Caroline: Okay. So, I want to start with a broad question for you.

Adam: Okay.

Caroline: Is school segregation definitely getting worse?

Adam: “Getting worse” is kind of hard to quantify. I can say that schools are ... it's kind of consensus now that schools are re-segregating, when you've had, in the course of 20 years, school districts that are consistently getting either black or Latino or just getting whiter. And it's not the Jim Crow de jure segregation, it's more about housing policies and the way that population shifts have changed that kind of lends itself to re-segregating. So even if we talk about America getting more diverse culturally, and in our morays and traditions, there's still these basic things that the court decided 64 years ago that still haven't changed.

Caroline: That was one of the things I was reading about, that it's really hard to measure how we're doing with school segregation, because of all these other things that are changing, too. One of the big strains of conservative thought is that these numbers that we're seeing, the number of schools that are less than 40 percent white, that's going way up, are just signs that the country is diversifying.

How do we actually go about measuring this and getting any kind of answers here? Is it possible?

Adam: I think that's still what we're trying to figure out. But what we can say definitively is that in schools that have re-segregated, you have these schools with high population of not only black and Latino students, but also low-income black and Latino students, it's an economic segregation alongside this racial re-segregation of schools. You'll see less resources devoted to those schools, you'll see less experienced teachers. So statistically, those schools and students who go to those schools are statistically supposed to have less opportunities for the future.

And I think that's really the issue here: that these highly concentrated, as the UCLA study said, intensely segregated schools mean that there is this population that will have less opportunities just because of the zip code they live in and the school they go to.

Caroline: I want to talk a little bit about the courts, and the role of the courts in segregating schools and de-segregating schools. How much of the story is about courts that are de-segregating, and districts that are rebelling and doing their own thing, and trying to get around what the court is telling them that they have to do?

Adam: I think that can be answered two ways. One, the court, of course, is definitively settled.

Caroline: Yes.

Adam: In the question of segregated schools and Brown v. Board, they said that separation is inherently unequal. And courts and judges have consistently toed the line on that and

said, yes, that's the rule of the land, and they've forced schools into these court de-segregation orders. But the issue comes when schools prove to the government that, yes, we've de-segregated our schools, and then they're free to do whatever they want.

Adam: There are a couple of different ways. For me, personally, I've looked a little bit more at the higher-education side of de-segregation, where you can prove to the department, or you can prove to a judge, that you de-segregated by basically entering an agreement getting to the percentage markers or whatever the markers were in that agreement. Once you've done that ... say you had to hit 35 or 40 percent black enrollment. Once you've done that, you're good. You can get out of your court order, and then if it so happens to re-segregate naturally after that, then you have to prove intent that you have a policy that is intentionally segregating schools. And that's where you run into the problems.

Caroline: So then how much of it becomes the court checking up on these places and saying oh, wait, you actually are violating the law?

Adam: I think the appetite for aggressively policing re-segregation is not necessarily there. And that's not even necessarily just from the Trump administration. You look at higher education, where there were a slew of de-segregation orders right after this major landmark case in 1992 that defined what it meant for higher education to be de-segregated. And you talk to some of these states and they're like, oh, we don't have our de-segregation agreement. Or we can't produce that if you try to FOIA it. And the department will clearly tell you, oh, no, that state is still under monitors. We're still monitoring them. And it's like, how are you supposed to de-segregate if you don't know what you're supposed to be doing?

I think some of it is a lack of want on the part of actually committing to integration and de-segregation. And then part of it is a lack of policing at the federal level.

Caroline: I want to ask one more broad question before we get into the specifics of your story, and a couple of other specific segregation tangents that we want to go down, which is, who is most responsible or able to fix this problem? Is it the federal government? Is it the state government? Is it the courts? Is it individual schools?

Adam: I think it has to be a mix of all of the above. I think it just has to be a situation where all parties involved take seriously the cause of de-segregating and integrating schools. And it has to be strict enforcement on the part of the Department of Education. The Department of Justice can also monitor on a civil-rights basis. The courts—as people are bringing cases and saying, hey, this is intentionally discriminatory—the courts are evaluating based on the standards set forth in Brown v. Board. Yeah, I think integration, as with anything this country does, has to be a group effort.

Karen: To follow up on that question, out of these examples Caroline just gave, who has the most power in that responsibility?

Adam: Probably the courts. In a perfect world, or in a world where the consequences would equal the actions, the Department of Education would technically have the most power there. So in the higher-education side, they can revoke a state's access to Title Four funds and say, you get no more federal financial if you don't comply with Title Six of the Civil Rights Act. But Texas, actually, in 1998, basically wrote a memo that said no state is actually going to get their funding revoked. It's not something that the department does. It's just a threat.

Caroline: You think it's just an empty threat?

Adam: The way it's played out in practice—I spoke with the former Assistant Secretary for the Office of Civil Rights, and she was basically telling me that, yes, states do not feel that they're going to be held accountable for these.

Caroline: I wanted to jump into your piece, which was great.

Adam: Thank you.

Caroline: This is a little bit of a tangent, but how did you decide that you wanted to focus on Carranza?

Adam: We were, of course, interested in what's going on in New York City right now. Ever since the 2014 report from the UCLA Civil Rights Center came out and said, hey, New York state has the most segregated schools in the country, there's really been a laser focus on how New York is reforming its schools. And Carranza is an interesting character, because every stop along the way he's kind of had this equity agenda and has made a lot of people mad along the way.

I remember when he was in Houston—he was only there for 18 months—but when he was in Houston, I just remember seeing stories in The Chronicle about Richard Carranza wanting to change the magnet schools. And I remember growing up for at least part of the time in Texas thinking of these magnet schools, these grand schools, and he's like, yes, I want to cut some of the extra funding that they're getting and move those resources to resource poor schools with a lot of low-income and black and brown students. And it made a lot of people upset.

So, knowing that he doesn't have an issue with making people upset if it's a part of a genuine equity agenda, and then also with the ongoing conversation about specialized schools in New York City, I thought it would be interesting to go up there and chat with him.

Caroline: The debate about this tiny group of specialized high schools in New York has become massive, which is funny, because it's such a small group. And comparably so few kids who were affected, but for some reason it's just become such a huge issue. And I'm wondering how much that matters. It's not actually going to affect that many kids, but you could say it's a symbolic move. How important is that specific issue right now?

Adam: I think of it this way. Say you had a group of schools, Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth. You just have all the Ivys. And they're saying, let's just get rid of the SAT and let's actually fundamentally how we're admitting students. That would send a powerful message in terms of actually achieving equity, and actually thinking about diversity and how you're admitting students. I think Carranza is of the same estimation when he is thinking about the SHSAT, and also Mayor de Blasio, of course, because this proposal predates Carranza a little bit. But I think they're thinking along those same lines where they're saying, this is the top dog in the city. These are premier high schools. And, yes, it's only going to affect a small portion of the students, but it also sends a message that, yes, we are committed to genuine equity and integrating our schools. And also that this is a tangible change that we can make right now. And if we can do it, why not?

Caroline: This particular issue, I think, has people so fired up, because so many of the people who are benefitting are low-income Asian kids. How does Carranza think about that? And how might what happens to low-income Asian kids change or reshape this debate?

Adam: We actually had a lengthy exchange about this, because it is a legitimate critique. The most socioeconomically disadvantaged people in the city tend to be Asian minorities in Queens. It's interesting, because his response is basically that this test is actually disadvantaging them more, because it's saying, you guys are having to spend all of this money on test preparation for this test that we're requiring you to take, whereas we're moving to a system where the top 7 percent of students from each middle school have the opportunity to attend these specialized schools if they want to. And of course New York is this big smorgasbord of schools. And it's these different kind of schools. So you have the Catholic schools, or the parochial schools, you have your charter schools, you have all of these different kind of schools that students can attend. And a lot of students ultimately do end up attending the parochial schools in the city. But he's basically saying that we want to make sure that students, for P.S. 277, where I went to go meet him, are basically provided the same opportunities as a student from Tribeca or Park Slope.

Caroline: One of the other big questions that emerged for me from your piece was that, focusing on this superintendent, there are so few superintendents that we hear about, and you say in your piece that Carranza was jumping from city to city to city. These cities are competing for these superintendents, which is fascinating that the pipeline is narrow. And I'm wondering how that might affect something like school segregation? The fact that Carranza got to Houston and couldn't really change anything, because he was poached?

Adam: I actually do think that's one of the really interesting things. How even if somebody may not actively be looking, they just end up moving up. And it's like, okay, yes, I was in San Francisco, and then I was in Houston. And then it's like, oh, we want to get the guy from Miami to come up here to New York.

Caroline: So interesting.

Adam: I suppose it's kind of like building somebody through their own pipeline. That said, prior to Carranza, Carmen Farina had been in the New York Public School system for a long, long time. But I think it is a concern about the pipeline, though, as one of the people

interviewed for the story basically said, maybe the pipeline is a little bit deeper than we think it is. Maybe, yes, there's the talented guy in Miami, but there's also a talented guy in Houston. And there's also a talented person in San Antonio, or El Paso, or whoever.

I think the way that people are thinking of picking these leaders, is that of course, you have to think about how big of a district this person is going to be running. I was just reading about the superintendent who just came back to Alexandria, Virginia, from Shaker Heights, Ohio, who was formerly a Deputy Superintendent of Alexandria. It's a weird bouncing around, but they're thinking about how they manage people, how many people they've managed before, and what their overall vision or goal for the system is.

I think that's a question that I'll have to grapple a little bit more with. Because I guess I hadn't honestly thought about what it means that, instead of building people through a straight pipeline, you're poaching people from all over the country.

Caroline: It's interesting.

Karen: Why are superintendents bouncing around so much? What is persuading them to leave a very present problem that otherwise they haven't finished solving?

Adam: That may be just kind of like the human-interest thing. I know for Carranza, talking to him, he kept mentioning the fact that what's going on in New York City shapes what's going on in the rest of the country and how people are thinking about things. And there's a certain responsibility that comes with that. Basically, he was saying that, when he was in San Francisco, he would be looking at what they were doing in New York, and what was innovative about what they were doing in New York. And when he was in Houston, it's like, what innovations were they doing in New York? And now that he's in this position, he's helping to shape the conversation nationally around schools and around public schooling. I think that's a challenge that he wanted. Just like any of us would. I moved from The Chronicle to The Atlantic four months ago, and it's a challenge. It's not that I didn't like where I was, it's just that it's a challenge, and about accepting the challenge.

Karen: Kind of like a macro version of how he's approaching these eight or nine specialized schools, right? It's one city, or one set of schools, but it'll send a message, he thinks, to other cities, or other schools.

Adam: Yeah. And also, you think about his career trajectory, going from being a teacher, and how, as he mentioned, "There were people above me that didn't necessarily get it." That's one of the things he told me. There were people above me that didn't necessarily get why the Mariachi program was culturally relevant curricula and something that we needed to do. So he said, "If I wanted to help students I needed more power. I needed more authority." That lead him to being the principal, and then it lead him to being a regional superintendent in Nevada, and then superintendent in San Francisco, and then he moved to a bigger district in Houston. And now he's in New York and he has this power, he has this authority, to shape culturally relevant curricula and emphasize

education for English language learners and things like that. So I do think it fits in with his general career trajectory.

Caroline: I want to turn, in our last couple of minutes here, to some potential solutions for this behemoth problem. We've combed through The Atlantic's coverage, and The Atlantic tries to find solutions for big problems. So we do have some proposed solutions. I wanted to run a couple of those by you.

Adam: Okay.

Caroline: The first one is confronting the problem of rich, white parents not wanting their kids' schools to become more de-segregated, because they worry that that will make the school's statistics go down, basically. The accreditation. Yeah. Am I saying that right?

Adam: Yeah.

Caroline: And that will go down, and then their kids will have a harder time getting into college, and all of that. One of the proposals was, to fix K- 12 segregation issues, we should turn to college admissions, basically, and incentivize schools choosing incoming students based on how segregated their high school classes were. If you attend a school that was less than 40 percent white, then you have a big advantage to college admissions. Do you think something like that could actually work?

Adam: There are merits to it, and I think that it could work. If you weight students who are going to more socioeconomically diverse, more racially diverse schools, then that makes parents say, if I want my kid to get into Harvard, or I want my kid to get into Yale, then, yes, I'm going to send him to a more socioeconomically diverse school. The question is whether it would actually happen in practice, which seems a little bit less likely. Though, if you think about it, colleges are already weighting all sorts of things, like recruited athletes or things like that.

It's always interesting when people like Nikole Hannah-Jones talk about this saying, the reason why school integration isn't happening is because people don't genuinely want it to happen. They want their kids to go to the best school, not realizing that if we didn't just think about the best school, but generally thought about society and what's best for society, and then what's best for their kid in terms of a good, cultured experience, that would lead to greater integrated schools, more integrated schools, and more diversity in the pipeline. But then there's also the argument that Natasha Warrick has made, that with college admissions, the focus on a diverse class for the sake of diversity and because diversity increases and betters the student experience, may be the wrong way to look at it.

Caroline: Why?

Adam: Basically, for example, if you're making the argument for affirmative action, and you're saying that affirmative action is good because it helps white students interact with a more diverse group of people, people argue, well, why? There are still some outstanding

questions that come along with it. But if you're arguing that we should have affirmative action because of slavery, then that's a completely different conversation.

Caroline: Yeah.

Adam: And because when these people immigrated to the U.S. they were placed in poor situations in terms of the resources they were provided and different things like that. So, yes, I think there's still this whole conversation about college admissions generally, and maybe if they just blow up the whole system, and started over, and just thought about it fresh, maybe that would be a good thing.

Karen: That's our next solution.

Caroline: That's our next issue. Any other questions, Karen?

Karen: No, this has been really educational.

Caroline: Yeah.

Karen: No pun intended.

Caroline: That was great. Thank you, Adam.

Adam: Thanks for having me.