I think kids and families could get stuck in the middle, and many fewer kids will achieve their potential, and many more educators will be frustrated. But I also see the possibility that the nation can embrace some of the ideas of chartering even more. Not only more opportunities for people to charter outside school district, but I've worked with some union members to get funds and legislation in Minnesota that allows people to create new options within districts. I think that that's equally important.

Dr. Chambers: 49:30  
Thank you, Joe. It's been a pleasure talking with you. We just have a minute or so left. You've heard about the National Charter Schools Founders Library. Why do you believe it's a good idea and what are you hopeful the Library achieves?

Dr. Joe Nathan: 49:49  
I'm hopeful that it will be a place where people can come to understand what really were these ideas and are these ideas because there's so much misinformation out there. So I'm hopeful it will be a resource for researchers, but also for
educators, and also for students who want to understand what's this idea about, and can use it as a springboard to make things even better. That's what I'm hopeful. I'm deeply grateful to you and your colleagues for making the resource available to people throughout the world via the internet.

**Dr. Chambers:** 50:19  
We just spent the time with Dr. Joe Nathan. I'm very proud of his new honor. He is an inductee tomorrow for the Alliance Hall of Fame. Well deserved, Joe. Thank you for fighting the very long fight.

**Dr. Joe Nathan:** 50:36  
Well, thank you for being a part of the fight and thank you to all those who are listening and watching. I hope you also have found this interview encouraging and helpful.