



The NHC GOP Podcast

Episode 13: Education Over Indoctrination: Melissa Mason for New Hanover County Board of Education

Reuel Sample: Parents rights. Child Safety. Restoring Trust. Education over indoctrination. Welcome to the NHC GOP Podcast. I'm Reuel Sample talking to Melissa Mason and joined by my CO Patti O'Neal. Good evening, Patti.

Patti O'Neill: Well, good evening, Reuel, and good evening, Melissa. It is great to be here with you, Melissa. I've not met you before and I'm very interested in learning a little bit more about you. So tell me a little bit about your background and how you come to find yourself a candidate for the Board of Education here in New Hanover County and how you're going to help our schools.

Melissa Mason: So there are three really important things that I always tell people that are really big parts of my life. So the first is that I'm an educator of 17 years, and that's a huge part of of my journey. I love working with kids. I've always loved working with kids. And so I've been doing that for about 17 years now. The second thing is I teach sign language. So this is where this is going to come in. But the thing is that I am a mom. I have two boys that go to school in New Hanover County. And so I am invested like these are these are very important details and information that I want to share with other parents because it impacts my kids as well.

Patti O'Neill: This is why we get involved, is because of our children. This is why everyone is involved.

Melissa Mason: I was having a conversation earlier today with a wonderful woman and we were talking about, you know, our kids make us better and my kids definitely make me better. They're very challenging. They have their own challenges, but they make me better.

Melissa Mason: And the one thing that that makes me amazing as far as how they have taught me is that they have taught me how to fight for them. They have needed me to be an advocate for them. Both of them have learning disabilities, and so I've had to fight for my children. They've taught me how to be braver and how to be stronger because they're just amazing little role models for me. And then the third thing about me is that I am a military wife. My husband has been in the military. He is finishing up his 20th year this year. Thank you, Lord. He has done two tours over in Afghanistan. The first tour, we were not quite we were not married yet, but the second tour was shortly after my second son was born, and I then had a toddler and an infant by my son. So learning how to manage that kind of situation, being able to be flexible, being able to work around what kids need and figure out, you know, is this priority or is this not? Those are those are skills that I bring to the table.

Patti O'Neill: So needless to say, you're able to be empathetic with the parents who are bringing the students into the classroom. Right. I will agree with you wholeheartedly that the things that we will do for our children are beyond what we would ever do for ourselves, which is kind of amazing to me, right? The sacrifices and the love and the dedication that we have to our children. We don't even give to ourselves. But it makes us advocates for them. Oh, absolutely. And it sounds like. Tell me a little bit more about your 17 years. You. You teach sign language. You work with special needs children. Just briefly, about your 17 years as an educator.

Melissa Mason: My experience with adults with disabilities and children with disabilities goes way back to even before college. My mom has always worked with adults with developmental disabilities, and so because of that, I've been around that population for my whole life. I fell in love with sign language when I was a teenager and decided that that was what I needed to do. I needed to be a teacher for deaf kids. And so I didn't know anybody. There was no like I had no connection to it. I just loved it.

Patti O'Neill: It was not it was not as mainstream.

Melissa Mason: It was a it's a beautiful language. And so I pursued that. And I taught at a school for the deaf. I was a speech therapist at a school for the deaf for 13 years before we moved down here. And the experience that I got, I got to work with preschoolers all the way up to 21 year olds. And they were so many different levels. There were kids that were just your typical deaf kids who they just needed a little bit of extra support. And then there were other kids who were a little more severe, who needed communication boards, who needed more adaptations so that they could actually function within the classroom. And so I've had a lot of experience in that arena.

Melissa Mason: When we moved down here about seven years ago, I stayed home for a couple of years to spend time with my youngest. He wasn't quite ready for school yet. He was three when we moved here and I then decided that I needed something. Being a stay at home mom is fun when your kids are home.

Patti O'Neill: I mean, I think you're an intelligent, articulate, successful person. And raising children is very rewarding. But it's not the only thing we want to do. Right? Right. We have more to offer. We have more to offer. Right. And until you finish your story about your son, but then tell me what you're going to offer our school board. I can do that if you would.

Melissa Mason: So I then went into it's really more about my where I'm at now as far as education. I went and I applied and I became a an adjunct professor at Cape Fear Community College. I teach American Sign Language there. And through the course of that, we went from teaching in person to then masks required. Well, sign language, if you know anything about it, is it is a head to waist language, you have to be able to see all of it. Facial expressions is super important. I have to be able to see it on my students. My students have to be able to see it on me.

Melissa Mason: So masks were not an option for me as far as being in in-person learning. So I then moved over to being online and I began teaching online and I saw all of the pitfalls of it. I saw students who were like watching TV instead of watching me, you know, talking to other people. Like it was muted because it was American Sign Language. And so there's no there's no talking in that. So I saw the pitfalls. I couldn't develop relationships with my students. And so that was one of the many reasons that I

that I decided that I was going to do the school board race. I'm not a politician, so this was not something I ever planned on. But I feel I bring a calm voice of reason. I've always been one that mediates at home. And when I when I'm struggling, when I have people that are struggling in other relationships and so someone who hears both sides and works with people, I feel as though I am a good communicator and I believe that I am honest. And that's really what we've been missing. We've had a board that has covered things up. We have had a board that has hidden things in policy. We have had a board that fights with each other and bickers during meetings where people get popcorn before a meeting so that they can watch the show. We have to change it because it's so important. Our kids are so much more important than the bickering and the fighting that happens right now.

Melissa Mason: We need to be clear with what we're sharing with the community. We need to be clear with what we're doing with our kids in schools. And we need to be able to communicate well with the parents. So those were really the big things that one got me into it. And two, that I think I bring to the whole the whole situation.

Patti O'Neill: Right, right. And so we had a conversation with Pat Bradford earlier this evening, and we were talking about changing over the school board to get four conservative candidates, four Republicans on the school board so that we can affect the change and that COVID really enlightened a lot of people because they were walking by their students, sitting at the dining room table, watching the video of the classroom, and they were appalled at what they saw. Right now, you just expressed how it impacted learning for the handicapped as it relates to hearing and deaf people. But it also impacts the ability for people to communicate, the ability to see expression, to see the words formed in someone's mouth. Right. And to understand that. So I think that it's very important for us to make certain that we elect all four Republican candidates to the New Hanover County Board of Education. We want to, as you say, hold people accountable and take care of our kids and really take a look at how we're conducting ourselves.

Patti O'Neill: This is not a this is this is not a reality TV show that people should be sitting back and watching. This is real life. This is the future of the children of New Hanover County. And I think it's very admirable for you to step in the ring without any political experience and, you know, put forward yourself as a mom, as an educator, as a military wife who understands a lot of the challenges that women face. And to be able to

say to people, I am going to be your advocate. I am going to watch your children when I'm when they're in the school. I'm going to do everything I can to make certain that the budget is spent correctly and that we work on improving our test scores and we improve on school safety.

Patti O'Neill: With your husband being in the military. Do you have any comments as it relates on school safety?

Melissa Mason: So that's actually one of my platforms. Safety is such a big deal. Our kids, we had a shooting last year and I know that other people have mentioned it, but it's not just the shooting there across the state are kids that I believe a couple counties over. Just last month there was a stabbing within the school and a kid died. And so we have kids that are afraid to go into school. My kids are getting bullied. We have kids that are that are. And if you focused on fear and if you're focused on keeping your head on a swivel, then you're not focused on education.

Melissa Mason: And so for me, because of the military background that my husband has, I know that his ability to de-escalate the situation, he has great skills with that, and that's part of the training that they have to go through. And so involving community members, there's different groups that I've seen be very successful in other schools, groups like Dads on Duty, Watchdog Dads. These groups, they go in and they're these men that they get background checks and they get fingerprinted.

Patti O'Neill: Certainly and I've heard about that all throughout the country. So let me let me kind of restate this, see if I see if I understand what you're saying. You're you'd like to advocate for more community involvement as it relates to men being involved in and in the process of school, whether it is, you know, in a in a security sort of setting or a mentor sort of setting to tap into the resources that we have in our community. I am a huge advocate of bringing our military personnel who have either retired or been discharged or left the military by, for whatever reason, to taking that skill set, that discipline, that dedication. I mean, that dedication and and showing that and sharing that with our youth. And I do think that in many homes there is a lack of a strong paternal figure and that that could be that could be very advantageous for a lot of kids that are in school right now.

Patti O'Neill: You know kids love volunteers. Kids love to see you in the school. They were like, oh, my God, you're the lunchroom mom. I can take cuts. I get the chocolate milk like it was carte blanche.

Melissa Mason: Well, I mean, here's the thing. The issues seem to be occurring most in middle schools and high schools, and they're happening in hallways and they're happening during transition times. And the teachers and there's school resource officers, and we've increased the number of school resource officers, which is fantastic, but they can't be everywhere either. And we have huge groups of students wandering around and they're not supervised. So I take this analogy of when you're driving and you see a police officer, what is everybody's gut instinct? You step on the brake, right? Even if you go in the speed limit, you step on the brake because that presence makes you adjust your behavior. And so when we talk about the Dads on Duty, when we talk about the Watchdog Dads, when we talk about even women going in there, firefighters, police officers who like retired, whoever. Having just their presence there, will likely decrease all of the all of the bullying that seems to keep happening. Right? When our kids do feel safe, they need to walk, be able to walk through the holes and not be afraid that they're going to get jumped, pushed, shoved, you know, anything like that.

Reuel Sample: Melissa, one of the things on your platform is what kids are being taught in school. And one of the big things about COVID, the parents actually got to see the stuff that their kids are being taught. What are they being taught and what is your answer to all of that?

Patti O'Neill: So I hear that a lot. I hear that CRT isn't being taught and social emotional learning is good. There are so many flaws in all of that and there's not really enough time to go through all of it. But here just from the basic standpoint of we had two years of learning loss, two years of learning loss, they lost two years our kids. So they're behind in reading. They're behind in math, they're behind in writing. They're behind in all of it. Now, I went to an open house with my for my one of my children and they gave us a schedule. And I'm going to read you a little bit of the schedule. 720 to 750 Arrival in morning routines. 750 to 755 Morning Announcements. 755 to 810 Morning meeting SEL, mental health check in. So that's 15 minutes of every day of my child's school that is spent checking on how they feel or checking on what's going on in their lives.

Reuel Sample: I never remember any teachers being particularly interested in how I felt on a particular day.

Patti O'Neill: Well, I would like to know why mental health is now part of the educators day to day, because they're not trained in child psychology, psychiatry, diagnosing disorders. Right. That's that's not their skill set. That's not their skill set.

Melissa Mason: No, it's not. Exactly. And that adds up to about 45 hours of social emotional learning. Now, we have kids that are failing. We've seen our schools are failing. We had these these report cards that we saw recently. And we have so many schools that are not doing well. Why are we focusing on that? We have kids. Again, we talk about that. Why are we focusing on that? Those 45 hours total would be beneficial. Reading to the kids. Reading to kids improves their language skills. Right? Right. It improves their focus, their attention. It gets them invested in the books. And so when you take that time and you don't do something academic with schools that are failing, that you're not doing your you're not doing the right thing, you're not doing your job correctly. You need to be worrying about the actual skills that they need to survive in the real world.

Melissa Mason: I tell a story. My husband went to a store and he paid cash for something. He was supposed to get \$0.95 back, right? So he paid like three bucks. And. And it was. 205. Right. And so he's like, oh, hang on to the cashier. He said, Oh, hang on, I'm going to go to the car and I'll get you a nickel and then go right. And the cashier, who was a young person, said, Oh, no, no, no, no, you can't do that. My my drawer won't be balanced. And he so he's like, Just let me go get it. It'll be fine. And the kid was adamant. He's like, No, my, my drawer won't be balanced. I'll get in trouble. So my husband was like, forget it. But this is this is the problem. We have kids that are that's basic math. That's basic math. You should be able to do that calculation and figure that out.

Patti O'Neill: Yes.

Melissa Mason: And our kids can't function as employees when they can't function, if they can't read, if they at a appropriate level, we're not going to have a functional society. And so when we talk about like, oh, we're talking about CRT. And SEL, yes,

those philosophies I wholeheartedly disagree with. But besides that. We have to focus on what the kids need right now. And what they need right now is to be able to read, to do math, to write. That's what they need to be able to function in society.

Reuel Sample: And with you on the school board. And we need you and we need the other three candidates on there.

Patti O'Neill: Pat Bradford, and Josie Barnhart and Pete Wildeboer.

Reuel Sample: And Pete Wildeboer.

Patti O'Neill: All those four candidates.

Reuel Sample: Need also on the school board. That's right. We need all four. So then you can then as school board members say, no, this is how we're going to teach. This is what you're going to teach. And you're going to throw all that open to parents and you're going to say, this is how we are doing this here in New Hanover County.

Melissa Mason: Absolutely. And the great thing about all four candidates is because we are so different and we have such different abilities, we bring such great things. Pete has the experience. He has been a teacher. He has been a principal. He has been on the school board. The man has done almost everything that you can do as an educator. So he brings that amazing experience to to the board. Josie, she brings this mama bear, this fighter. She's got great information on curriculum. The Title Nine information. The Title One schools. She's amazing at that stuff. Pat Bradford, she's she's a guardian ad litem and she knows kids and she knows their needs and she knows budgets because she's a businesswoman. And so we all have these different skill sets that just combined make us such a powerhouse team.

Patti O'Neill: Exactly. The word that was on the tip of my tongue, powerhouse. We get these four Republican candidates into the New Hanover Board of Education and we're going to be able to impact. Today, an impact our youth on into the future. And that's very exciting. It's very exciting for me to to be hopeful, right. To be hopeful that that things are going to change and that we can get back to the basics and that we can do everything possible to help our children achieve.

Melissa Mason: Absolutely.

Reuel Sample: Melissa, I have a feeling that you're a mama bear as well, so I wouldn't like to cross you either. So. Melissa Mason, how can they get in touch with you and how can they find out more about your campaign and support your campaign?

Patti O'Neill: So my website is Melissaforeducation.com. I'm also on Facebook. I am on Twitter but not nearly as frequently. So if they need to get a hold of me, there is a contact page on my website again Melissaforeducation.com. And then if they want to message me on Facebook as well, that's also a possibility.

Reuel Sample: This is not the last time we're going to have you on our podcast. We're going to get you out talking to people as much as possible. It has been a joy talking to you. It's been a pleasure watching your campaign and getting to know you as well. Melissa Mason for New Hanover Board of Education. Thanks for being here.

Patti O'Neill: Thank you for having me.