

Meet Me In the Middle Ep 02 Transcript

Announcer: From Curtco Media, Media for your mind.

Celleste: Whatcha gonna do about it?

Bill Curtis: Welcome to Politics, Meet Me in the Middle. I'm your host, Bill Curtis. This is part two of our discussion with California State Senator Henry Stern. In this episode, we're going to talk about the state of education, the future of employment and how technology is changing the way we work. Joining me, as always, is my co-host, Pulitzer Prize winning historian and renowned lecturer, Ed Larson. How are you doing Ed?

Ed Larson: Great to see you again.

Bill Curtis: So, Ed, Thomas Jefferson wrote that education was critical for democracy to work. Did the founding fathers invest seriously in education or was that just politics?

Ed Larson: The Founding Fathers didn't really invest in education, except they did write the Northwest Ordinance and the Northwest Ordinance provided in this new area, what became Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, those areas, that a certain chunk of the land would be held off and given for the support of public schools. The real public school movement didn't begin until the 1840s, so the founders realized education was important. And you certainly had people like Ben Franklin who were big supporters, but they didn't start putting their heart behind it except with the sale of frontier lands.

Bill Curtis: Henry, coming to today, here in California,.

Henry Stern: Yes sir, yes.

Bill Curtis: Once upon a time, not too long ago, California was close to number one, educating our children. And we're not anymore.

Henry Stern: Correct.

Bill Curtis: So what happened? And what are you going to do about.

Ed Larson: Before he goes on with that, we are still number one in college education. There is no state in the Union.

Bill Curtis: How can that be, compared to the New England colleges?

Ed Larson: No, that's private schools. The New England public schools are second third rate. When you look at Berkeley, UCLA, UCSD, UCSF, UC Davis, when you add those together, we have five of the 10 greatest public schools in America. There's no school that's better than Berkeley. UCLA is amazing. The problem has been the collapse of the K through 12, which I blame on the initiative that undercut the money coming out of the property tax.

Bill Curtis: I guess Henry then we have to go right there. In 1978, California passed Proposition 13 that robbed the schools of the money they needed to stay in.

Henry Stern: Reagan robbed California?

Bill Curtis: Was that a Reagan thing? That was in 1978, who was our governor then?

Ed Larson: No, it wasn't a governor, though.

Henry Stern: It was Howard Jarvis.

Bill Curtis: Ok. So, Ed, what was the point? Who decided we should do that and ?

Ed Larson: Well, they pushed property taxes supported at that time. California arguably had the best K-through-12 system in in America as well as the best college system. The college system was partly built by Pat Brown, but had been around even before then. Now, when you passed Proposition 13, it undercut funding for K through 12 and K through twelve has never recovered from that.

Bill Curtis: Henry, you're up.

Henry Stern: I don't know if it's just money and I don't think money is the sole solution, although it certainly helps. And I think we were forty first in the nation in per pupil spending. We made the largest ever increase in public school spending in this year's budget in Sacramento to try to fill that gap, at least to make money not the main problem. So luckily the state's economy is rock solid right now. We can afford it. So we record level.

Bill Curtis: Can we afford to pay the teachers for a change?

Henry Stern: Well, we better. Right now we have, I think it's over 6000 classrooms every day that we can't even afford to have a credentialed teacher in there. We basically have temps coming in and not even substitutes. But we have a teacher shortage in the state of California because we haven't told young people that that's a high value, honorable profession. And basically

Bill Curtis: Well we haven't made it a high value profession. So if we make it that way, then they'll want to get education themselves and become a teacher.

Henry Stern: Absolutely. And we ought to be able to go compete with all the other high paid professions out there, because there's really no better investment in the economy, let alone in people, than putting an inspired and creative and attentive teacher in the classroom in a situation that's set up for success where they can be creative and doing their work. I do worry we sometimes burden teachers with all of our ideas in Sacramento and too much reg and rule in.

Bill Curtis: Well, there's there's too much nonsense and not enough pay and incentive for them to be good teachers.

Henry Stern: I agree.

Ed Larson: You can look in California, you have some public schools like Palo Alto that are awesome and producing people that are flowing in everywhere and doing jobs. So why can Palo Alto pull it off? But then you go to L.A., you go to other places. Their public schools don't work for a lot of their students.

Bill Curtis: And we're trying to replace teacher pay with this thing called tenure. That takes a teacher, whether good or bad, as long as they're there, they're working long enough. They get locked into place. And, you know, we continue giving our kids a mediocre education. So, Henry, you've kind of jumped into the middle of this kind of environment. You have a good economy right now that you can work from. What are you going to do to increase teacher pay? And what do you feel about the whole tenure scenario?

Henry Stern: Look, I was a young teacher. I graduated Harvard and decided rather than go start Facebook or be smart like Daniel is and sell things and make a lot of money, I would go teach civics and try my hand in education. And it's hard, you know, got by living in my grandmother's basement and just made it work because I loved it.

Bill Curtis: So we need a lot of grandmothers basements in order to have a good education.

Henry Stern: Grandmother basement approach is one, we also, like you said earlier, you got to find some way to at least spare them the debt they get from training themselves. So we had a proposal, A -to provide tax cuts or tax credits to teachers in the early stages of their career, but also to do debt relief and student loan relief. If you're going to take that fifth or sixth year and do your training, you're going to be paying it forward in the state of California. Why are we taxing you on that and giving you sort of twelve percent or more interest rate?

Bill Curtis: And it seems to be a good start. That's a good idea.

Henry Stern: So we're working on that with this governor and made some big investments on that front. So this new round of teachers getting recruited right now out of high school should have debt relief in sight and increased pay. But we also, look, we've got teacher pay, overall school funding. We made big investments this year in also getting special education dealt with so it doesn't end up cratering local school district budgets and we can deal with kids of all kinds. I'm feeling optimistic. But the fact is the system right now is not built for success because we're not thinking about the future enough. We're not anticipating what the future of jobs will be in this state or in this country. We taught inside the box for a very long time. You see the economy shifting.

The new teachers need to teach to a new kind of student, which has to be a new kind of California.

Bill Curtis: And we're actually going to get on that in a little bit, But finishing up education, Ed.

Ed Larson: These people are graduating with these high student loans, they can't afford to go into teaching. If we went to income contingent student loans, that is student loans if you don't make a certain amount of money, if you go into teaching, then you don't have to repay them.

Bill Curtis: If you go into public school teaching

Ed Larson: If you go into public school teaching, or if you go into other community services, then your loan gets forgiven. Now, personally, I think that makes a whole lot more sense than this idea being thrown around by, say, Senator Sanders, who say, oh, let's make all college free or all public school free. So you're gonna make it free for a rich person. I was at University of Georgia when they did that at Georgia. All state schools in Georgia became free. The result was all these wealthy families who could afford education poured into the public schools rather than going to private schools. And did you end up helping people? Not really. We're here. If you have income contingent student loans, people will go into teaching. Good people go into teaching. They'll get their loans forgiven and they'll be good teachers because here's my here's my view. I think the most valuable person in America is a good public school teacher.

Henry Stern: Amen.

Ed Larson: And the trouble is, we don't have many of them. And if you have tenure, you're gonna tenure a lot of bad public school teachers. I went to public school. I had a few good teachers. They changed my life. My kids went to public school. Both of them. And they had a couple good teachers and a lot of crappy ones. Those good ones changed their life. And those people are the most important people in America. Good public school teachers.

Bill Curtis: So as we bring this subject to a close. Let me ask you both. Why don't we have directed funding into the government? What I mean by that is why don't we try to get private funding for public schools? You know, if you go to the Gates Foundation or you ask Larry Ellison to create a fund for public schools, they could make a big difference. But right now, they're not motivated to.

Henry Stern: That's an interesting idea. I think, you know, there are some folks who've been trying through the charter movement to do that. You know, folks like Eli Broad and there's the whole college track going on in Silicon Valley where they're trying to prevent kids from living in poverty in the backyard of the richest people in the world. But I, trying to find a public venue and maybe invest in the greater good would be less divisive than this sort of separate fiefdom of education.

Ed Larson: Charter schools have a mixed record in this way. You have some for profits that go in and run a charter school and they're awful. You have other charter schools, especially the ones when you have a lot of local parent involvement that do a fabulous job. They're a mixed bag. You can do all the studies and there are lots of studies. Do charter schools do better than pure public schools? No. Not on average. Some of them do. Some of them don't.

Bill Curtis: But if, Ed, if you had a guy who grew up in Santa Monica and I'm not talking about charter schools, I'm not talking about private schools. I'm talking about the public school system.

Ed Larson: Right.

Bill Curtis: And you had a guy who grew up in Santa Monica and he wanted or she wanted to give back. And we needed. Oh, I don't know. Ten billion dollars to turn the whole west side into a quality public school district. Why couldn't we create an incentive, create the kind of public relations necessary? Because, you know, that's the deal. Because right now you actually can't do that in only one school.

Henry Stern: I like that.

Ed Larson: And that's the answer. And people are doing that. There are people stepping in and helping individual public schools in different places. And that should be encouraged. There should be a program to do that because public schools are where most people are going to go to school. I'm all for charter schools, but public schools are where most people are going to get their education.

Bill Curtis: The one last thing in education that I'd like to like to talk about is the whole issue of student loans. And if you have a plan to try to solve that issue, it's hard to stop the merry go round from turning. It's hard to find the funding from banks that are willing to forgive. Do you have a plan here?

Henry Stern: At bare minimum, it should be that the student loan market is in compliance with the rest of all the loan products that are subject to oversight from Consumer Financial Protection Board. Right now, the student loan market is pretty much unregulated outside of the federal funding. There's a lot of predatory lending going on. And so at the very least, make the student loan market play by the same rules as the rest of the consumer loan market. But even better would be.

Bill Curtis: But is it reasonable for it to be that expensive and to have that kind of debt?

Henry Stern: Oh, it's crazy. And how do we expect to get a leg up if you're going to be saddled with debt for the rest of your life? Right now, we are deceiving a lot of young people, sending them off to some imagined workforce future that we really haven't educated them for. So we make them sink hundreds of thousands of dollars into an undergraduate education with the promise of some high paid job. And then what happens if they don't get it?

Ed Larson: There've been some great recent studies on student debt and student loans. And what they find is, and it's counterintuitive, that the people who have the worst problem with student loans aren't the people who have a lot of student loans. It's the poor students who have just a little because if

Bill Curtis: Why is that the worst problem?

Ed Larson: Because they can't pay them back, because especially if they went to a for profit school. They don't get a job, especially if they don't finish college. They don't get a job.

Bill Curtis: Well, I think, frankly, you need to finish college in order to get benefits of your student loan.

Ed Larson: The problem is people who went to for profit schools, many of which are simply a rip off, or the people who take out a loan and don't finish college. Those people might only be burdened with ten thousand. They might all be burdened with twenty thousand, but they could never repay it. And student loans, unlike other loans, are not forgivable in bankruptcy. So it's an anchor around their neck for the rest of their life.

Bill Curtis: It sounds like we're going to need more time to talk about this, but we don't have any. And you brought up a subject, Ed, that I want to talk about in the next part, and that is the whole idea of graduating, having a job to go to, our whole future of work and employment, especially in California. We'll be right back.

AD: Sometimes the exceptional is not the biggest budget. Sometimes the exceptional is someone's ability to actually take their soul and print it on the screen for a moment to learn everything that there is to know about the filmmaking process. I think part of art is hearing from the artists who create it. And the number of different visions, the number of different qualifications that have to go into making any film is insurmountable. And hearing those stories can be just as exciting and insightful as the movies themselves. Certain movies or certain scores certain actors have shaped who I am as a person. I have such appreciation for the things that people produce and the work that goes into it. Whether it's the writer who came up with this story in general, or how the filmmakers were able to take that from the page and put it onto screen and then from the actors themselves who are able to kind of bring that all to life. All of that is what I want to hear, because it makes me love my favorite movies even more. I'm Scott Tallal. If you love movies like I do you're going to love Hollywood UNSCRIPTED.

Celleste: What are you gonna do about.

Bill Curtis: We're back with State Senator Henry Stern and my co-host Ed Larson. So, Ed, you were just mentioning the folks that graduate and go get jobs or frankly, the folks that don't graduate and go get jobs. Now, one of the leading jobs in California is driving trucks and vans. I know that doesn't have a lot to do with college, but just for a second. The L.A. Times recently said that nationally five million people will lose their jobs to autonomous drivers, robots.

Ed Larson: That's a real issue when we have driverless cars, which apparently is just around the corner, what are all these people who are driving going to do?

Henry Stern: I think the private sector is going to get very interested. And they already are. You're seeing in the hotel industry an improving service quality and really thinking about work as a matter of sort of emotional intelligence, not just the widget or turning the wheel, but how to actually provide consumers and customers with a good experience. And that's how brands are going to, I think, in the future really distinguish themselves. So you look at there were strikes over the hotel workers in the lobbies, the receptionists and attendants. I think Marriott had a global strike that they were dealing with earlier this year. And the part of the resolution to that process was to retain some of that same workforce, but to have them actually help the customers through the system. So maybe they end up touching a touch screen at the end of it or inserting their credit card. You don't have someone actually doing the entry, but you don't want an empty cold lobby to a hotel. You want a good experience and someone to help you through it. So I think, look, that's not the entire solution to automation risk. I think it's a much bigger conversation about what is valuable in this economy and what functions do people really want to do? Or do people really like these jobs that much in the first place? Look, some people, they love to drive and that's what they live for. But there's a lot of that.

Bill Curtis: Well, that's what was available to them was.

Henry Stern: That's right. And in some cases, there's a lot of working people in Los Angeles that if you just gave them decent health care and an affordable education, they wouldn't be sitting on the roads for 18 hours.

Bill Curtis: They're talking about a bunch of health care being replaced with robots.

Henry Stern: Well, so if you could deliver health care a little cheaper, too, that wouldn't hurt. I mean, the real question is.

Bill Curtis: Those are people. Those are people that you sent to college to get a major education so that they could supply us with health care.

Henry Stern: True. And so when it comes to the very human facing professions, I just I don't see robots penetrating the markets that quickly. For instance, very simple tasks. You'd be surprised how long it takes a robot, for instance, to fold a towel. They don't do well with removing a bedpan.

Bill Curtis: But that's not why people want to go to college and get to get an education so they can fold a towel.

Henry Stern: No, and I don't think everyone should be going to college in the future. I don't think college is going to be for everybody. And I think the notion of a four year university that costs all this money every year for every single person. That's how we measure your value. I think that's anachronistic.

Bill Curtis: Wow, you just got a few million extra voters who don't really feel like going to college.

Henry Stern: Well, look, we are teaching to one kind of student and one kind of worker in this country. And we've got to get more creative. If we started early on and things like creative economies, you know, that kid who maybe doesn't want to study the flashcard or do the S.A.T. tests but has a penchant for music or sound design or who wants to work in the auto shop and figure out how the robotics work and be that engineer, we don't expand our education system to help that kind of creative enterprise. Robots cannot do that work. They can do non-cognitive both routine and non-routine functions. Right. So they can write a very boring and basic legal contract, but they can't give good advice to a client and give them real strategy.

Bill Curtis: So we've been through this before and I want to go to Ed for a minute because this isn't really new for us. Right? We've gone through processes at the end of World War One. At the end of World War Two, we have had a bunch of people come

into this country. We had to find them jobs and training and, you know, the G.I. Bill. Tell us a little about how we got through it last time.

Ed Larson: It isn't new at all because it came with industrialization. First it came with the factory system when it was in the early eighteen hundreds, when they first had the factory system and then again, even more so at the turn of the last century when you went to industrialization. Think of Henry Ford before that. You needed a craftsman to create a car. Now you didn't need a craftsman. You just need somebody on the assembly line.

Bill Curtis: We still needed wholesale training, retraining of a population.

Ed Larson: You had a whole different job. It used to be when our country was founded all the way through nineteen hundred. The vast majority of Americans worked on the farm. Now you had to you had to be industrial workers. And a lot of these were routine menial jobs that didn't work.

Bill Curtis: So who trained them? Just the companies or did the government get involved in...

Ed Larson: Usually it was the companies. Now you also had education, the education system exploded with the coming of industrialization. The big explosion came after First World War One and then especially after World War Two with the G.I. Bill. The issue is you can look at this from, what can or what can a robot do? What can a person do? The problem is people by their very nature. What we want more than anything is meaning in our life. And for most of us, the meaning in our life is our job. And it could be something creative like the Senator's talking about. It could be creating a new craft beer or it could be creating a new design, but it could be just a job to go into each day. So we've got to deal with the human needs of work.

Bill Curtis: So, Henry, I'd like to know, how do you envision balancing technological advancement while still employing people with dignity so they can provide for their family?

Henry Stern: Yeah, I don't think it's going to work like some European model where you just are on the dole and you don't work. I mean, I think that's an American value that is critical to our self-worth, as Ed said. But what is work and is work teaching. I'd say yes, is work child care and taking care of young people. I'd say yes. There's a lot of work, frankly, that we don't even value right now around how to raise families that I don't think is accurately.

Bill Curtis: We don't pay people for that.

Henry Stern: We don't. We don't. And, you know, when you think of the stresses of being a parent right now.

Bill Curtis: Could you earn money per kid?

Henry Stern: I think, well, now we have a child care system where you can get either as a parent looking after other parents' kids and actually setting up your own pre-K system that is certified by the state, but finding ways to pay for these incredibly value driven human investments that are going to lay groundwork for the future, I think is darn good money spent. But in terms of how do you balance for the future, there's a lot of fear about automation. You know, we come up with these sort of apocalyptic scenarios. You mentioned the L.A. Times or New York Times story of, you know, you could lose as many as five million workers and trucks. The fact is that it's not going to happen as quickly as some of the doomsday scenarios project but.

Bill Curtis: but we know the jobs are changing and training is changing.

Henry Stern: We do, we do.

Bill Curtis: College has to lean people toward a career that they can actually get a job in.

Henry Stern: Look, it's driving an anxiety out there in the workforce. And the nature of work itself, I think, is becoming menial in a different way than it used to. Doing factory work as a service worker can have its own drudgery to it when you think of the call service people who just sit there doing human work that a robot isn't great at doing yet,

but is it still meaningful? I don't know. I mean, to me what's meaningful is spend time with your family, doing something you love and being able to,.

Bill Curtis: But you don't always get to do that and earn the kind of living that you want.

Henry Stern: The hope is that technology actually enables us to do more than any person ever imagined. And the wealth, we don't always acknowledge it because there are massive wealth disparities and all kinds of tensions going on around sort of the distribution of wealth in society. But we've never had more wealth at our fingertips, democratizing the power to go get a car anywhere you want in the city for a very small amount of money or order any food product or.

Bill Curtis: Well, that's certainly where we're becoming a rental economy, where we don't need a car anymore. We just need a piece or someone else driving.

Henry Stern: Right.

Bill Curtis: Same thing happening with homes. I mean, there's a whole new kind of process. But, you know, a minute ago, Ed brought up the idea of companies investing in the future of employment and the sort of people it was. So Amazon announced their 700 million dollar allocation to retrain employees for more technical jobs. Is that a good start? Is it real?

Henry Stern: Oh, I think that's all very real. They're looking at coding. We want to see Amazon also invest in our community college system and the mechanics that allow folks to get these warehouse jobs and actually transition to

Ed Larson: think of all the vocational jobs that cannot be replaced by robots.

Henry Stern: This is a plumber take over.

Ed Larson: We need plumbers,

Henry Stern: We need the plumbers, I agree with that

Ed Larson: we need electricians

Bill Curtis: well, creativity basically in any form.

Ed Larson: And any sort of creative job. Vocational schools, communities, colleges can produce these workers who cannot be replaced by robots. I mean, how are you going to replace, take the example of a plumber. An electrician? A graphic designer. These are jobs that are going to last.

Bill Curtis: The idea of Amazon dedicating 700 million dollars to retraining their staff for more technical positions, you got to love them.

Henry Stern: I think it's a good thing, is a darn good offer. But I, look Google's putting money into the housing market. Amazon's trying to figure out.

Bill Curtis: They are spending about a billion, right they are spending a billion on land that they own. Are they building apartments or what are they doing?

Henry Stern: They're trying to build or subsidize rental apartments or try to find ways to drive a little bit more affordable housing so their workers aren't living in poverty, doing, you know, work for a giant company. The problem is, charity is really not a good way to govern. And so my only hitch with this whole trend: You can't offset your impact on workers just by making a charitable contribution. We've got to find a really durable way to deal with automation risk. And, you know, Bill Gates has been talking about trying to actually get ahead of this and look at automation fees or ways to fund the health care system from robots, essentially, so that you don't depend necessarily on your work for your health care or your work for the ability to fund your education. So I think tech has a huge equity stake to take in this. I like seeing the early openings.

Bill Curtis: You're a millennial. How much time do you spend on your cell phone?

Henry Stern: The cell phone is me. I don't know how much time. I am my cell phone.

Bill Curtis: Is that what we want for our kids?

Henry Stern: No, it's awful. Shabat, I'm preaching.

Bill Curtis: You look at the table next to you and they're all on their cell phones. They're not even talking to each other.

Henry Stern: I know. What are you doing at dinner?

Ed Larson: Well, they are talking to each other on the cell phone.

Bill Curtis: So what's your recommendation, Henry? What should young people do?

Henry Stern: Shut your phone off once a week for one day a week, every Saturday or Sunday. Pick your day and declare your independence.

Bill Curtis: And then what do you do? Watch television?

Henry Stern: No! take a, go surf, go on a walk. You know, go eat a sandwich with a friend and just look at them. Just look at your friends, see what they look like. It's amazing. They look way different than on...

Bill Curtis: They're not that good looking actually.

Henry Stern: Well, they look different than on the Internet. It's not as much like you might as many unicorns or whatever in the background, but it's real life. It's good.

Bill Curtis: So you see do you see technology as good? Cause I wasn't so sure.

Henry Stern: Good and bad. It's both. I love it and I hate it. It's the most incredible useful tool we could ever have. These smartphones and information networks. I can find people I never thought I'd find to pop back into my life or hail an Uber and, you know, and do things like tackle climate change and find innovative ways to network our energy systems. But at the same time, it can't define us as people. And how many likes you get doesn't define how cool you are, we are so bound to our social media as some quantification of value. And all due respect to all my friends with millions of followers out there, and maybe it's just FOMO or I'm jealous because I only got thousands. I just I

guess I came a little late. I was in the Facebook class when we had the book version at Harvard. Mark's a smart guy, right? He's made plenty of money and built a giant machine. I still like the book. People don't even know what that is anymore, by the way.

Bill Curtis: You know, I used to publish magazines.

Henry Stern: For your readers. It's a place

Bill Curtis: That went the way of the buggy whip. Nobody's reading those anymore

Henry Stern: I know. So maybe get me off your your marketing pitch team because I'm a little of a Luddite.

Bill Curtis: Any last words of advice for our young people and what kind of jobs to go after? What kind of education to go after? I love the put down your cell phones for a day a week.

Henry Stern: Absolutely. And I'm telling you, it will heal you when you just go to sleep on Friday night from dinner time on Friday night shut it off at dinner and just go to bed without it and wake up without it. If you can find a way it's a game changer. Terms of jobs, we talked about them today: teaching, working in clean energy, finding ways in the creative economy to do the kind of work like this incredible podcast. Those to me are the jobs of the future. Finding those creative instincts doesn't mean you mean you need to be Mr. Social and always the gregarious one. There's room for all kinds of personalities in this work future, but it's not going to be what it looked like with your parents. So if your mom or dad tell you "back when I was young, you know, we used to" it's like, thank you, mom and dad. But the future is changing more rapidly than we can imagine. And I trust in this next generation, if we empower them, they're going to invent things that we can only imagine. And I got a lot of hope. We just got to unleash them and not saddle them with debt and pressure and stress and let them shine and good things can happen.

Bill Curtis: Well, I'm going to have to cut it off there. But we need you to come back and talk more about that if you want to follow Henry Stern on his Website.

Henry Stern: You can yell at me on the Internet at @HenrySternCA You can yell at me on Twitter any day of the week, anytime. This is America. I welcome it.

Bill Curtis: State Senator Henry Stern, it has been an absolute pleasure to be here today.

Henry Stern: Honor is mine Bill. Thank you for doing it

Bill Curtis: And Ed, thank you very much. As always you are a font of knowledge and thanks so much for tuning in. And we will see you again right here in the middle.

Announcer: From Curtco Media. Media, For your mind.