

Reuel Sample: Welcome to the GOP podcast. I'm Reuel Sample. I am so happy to be joined by Josie Barnhart, one of our candidates for school board. Jose, how are you tonight?

Josie Barnhart: I'm doing well. How are you doing?

Reuel Sample: I am doing better than I deserve, to quote another podcaster. It's good to have you on board. I'm going to start by saying you like a whole bunch of other people across the country are a newbie to politics. But why are you jumping into the political ring?

Josie Barnhart: My background is in education, and so my daughter got to start school as a kindergartener in 2020, which, as you can imagine, was not how I envisioned in my head what our kindergarten year would look like, not being allowed to set foot in the classroom, not being allowed a tour of our building. I eventually pushed back and we got to see the classroom before she started school.

Reuel Sample: Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. You were bringing your kid, your child, to a school district, a school that that you were going to not see your child for how many hours a day? And they wouldn't even let you see the building on the inside.

Josie Barnhart: New Hanover County did not allow for tours, and it was not until people like me got vocal to push back that they allowed small group tours for our elementary students and we were only allowed in the building for a ten minute time period. But just imagine a child starting in a new school, a new district coming in to a building, they've never seen these people. They're masked up. How do you teach your kids about good guys and bad guys and what it looks like and you don't know anybody so what it is? So we had a lot of interesting conversations come up that we didn't expect with our kindergartner of just here's how you identify somebody who works for the school district because everybody's face is covered. So I reached out to the principal of saying, should I expect certain masks on the staff so that I can tell my child, this is what you need to look for when going into the building? This is these are the teachers, these are your allies. And, you know, she informed me everybody would be wearing a badge. And so I talked to my daughter about that.

Josie Barnhart: But yeah, it was it was a difficult situation for my daughter because she was very anxious. She didn't know anybody and they weren't allowed to they had to be six feet apart when they were able to go back to school in October because they started the year virtual. And so I got into politics because I had six months of my daughter in a virtual school learning setting, which was not ideal for small learners at all. And then in January 2021, I really felt called to speak up because my background is teaching our low income students and Title one schools. And if we're talking about the groups of students who are falling through the cracks, it's that large, or kids who are already at the most at risk. And so I started pushing back because the narrative that was coming from our current board was hate was disgust at people who even had the audacity to challenge the system. And it became this environment of teachers versus parents. And I said, This is not how it's supposed to be.

Reuel Sample: Now, you were a teacher. You're a teacher. And that's interesting that you say it has become an attitude of teachers versus parents. Is it teachers versus parents? Is it school board versus parents or is it a mixture of both?

Josie Barnhart: Well, it should not be. And that's why I started speaking up. And so what I have found is we have political activists in our local teachers union, and they actually released a video and it was a statewide zoom call, how these representatives were bragging about how their relationship was so good with the Board of Education that they were able to keep our schools closed, as were teachers in our county bragging about keeping our elementary school students closed. Because what happened was in January of 2021, our students were supposed to go back to school and they switched six days before they said, Never mind, you're not going back to school full time. We're going to we're going to keep this hybrid program of two days a week going to school. And this this video got released of a statewide zoom call of our NHC representatives bragging about how they kept our schools closed. The parents were not educated, parents were tired. They just wanted a babysitter for their children. And I got very angry because educators and parents should be working together so that education growth can happen for our kids. And so I decided to send those video links to every single principal in our county, and I expressed a very detailed email about how upset I was as a parent and a former educator that this kind of behavior was allowed and tolerated here in New Hanover County because. I am not uneducated as a mom who wanted my child back in school. I am not lazy, I am not inconsiderate. And so I really pushed back

on these narratives that were coming from our board. And the more I got involved, the more I realized we need somebody who is able to push back and be compassionate, but also demand accountability. And so that's why I'm ultimately here.

Reuel Sample: What was the reaction from the principals to that video that you sent?

Josie Barnhart: Well, I started cold calling them too, actually. And so I had about three of them answer the phone and talk to me because I said, I want I want to know. One of the one of the teachers on the video said New Hanover County was not prepared. They were not prepared to bring our students back. And I said, did you? These were the question I asked. I said, Did you feel like you were prepared in the process of what we needed to do to bring our kids back full time, not asking if they were scared or whatever, but did you feel like we had a plan in place, a process we were able to articulate what was happening. And of the three that answered my phone call, they all said, yes, we absolutely did feel like we were ready to do it. Know, obviously nerves were high, tensions were high. But that's with part of the times of what we're living in.

Reuel Sample: One of the things, Josie, that we've been talking about, we talked about it on last week's podcast, we've been talking about it in all of our emails to folks is that the Board of Education race is all about crossing party lines because no matter whether you're a Republican or a Democrat or an Independent, we all want what's best for our children. What are the big areas, the big topics that you are facing as you race, as you run for this position? And what are the topics that parents are talking to you about as well?

Josie Barnhart: Sure. So, you know, one of the big talking points I see is how we pay our staff. And so that is something obviously I am passionate about. I want to make sure that our staff, not only our educators, but our cafeteria workers, our bus drivers, everybody that's involved in the system, our secretaries, they help make the system work. And so we need to have quality people. We need to have consistent people for our kids because that's going to help with student success. There are so many issues right now from we have some parents talking about mental health support of that being the key issue for their child. And so how how does that look like without overstepping school boundaries and make sure that line for our parent is not crossed? My big concern that I have voiced a lot of opinion on is the curriculum and the content. And so

the history standards that were passed in 2010 and the summer of 2021, I actually pushed back on those at the state level because I did not want to see them passed. And the reason why is it was an inquiry based program, meaning teachers have flexibility to teach what they want to teach. In addition to that concept, what they did was they condense two years of American history into one the state board of Education. They also allow for terminology. And I'll tell you some of them, and they did not specify a grade level. The state did not meaning the state is saying and has approved that you are allowed to talk about these topics in any grade level when teaching history.

Josie Barnhart: The glossary words include gender identity, they include systemic racism. They include they crossed out white privilege and they changes to be just privilege, stereotypes and marginalization. And so when you have topics of saying, compare a time in history where a marginalized individual was discriminated against or whatever, you have interpretation of what that looks like and how you implement it. And I was very frustrated. Miss Justice was one of the representatives on the curriculum committee, and there were multiple people and the curriculum committee here in New Hanover County that said, how are we going to ensure quality, unbiased, consistent teaching across our district? This was brought up as a concern by our educators, by our people in central office. That concern was never expressed to the board via via that board member. And that's downright irresponsible, because when we have an issue that we know could be bad or could be an issue that, in my opinion, political activism to flourish, what we need to do is we need to have accountability for it. And so as a state passed these standards, it's our job to implement them. But then how can we bring accountability so that we're not teaching skewed history in either direction? One of the other changes that summer is they they actually lowered the standards of our AIG, which is our high achieving students. And it used to be a standard on merit. You know, you had to enter into a program based on a certain grade level. But what they changed the verbiage to be is no longer about merit, but the teacher selection with a heavy emphasis on diversity.

Reuel Sample: Wait a minute. So I was in the gifted program and all throughout high school and and in middle school. So I had to maintain a certain GPA. I had to maintain certain standards of studying and progress and or else I was kicked out of the AP program. You're saying now that if you're in an advanced program, you are there because the teacher thinks you're okay for that and not based upon your merits?

Josie Barnhart: I'm saying the state has passed that. So is it currently playing out in New Hanover County? I will tell you, I'm foreshadowing. It's going to be I've heard conversations with our equity diversity and inclusion committee chair that she wants to look at all of our magnet programs because the demographics aren't diverse enough. And I'm going to push back on that. I've already been vocal to with people of warning, hey, we need to be looking at this happening because what we do whenever we put kids into a program that they're not academically prepared for is we're going to set them up for failure.

Reuel Sample: Exactly.

Josie Barnhart: So there's always been a caveat how the standards was written. You had a program that you had to get in with a certain merit, but there was always a caveat. If there was a student that a teacher felt like really would be successful in the program but didn't quite make the cutoff, they had the flexibility to put that student in the program. I have been frustrated with the lack of accountability to education we've been seeing through the lens of demographic makeup and at large in our county. It's been about race rather than academic merit and rather than academic intervention and rather than academic foundation, we're seeing through the lens of, well, the demographics don't look good. And when you step back and you think about it as an educator, I just want to say why this is not at all how I would teach my kids. I would not say all of my Hispanic students learn this way. All of my white kids learn this way. All of my black kids learn this way. I think about what it means to teach different types of learners, audio learners, visual learners, kinesthetic learners. And I teach I create a lesson with that in mind, not a skin color or demographic makeup character trait of students.

Reuel Sample: All of this, whether it is the gender policies at school, whether it's what we're teaching in our classrooms, accountability at our school board level. One of the big things that this all comes down to is it seems to have all excluded one of the major forces in education, and that's parents. When you get on the school board, you're going to be part of the government agency. How are you going to make sure that parents are not just a voice but the voice in the education of their kids?

Josie Barnhart: Well, I think part of it, since the school system has slowly crept into the mental health side of things, I think re establishing where the boundaries are and there is there's a lot to dive into that and I'm going to do my best to do it very quickly. One is ensuring that any sort of mental health or medical health decision is being made, that the parents are doing it, not the school system itself. We've seen surveys be crept into our school system and but before we started doing the surveys, we conveniently change the policy to not be a parent consent required. It's a oh well parents can opt out if they want to, meaning we don't need your permission. We're going to survey these children. And if you catch it, you can tell you can tell us you don't want your kid to be a part of it. There's no formal documentation process for that. So you're going to have to trust us that we're doing it. And so, you know, rectifying that of making sure that if we're going to survey children, which I don't really think we need to do that, we're getting parental consent. Right now as far as all the committees are developed, there is not a formal process for how to get on these committees. It's basically has been the committee board representatives get to choose who's on these committees.

Josie Barnhart: So we need to do a better job, clearly outlining how parents are getting involved on these committees and having a standard so that no matter who wants to apply to these committees can be on it. And another thing I would like to see is we have a lot of things that get voted on on month to month. And I think it would be a great addition to actually have a Google form, if you will, to say if this is what the board is voting on policy 745 or whatever it is. And parents can leave feedback for that specific policy so we can have direct correlation. And it's really easy to get an input of, hey, this is all the feedback that I got on this. So obviously people can email the board and I absolutely encourage you to email me if I get elected and have conversations over the phone and things like that. But I think that we can streamline some of these processes to include parents. But I think it's been one of those things that's been frustrating for parents and myself is one has been one of them is feeling like. The things that I want for my kids cannot happen if I keep them in the public education system. And my question and part of my motivation for running is why? I just want my kid to have a quality education.

Josie Barnhart: So if I say I don't want somebody talking to my kid about sexual orientation, then I shouldn't have to worry about that because that's not the job of a teacher. I don't you don't go to school in academics and trying to teach math or science

or history and sexual orientation is leading conversation because that does not make or break how you educate children. And so it's been it's been frustrating because the narrative has been if you push back, if you challenge in any way, shape or form, you are not inclusive. Therefore you are insert bad name here. And I just want to give hope to parents that you are not alone in saying I'm going to challenge this and I should not be punished by my school or my teacher for pushing back and asking questions and gaining clarity and saying, No, thank you for my child. And so I you know, I have always told my kids I would never ask you to do anything that I would not do myself. And so I'm putting myself in the hot seat. And I have been pushing back and I have been leading with compassion but demanding accountability. And that's what you're going to see coming to the Board of Education.

Reuel Sample: Talking with Josie Barnhardt, candidate for school board here in New Hanover County. I think one of the big things, one of the big outcomes from COVID is that parents woke up. And I think we're seeing this all across the country, especially here in New Hanover County, where we're listed as one of the top ten bellwether counties across the country. As New Hanover goes, so does the rest of the country. Jose, you are one of four candidates and we've got to get all four of you elected to make some change on the school board. Before we let you go, we want to talk about your event that's coming up at the end of August. Tell us what's happening.

Josie Barnhart: Yeah, I decided to do a back to school bash. I know as a teacher, I spent a lot of money out of my own pocket on supplies. And so my kids go to a title one school rights for elementary. And I reached out to the principal and I said, Can I collect supplies that we can give to the teachers and have for the students? Because teachers are not alone. I'm a parent who, although I'm questioning and pushing back and demanding accountability, I want to see our kids be successful. And so, you know, having the basics of having school supplies and getting that is important to me. So on August 28th at Longleaf Park, from 1 to 3, we'll be collecting school supplies, we'll have some music, some storytime snacks. I'll have a station to write notes to your teacher for the first day of school, and we'll have some goodie bags for staff that stop by. But this will be a, you know, an event just to hear about who I am as a candidate and what I want to see happen and how I want to see it be done. And so I encourage everybody to come out. Bring your kids. My kids will be there and they'll be close to the splash pad. It'll be a pavilion four. So if you want to bring your swimsuit for your kids to let them run

and play and it's it's caged in over there. So it's makes it easy to concentrate a little bit, but it's just a really an opportunity to meet candidates because I was not into politics. I did not know who's who or what's what. And so I want people to know this is my community, too. My kids are at parks, my kids are at the pool and doing different things. And I support our teachers. But I also I want to see schools to thrive academically. And so I'm going to continue to look for solutions to do that as well as respond to needs when our schools have them.

Reuel Sample: How can people find out more about who you are?

Josie Barnhart: So I have a website, josieforschools.com. And I'm also on Facebook and Instagram. And so you can read there, but feel free. My contact information is out there. You can email me or call my phone number that's on there. And I will be happy to talk with you about any questions you might have.

Reuel Sample: You can always go to the newhanovergop.org website and we've got links to Josie's, all of her stuff there on the site so you don't even have to worry about writing all that stuff down. You can just click and go. Josie Barnhart, all the best for you. I'm going to give you the last word.

Josie Barnhart: Thank you so much. I, I appreciate being here and having conversations, because what I was most frustrated about as a parent was feeling like we were not being heard and not being able to hear the full side of the story. So. As I've been leading in my campaign, I really wanted to put the emphasis back on what I want to see come out of schools, and that's quality academics for all, and that's supporting our staff, supporting our parents, because ultimately when we work together, that's when our students are going to be successful.