SIRIUS RADIO INTERVIEW
Interviewer: Perri Peltz, Journalist, The Perri Peltz Show (PP)
Interviewee: Mark St John, President, Inverness Institute (MSJ)
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Announcer: This is the Perri Peltz Show on SiriusXM, here is your host, Perri Peltz.

PP: Welcome everybody, we are so glad that you could be with us for this hour and of course, it is June and just in time for summer break and lots of schools are open across the United States

And actually as of June 8, at least 14 states required in-person instruction to be available in all or some grades, but of course it begs the question even though summer break is coming, how students are doing, are they ready for return and what are the challenges that a return brings? Lots and lots of questions and how did they do when they were remote? And these are just some of the questions that we will be talking about during this hour. So we are so glad that you could be with us and it is an important conversation.

To answer some of those questions, our first guest is Mark St. John. Mark is the president of the Inverness Institute. The Inverness Institute tries to assist foundations and organizations and individuals who are designing and implementing efforts to improve education. Mark, that must keep you pretty busy these days.

MSJ: Yes, actually it has been a life-long pursuit -- improving education.

A quick background story, I began my career as a teacher and so I taught physics and I was an Outward Bound instructor and I loved teaching .. and then I got sucked into the world of improving education. And so I went to graduate school and I studied all aspects of education.

After that I became an evaluator -- and in that role we worked on efforts to improve education – we studied efforts to get better curriculum and to have better professional development and to have new standards and to have new tests. These were all of these strategies for improving education – all of which we studied... and then about 5, 6, 7 years ago I thought to myself... you know we are not only experts in education, we are experts in this whole history of trying to improve education and trying to invest in the improvement of education.

So now we have shifted up another layer -- and now we basically study efforts to improve education and our goal now is to improve the improvement of education.

PP: Let’s pause just for one moment because, of course, when we talk about improving education, we are also talking about it today in a moment where students are really,
families are really facing one of the most complicated years of all of our lives and education has taken a big hit in many ways.

**MSJ:** It has. It is the same in education -- or even more dramatic -- as it is in business or as in all of the other endeavors that we are involved in. The pandemic has a huge impact.

You can just imagine... you are a teacher... and you go to sit in a classroom everyday with 30 students -- and then all of a sudden one day they say you can’t do that. Now immediately you have to do everything on this thing called Zoom ... and your students have to do everything on this thing called Zoom.

So teachers are just like the rest of us, we all had to learn how to use Zoom ... and they also had to learn how to use all of these other software platforms as well ... and note that all of the problems that they had in the classroom before -- they didn’t just go away.

In a classroom you have students who are highly motivated -- and you want to cheer them on; and you have students who are going through the motions -- and you want to make them highly motivated; and then you have students who are completely disengaged – and you have to find ways to reach them. And all this becomes exacerbated when you get into a distance learning environment.

**PP:** Let’s talk about some of the work that the Inverness Institute has been doing and specifically, the surveys that you have done of teachers. Tell us a little bit about that.

**MSJ:** When we first went into the pandemic, there was all of this discussion about what schools should do: Should they open, should they close etc ... and I noticed what was missing in this discussion was the voices of teachers -- the people who were on the frontlines if you will. Their voices were completely not there in the discussion.

And I thought we needed to hear from the people who are actually having to make this work.

I have had the honor and privilege of working with many projects and networks, composed of what we call *leading teachers*. Some of the country’s best teachers -- these are people who teach other teachers, who are brilliant at their craft, are professional leaders, ... and I thought I could organize these teachers, especially in California, to inform us all about the realities of teaching.

I thought we could find a group of 150 teachers across California who are knowledgeable, thoughtful, and representative of the teachers of California in all ways ... and that we could capture their voice and make it public -- we could make their voices heard!
And so we partnered with EdSource which publishes California education news on a daily basis; we partnered with them -- and we also got seed funding from the Stuart Foundation. We said let’s get the voices of 150 teachers into this discussion. So we surveyed them --and we have plans to interview them -- and so we have this new asset now – a network of 150 teachers who are consultants (and they are paid consultants) -- to inform California and the nation about what it is really like out there.

PP: So tell us, what is it really like and what is it that we, the public, the recipients of the good work that teachers do across this country, what do we need to know that we don’t know?

MSJ: First of all I have to tell you I have become a fan, an advocate and a total appreciator of teachers. Too often teachers are portrayed as the problem and in my mind -- over many years -- I have come to see them as not the problem but the solution – the only solution.

Our educational problems will only be solved because of the intelligence and motivation and drive of our leading teachers.

And so we need to find a way to harness their wisdom and their energy. When this pandemic hit, these teachers had to pivot. They had to re-invent teaching -- and they did so quite creatively, quite courageously and with extraordinary difficulty. If you take these teachers --and remember these are 150 of the most optimistic, energetic teachers that you can find in California—you now find that a significant percentage of them are reeling and they are challenged and they are depressed. In fact, they are suffering the same socioemotional challenges that their students are -- and so they need support. And they need understanding and they need respect. One of the things we learned was these teachers felt very misunderstood by the public and by the education system leaders. A great majority feel this way.

PP: What you are saying is really important -- and I want to translate that out then for our listeners, many of whom are parents who have children that are in school or will be in school or returning to school, how can we all as individuals, not the government, not the school boards, make a difference and help remedy what you are describing?

MSJ: Our teachers showed this huge variation. Some of them quite articulately said “My parents are the best. They are supporting me, they are supporting my students, and they are creating learning environments and we are communicating ... “. They were absolutely raving about the support they had from parents.

Other teachers, many others, felt absolutely alienated from, blamed by, and distrusted by parents. So the spectrum was huge in this 150 teacher group ... So I would just say to
parents: I wish you could read the comments of these teachers. I wish you could find ways to understand, work with, and support your child’s teacher.

One of the things in the survey which surprised us -- we thought their survey ratings would be important -- but it turns out that just reading through hundreds of comments by teachers gives you this deep feel of what it is like to be a teacher.

If you could take the time to read their comments and begin to get a sense of “wow -- what world that these teachers are living in” – to understand viscerally what challenges they are facing, you would begin to have an empathy and an understanding towards teachers, rather than hold the stereotypical view --well that is a teacher.

So having this survey data comments gives us all access to the first-hand experience of teachers and it helps you realize how important the parental and public support is.

**PP:** It is so true and you are right, we can create villains because it has been such a difficult and challenging year. Parents are frustrated and they are trying to figure out how to get their jobs done and they are worried about their children and often times an easy place to point fingers is at the teachers. I am curious, based on the work that you have done, the research that you have done, as you look forward to the fall, where we hope and fingers crossed that the country continues to open up, do you have any concerns about re-opening the classroom?

**MSJ:** Yes. A couple of things.

One is when you have political pressures to open schools and not open schools, you sometimes come up with a solution that is a hybrid solution. In theory that sounds great--some in class and some distance learning -- and I think we might ultimately craft a vision where we get the best of distance learning and in-class learning,

But right now, the hybrid learning situation is a total nightmare for parents, for teachers and for everybody and the current arrangements of some hours on, some hours off, bring your kids from 11 to 2, etc ... it just does not work for parents, teachers or students. It is pretty much a disaster and it is sort of a political accommodation, but in terms of a workable, feasible arrangement, it has been just terrible.

So I hope that we either go to all distance learning or all in-class learning, or if we have a mixture, that we engineer that mixture much more carefully.

Another thing very interesting thing that the teachers told us is that they don’t want to go back to normal. Normal wasn’t that great before. Normal means we have systems with huge inequities -- which now have been made transparent and made visible by the pandemic -- where we have classroom situations, family situations, school conditions, policy situations that really aren’t what they should be -- and so we don’t want to race
back to the way we were. We want to use this as an opportunity to create a new, better world.

**PP:** And Mark, can you describe a little bit about what that new better world might look like?

**MSJ:** I think in that better world we would first acknowledge some things. So one thing is for us all to acknowledge is that these inequities run very deep in our lives and in our systems. And that we should actually engineer -- and I used the word engineering because I was trained as an engineer -- we should begin to engineer ways to solve some of those problems. There are huge inequities in family situations and also school financing.

School financing done primarily by property taxes as we know over the years leads to hugely inequitable systems and unequal opportunities for students to learn.

There are technology inequities -- not being able to get online or have the computers or the hotspots or whatever.

In the better world I envision we deliberately and honestly search for the sources of inequity in our systems... and we address them.

I will tell you another interesting source of inequity can be found in our approach to testing and accountability. The whole concept of standardized testing and the larger concept of accountability is often quite counterproductive. Although it is meant to drive the system and make things better, in reality testing and accountability efforts often exacerbate inequities.

For example, if you are in a poor school district, you are much more likely to have a lot of attention paid to test scores which then drives fear and narrows the curriculum. Teachers teach to the test and students are drilled.

So there are lots of unintended consequences of our policies -- including standardized testing and accountability and we should look more deeply at all of them so that we begin to recognize and understand the sources of inequity... we should really care about and do something about the upstream sources that create very different learning opportunities downstream for very different groups of students.

**PP:** That is such a good point Mark and unfortunately our time is up, but I want to make sure that our listeners have an opportunity to read more about the work that the Inverness Institute does. Can you tell everybody how they can learn more?

**MSJ:** Sure just Google the Inverness Institute. Google is always the answer, right? There we are! And again I really encourage people to look through the EdSource
reports, our spotlights and especially just to read the teacher comments. They are such wonderful people working so hard -- and I feel like their voices should be heard.

**PP:** I think Mark we should all just take a second to think about the teachers and the teachers who have struggled so mightily as you used the term, on the frontlines, this very, very difficult year and they have done an extraordinary, extraordinary job and we owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude and so thank you for bringing that to light. And thanks for taking the time to be with us today.

**MSJ:** It is a lot of fun.

**PP:** Come back again.

**MSJ:** I will, thank you so much.

**PP:** All right. Mark St. John is the president of the Inverness Institute and you can learn more at Invernessinstitute.org.