



The NHC GOP Podcast

Episode 22: Addressing Social Emotional Learning: Melissa Mason for New Hanover County School Board

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Good evening and welcome to the NHC GOP podcast. I'm Reuel Sample. Honored to be talking with Melissa Mason, candidate for school Board. Good evening, Melissa. How are you tonight?

Melissa Mason: I am good. I am ready for election day.

Reuel Sample: We were talking before the podcast started that this has been tiring. This is if you've ever run track before, the quarter mile is the worst thing to do and you're running the quarter mile right now. So I want to talk to you and ask you you've been talking to people during the actual voting and before all this started going to parents and educators and teachers. What is the top thing on their minds that you're hearing about from them?

Melissa Mason: So I just had it was about two weeks ago, there was a meet and greet that we had an amazing patrons house and amazing voters house. And it and we were given the opportunity to speak to this awesome group of people. And one woman came up to me and she said, You have to get social emotional learning out of our schools. And I looked at her and I said, Really? Tell me more. And so she began to tell me she has a high school student who was really close to the shooter last year. Really close. Like you can see him on the camera video, like the videos that got out before everything got pulled back in. He was right there and he was he was very much traumatized. So she told me that he gets this outside counseling, which is great. He missed like 30 days of school that year because he was just so it was so much. What she said to me is they do SEL social emotional learning and it's damaging him. He hates it. He does not want to participate. And he asks me all the time to remove him from it. And so there's been this narrative that's been going on with reporters and with some of the some of the administrators, that social emotional learning, it's only done like at random points of the day and as needed. And this this woman's story just completely runs counter to that. I had another individual who shared a student schedule, and I actually have with me. I'll read it to you. It's 7:20 to 7:50 arrival and morning routines. 7:50 to 7:55 morning announcements and 7:55 to 8:10 morning meeting SEL mental health check in.

Reuel Sample: That's actually on the list.

Melissa Mason: From the list written right on that schedule and so to to tell parents to tell the community to tell everybody that this is not a scheduled thing it's happening at random points. It's it's disingenuous and it's not accurate. And so I actually brought that to the attention of some of the individuals that were reporting that. And then they turned around and wrote an article all about social emotional learning and said, let me let me find the quote here. "It might look like teachers have flexibility here. It could be one 20 to 30 minute lesson where we're going to focus on how we make friends and how we foster those relationships and maintain those relationships." So now we're going from the story just keeps changing, you know. We're going from well, it's not scheduled to yes it is. It's 15 minutes to now. It could be 20 to 30 minutes. And then within the same article, they say, but it's not taking time away from academics.

Reuel Sample: What you're taking when you're when you're spending 30 to 45 minutes on it, that adds up. Let's let's get something out of the way because we've talked about

social emotional learning SEL throughout this entire process. It is one of the big things that that you have been focusing on and other like minded people have been focusing on. What is social emotional learning? Because on the face of it, it sounds pretty innocuous. A pretty, pretty tame.

Melissa Mason: And it's supposed to sound good. A lot of it is based on equity. There's there's different components to it. And I look at there's let me see, there's several different I have lots of out lots of things that I carry with me. But there are there are five core. I forget what they call core principles. We have self awareness, self management, responsible decision making, relationship skills and social awareness. Now all of those sound pretty good. But as somebody who's been an educator for now 18 years, because I'm just doing my fifth year over your community college years of education, it sounds really nice. However, these are all things that on the surface you don't need to set aside 20, 30 minutes to teach because you can do it through content. But if you dig deeper into some of these different arenas under self awareness, it says the ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. But then they dig in and they talk about integrating personal and social identities.

Reuel Sample: TWhen you get down to identities, that starts crossing some lines there.

Melissa Mason: Because what identities are you referring to? They can kind of dig into some of these other ideas that they've been saying they're not digging into. But if you keep on going, it talks about examining prejudices and biases. Now, social emotional learning is done primarily. I mean, they do it across all levels, but the core teaching begins in elementary school. So another candidate I know mentioned you talk about, well, what makes somebody different prejudices, biases, things like that. And kids that are a little they don't see character qualities. They don't necessarily think about that stuff. They're very visual. It's very black and white kind of thing. But what happens is they they look at they look at the surface level. Well, they have blue eyes. I have brown eyes. They have brown hair. I have red hair. You know, they have brown skin. I have white skin. And so when they're already identifying these and then, oh, well, don't you feel a certain way? What kind of leading is happening is really the question. Now, here's the thing. I don't believe all teachers have this kind of thought in mind. I think that the way that it's been presented to teachers is that it's helpful for kids mental health. I think

that it's been presented as this is going to help with behavior problems. The problem is this this program, we were a pilot program for this back in, I believe, 2016. And if you look at our test scores, because because they're always saying, oh, mental health and their mental health has to be good so that we have to focus on their mental health first because then they can focus on academics. However, if you look at the test scores, they haven't gotten better. And I mean, COVID didn't help. No, but but they weren't getting better. Right. And so to say that this is helping kids with their mental health, to say that this is helping kids with their academics, that's false.

Reuel Sample: And to add on to that is that it also goes into areas where parents want to be involved, is that schools have always there's always been a a definition of character in schools. But you are right, is that it happens through content, whether it's through sports. Sports used to be a big definition of character or in the things that you tackle in in the classrooms. But it's always there as a result of content and not a targeted lesson time.

Melissa Mason: So I was a speech therapist for for 13 years. And one of the things because I taught a lot of kids with who are on the autism spectrum and who were struggled with conversational abilities and the ability to relate and communicate. And one of the things that we were taught through all of my training and even in when I was teaching, is you cannot teach for every situation that comes up. And so what you have to do is you have to teach within the moment, meaning Johnny is not sharing with Sally. So we sit down with the two of them and we we demonstrate how do we share, how do we do this? How do we communicate better using the context of right now to teach kids how to respond better the next time and really talk through? Briefly, I mean, you don't need to go when you're talking to little kids. You don't need to go super in-depth.

Reuel Sample: And you can't.

Melissa Mason: Exactly they don't have the ability to to to get all of that. And so when you when you put it into play, like there are always these there's so many teachers that say play is the best way to teach kids. It is because they're there and they can learn, This is how I interact with these people and this is not going to be taken well by this person, but this person might be okay with it. And so learning how to navigate through play. Play is really vital. So to say that we have to sit down for 20 to 30 minutes to teach

these kids this this stuff that honestly is taught through context, through through play, through even through group projects. You learn teamwork through like a group project, you learn teamwork through playing a game together. There are so many ways to learn teamwork and how to benefit other people and how you are a valuable part of the team. You don't have to sit down and talk about it for 20 to 30 minutes. You just don't. It's tough.

Reuel Sample: So you've got some heavy lifting to do because this is coming down not just from the county school board, but this is coming down from the state. How can we fix that at a here at the New Hanover County level. How are you going to fix that?

Melissa Mason: I think that one person is not going to fix that. I think it's going to take a team. And I think that we have a we have a good group of of the four of us that really want to really want to get this out of our schools. It's damaging to our kids. And it's honestly, it's overburdening our teachers. They don't need 20 to 30 minutes of extra work. And so I really I think that having that majority and really just talking through, well, this is not effective. Because as I said before, test scores haven't gone up. They haven't. And what we're seeing I spoke with a therapist and she said at of school and she said all day, I'm putting out fires for behavior. And I said, Really? And she I said, What? What can be done to solve this? And she said, They don't understand what they're learning, like they're supposed to be learning. They can't read, they can't do math, they can't write. And so they're acting out. So right there that shows social emotional learning is not effective and really sharing that with teachers and saying, we're trying to take the burden off of you. You're already overwhelmed. You're already filled with these teacher workdays of training, and you don't even get to prepare for class to make these enriching lessons about reading and writing and math and history and all the things that you could do in science, all the amazing things that you could do with your time to prepare. You're now in trainings for social emotional learning or equity or all of these things, and really just just speaking with the community and with the with the teachers and saying, look, this is an extra burden. We don't need this. We need to get it out. And having a team with me on the school board I think will definitely help influence that decision and help these teachers understand this isn't an effective thing and we don't need it. We need to focus on other things.

Reuel Sample: You and your team have been targeted by a lot of money from outside of New Hanover County. A lot of money. And they are saying things like, you want to ban books, you want to literally whitewash American history. You want to you want to get or get rid of particular subjects in particular schools. You want to lock down schools, too, like they're Fort Knox. What's your response to that, Melissa?

Melissa Mason: I can't be an extremist and a conservative at the same time. Not possible. What it is, is fear. There's fear. Never once have I said I want to ban books ever. What I want is parents being able to know what's in the libraries. And I've seen what's in our libraries and I've read what's in our libraries, and it's not appropriate for kids. And I think that there has to be some accountability at the school board level or not the school board level. Well, yeah, at the school board level, because they're responsible for some of the materials that are being put in the libraries. I know you're aware of what's going in. You should know that this is not appropriate content. And so when it comes to the book banning, I think that's absurd. I don't want to ban. I want parents involved more. I want parents to be able to decide, you know, I'm not saying nobody can ever read these books. When you think of banning, it's making them illegal. Like you cannot have them in the school. It's illegal. That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying I don't want inappropriate content paid for by taxpayer dollars to be in our school libraries when parents have to jump through 8 million hoops to one, try and find out what's in the library and two complain to get a book out of one school. You know, you can have these these books. They can be in five different schools, but you have to go with one school at a time. If it's inappropriate for one, it's inappropriate for all.

Reuel Sample: So I'm interrupting you for a second. Some of these books are so bad that when they've been attempted to be read at school boards across the country, they've been stopped because they're told, well, we don't use that kind of language here. Right. And and these are these are the kind of books that we're giving our children.

Melissa Mason: Right. And it doesn't make any sense. We have school board members that are saying, well, you know, they can find it on their phones. So what difference does it make? Are you serious? You know, if parents are not monitoring what their kids are looking at on their phones, that's their decision. But if we can control it, taxpayer dollars should not be going toward books that have pornography in them. And

we're not just talking like like many times what will come up is the book All Boys Aren't Blue, which is, you know. Mainly focused on homosexual acts. But let's be honest, there's more books about heterosexual sex acts. Then there are homosexual that I've read at least. And they're explicit. And if a radio deejay can't read them on the radio because he'll lose his job if I can't read them in front of the school board, and if they're even inappropriate to be read out loud to begin with. And I could I can get in legal trouble for it. Why do our kids have access to it?

Reuel Sample: So it's not about banning books. It's not about banning books. It's about being responsible for what our kids are reading.

Melissa Mason: Absolutely.

Reuel Sample: And making sure and making sure that the parents have access to it. So whether it's whether it's banning books or whether it's whitewashing American history or whether it is all of the other things that you are, that if you're listening to this podcast and they're getting those mailings, they're lying to you. Let's let's be open. They're lying.

Melissa Mason: Absolutely. I mean, and just briefly, about the history thing. I want all history taught, good, bad, indifferent. I don't think we should be focusing on one particular aspect and and having conversations with teachers and students who are saying, well, they're saying that this Wilmington horrible thing that happened in Wilmington was done by a certain group of individuals without doing the research and blaming one political party for it. I don't think that's accurate teaching. You don't you have to teach all of it. All of it, the good, the bad, the indifferent. Our history is our history. And if we don't learn from it, we'll do it again.

Reuel Sample: And again and again and again. Melissa, you have been out campaigning a lot. We're coming down to the final days. I've asked this of all the candidates I've talked to in the last few days, if there is one thing that you want people to hear, as they go in and fill out that ballot, to make them understand that you are the best candidate for this position. What would that be?

Melissa Mason: So many people they're looking for change. We need change. We need people that aren't politicians. And I am definitely not a politician. I've been a teacher for 18 years, so I have the background and I've taught from kindergarten all the way up now through college. I've taught special needs kids, so I know that the unique needs that they have and working with individualized education plans and 504s and how often they they tend to fall through the cracks. And those those kids are so special to me. There's some of my some of my little babies that I that I still look out for. But being a mom that has kids that go to our schools, this is this is a big deal for me. This is my kid's future, too. And so I'm not willing to put my kids future on the line. And I'm not willing to put the community, the community's children, their future on the line. I think it's so important that we do better for our kids because they have been shafted for the past few years and we need to do better.

Reuel Sample: Melissa Mason running for Board of Education here in New Hanover County. I know you're incredibly busy. Thank you for taking the time to get on our show tonight.

Melissa Mason: Not a problem. Thank you for having me.