

Download and Read Free Online **Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education** By **Ken Robinson Ph.D., Lou Aronica**

Editorial Review

Review

"Compelling...Robinson wants a revolution in education...and he wants us—you—to be the change."—*The Guardian*

"*Creative Schools* is one of those rare books that not only inspires and brings a new sense of possibility to the goal of transforming education, but also lays out an actionable strategy. Ken Robinson is leading a daring revolution to change how we understand schools, learning, and most importantly, the passion and talent of our students. This is a global game-changer and I'm in."—BRENÉ BROWN, PH.D., author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Daring Greatly*

"*Creative Schools* is wonderful and enjoyable. It makes us rethink what real schooling, learning, and creativity means."—MALALA YOUSAFZAI, author of *I Am Malala* and Nobel Prize Laureate

"Ken Robinson's *Creative Schools* offers a brilliant and compelling vision for what education must become. His powerful call to action cites wonderful examples where the education of the future is happening today. Don't miss this important book!"—TONY WAGNER, author of *Creating Innovators* and *The Global Achievement Gap* and Expert In Residence at Harvard University's Innovation Lab

"Make me care. Sir Ken and Lou turn these three words into a mantra for the future of education. We don't do education to students, we do it with them. I hope every teacher and every parent reads this."—SETH GODIN, author of *Stop Stealing Dreams*

"Sir Ken Robinson has been a leading voice for radical change in education for decades. In *Creative Schools*, he not only articulately defines the problem, but also provides a practical roadmap for transforming the system one school at a time. Far from being a pipe dream, Sir Ken Robinson highlights educators who are leading the charge and revolutionizing education NOW."—DAVE BURGESS, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Teach Like a PIRATE: Increase Student Engagement, Boost Your Creativity, and Transform Your Life as an Educator*

"From the pen of the world's expert on creativity comes a comprehensive and compelling statement of why creativity matters for everyone, what it looks like in action, what kinds of curriculum and assessment systems are needed to support it, and how to get there. Inspiring and so readable you will feel Sir Ken is talking directly to you."—ANDY HARGREAVES, author of *Professional Capital* and Thomas More Brennan Chair at Boston College's Lynch School of Education

"Ken Robinson is the world's most potent advocate of global education transformation; his clarity, passion and insight have inspired millions, including me. This book is not only a catalyst, or call to action; it is a manifesto; a practical exploration and celebration of what is possible. Now it's up to us; we must read, react and accelerate the revolution."—RICHARD GERVER, author of *Creating Tomorrow's Schools Today*

"Sir Ken Robinson does it again with this compelling book. His explanations and examples are spot on. As *Creative Schools* shows, there's no denying the change is occurring."—ELLIOT WASHOR, Co-Founder of Big Picture Learning and author of *Leaving to Learn*

"Forget the chatter about disruptive technological and economic forces in education. Ken Robinson and Lou

Aronica vividly describe the disruptions that are needed if we are to have quality education in our time.”—HOWARD GARDNER, author of *Five Minds for the Future*

“This is the book we have been waiting for from Sir Ken Robinson —laying out what is fundamentally wrong with our education systems, and correspondingly showing what and how it should and could be different. He makes creativity, and much more, come alive. Don’t start reading this book unless you have three hours before you, as you will have difficulty putting it down. Then, think about what you might do and re-read the book with others to start making the changes. Creative schools indeed! The timing is perfect.”—MICHAEL FULLAN, OC. Professor Emeritus, OISE/University of Toronto and author of *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*

“This book is a wake-up call to the emerging global human resources crisis. Increasing boredom, disengagement and dropouts among students have become chronic aspects of many school systems around the world. Creative Schools is a must-read for anyone who is interested in critique, vision, and theory of change for the new course of schooling.” —PASI SAHLBERG, author of *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland*

About the Author

Ken Robinson is one of the world’s most influential educators. Listed by Fast Company as “one of the world’s elite thinkers on creativity and innovation” and ranked among the Thinkers50 of the world’s top business thought leaders, he advises governments, corporations, and leading cultural institutions. **Lou Aronica** is the author of four novels and coauthor of *The Element* and *Finding Your Element*. He lives in Connecticut.

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Introduction

One Minute to Midnight

ARE YOU CONCERNED about education? I am. One of my deepest concerns is that while education systems around the world are being reformed, many of these reforms are being driven by political and commercial interests that misunderstand how real people learn and how great schools actually work. As a result, they are damaging the prospects of countless young people. Sooner or later, for better or for worse, they will affect you or someone you know. It’s important to understand what these reforms are about. If you agree that they’re going in the wrong direction, I hope you will become part of the movement to a more holistic approach that nurtures the diverse talents of all our children.

In this book, I want to set out how the standards culture is harming students and schools and to present a different way of thinking about education. I want to show too that whoever and wherever you are, you do have the power to make the system change. Changes are happening. All around the world, there are many great schools, wonderful teachers, and inspiring leaders who are working creatively to provide students with the kinds of personalized, compassionate, and community-oriented education they need. There are entire school districts and even national systems that are moving in the same direction. People at all levels of these systems are pressing for the changes I’m arguing for here.

In 2006, I gave a talk at the TED conference in California called “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” The essence of that talk was that we’re all born with immense natural talents, but by the time we’ve been through

education far too many of us have lost touch with them. As I put it then, many highly talented, brilliant people think they're not because the thing they were good at in school wasn't valued or was actually stigmatized. The consequences are disastrous for individuals and for the health of our communities.

It has proven to be the most watched talk in the history of TED. It has been viewed online more than thirty million times and has been seen by an estimated three hundred million people worldwide. I know that's not as many views as Miley Cyrus gets. But I don't twerk.

Since that talk was posted online, I've heard from students all around the world who say they've shown it to their teachers or parents, from parents who say they've shown it to their children, from teachers who've shown it to their principals, and from superintendents who've shown it to everybody. I take this as evidence that I'm not alone in thinking this way. And these are not recent concerns either.

I was speaking last year at a U.S. college in the Midwest. Over lunch, one of the faculty said to me, "You've been at this a long time now, haven't you?" I said, "At what?" He said, "Trying to change education. How long is it now? Eight years?" I said, "What do you mean, eight years?" He said, "You know, since that TED talk." I said, "Yes, but I was alive before that. . . ."

I've now worked in education for more than forty years as a teacher, researcher, trainer, examiner, and adviser. I've worked with all sorts of people, institutions, and systems in education and with businesses, governments, and cultural organizations. I've directed practical initiatives with schools, districts, and governments; taught in universities; and helped to set up new institutions. In all of this, I've been pushing for more balanced and individualized and creative approaches to education.

In the last ten years especially, I hear people everywhere saying how exasperated they are by the deadening effects of testing and standardization on them, their children, or their friends. Often they feel helpless and say there's nothing they can do to change education. Some people tell me they enjoy my talks online but are frustrated that I don't say what they can do to change the system. I have three responses. The first is, "It was an eighteen-minute talk; give me a break." The second is, "If you're really interested in what I think, I've published various other books, reports, and strategies on all of this, which you may find helpful."¹ The third response is this book.

I'm often asked the same questions: What's going wrong in education and why? If you could reinvent education, what would it look like? Would you have schools? Would there be different types? What would go on in them? Would everyone have to go, and how old would they have to be? Would there be tests? And if you say I can make a difference in education, where do I begin?

The most fundamental question is, *what is education for?* People differ sharply on this question. Like "democracy" and "justice," "education" is an example of what the philosopher Walter Bryce Gallie called an "essentially contested concept." It means different things to different people according to their cultural values and how they view related issues like ethnicity, gender, poverty, and social class. That doesn't mean we can't discuss it or do anything about it. We just need to be clear on terms.² So, before we go on, let me say a few words about the terms "learning," "education," "training," and "school," which are sometimes confused.

Learning is the process of acquiring new knowledge and skills. Human beings are highly curious learning organisms. From the moment they're born, young children have a voracious appetite for learning. For too many, that appetite starts to dull as they go through school. Keeping it alive is the key to transforming education.

Education means organized programs of learning. The assumption of formal education is that young people

need to know, understand, and be able to do things that they wouldn't if left to their own devices. What those things are and how education should be organized to help students learn them are core issues here.

Training is a type of education that's focused on learning specific skills. I remember earnest debates as a student about the difficulty of distinguishing between education and training. The difference was clear enough when we talked about sex education. Most parents would be happy to know their teenagers had sex education at school; they'd probably be less happy if they'd had sex training.

By *schools*, I don't mean only the conventional facilities that we are used to for children and teenagers. I mean any community of people that comes together to learn with each other. School, as I use the term here, includes homeschooling, un-schooling, and informal gatherings both in person and online from kindergarten to college and beyond. Some features of conventional schools have little to do with learning and can actively get in the way of it. The revolution we need involves rethinking how schools work and what counts as a school. It's also about trusting in a different story about education.

We all love stories, even if they're not true. As we grow up, one of the ways we learn about the world is through the stories we hear. Some are about particular events and personalities within our personal circles of family and friends. Some are part of the larger cultures we belong to—the myths, fables, and fairy tales about our own ways of life that have captivated people for generations. In stories that are told often, the line between fact and myth can become so blurred that we easily mistake one for the other. This is true of a story that many people believe about education, even though it's not real and never really was. It goes like this:

Young children go to elementary school mainly to learn the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics. These skills are essential so they can do well academically in high school. If they go on to higher education and graduate with a good degree, they'll find a well-paid job and the country will prosper too.

In this story, real intelligence is what you use in academic studies: children are born with different amounts of this intelligence, and so naturally some do well at school and some don't. The ones who are really intelligent go on to good universities with other academically bright students. Those who graduate with a good university degree are guaranteed a well-paid professional job with their own office. Students who are less intelligent naturally do less well at school. Some may fail or drop out. Some who finish high school may not go any further in education and look for a lower-income job instead. Some will go on to college but take less academic, vocational courses and get a decent service or manual job, with their own toolkit.

When it's put so baldly, this story may seem too much of a caricature. But when you look at what goes on in many schools, when you listen to what many parents expect of and for their children, when you consider what so many policymakers around the world are actually doing, it seems that they really believe that the current systems of education are basically sound; they're just not working as well as they should because standards have fallen. Consequently, most efforts are focused on raising standards through more competition and accountability. You may believe this story too and wonder what's wrong with it.

This story is a dangerous myth. It is one of the main reasons why so many reform efforts do not work. On the contrary, they often compound the very problems they claim to be solving. They include the alarming rates of nongraduation from schools and colleges, the levels of stress and depression—even suicide—among students and their teachers, the falling value of a university degree, the rocketing costs of getting one, and the rising levels of unemployment among graduates and nongraduates alike.

Politicians often scratch their heads over these problems. Sometimes, they punish schools for not making the grade. Sometimes, they fund remedial programs to get them back on track. But the problems persist and in many ways they're getting worse. The reason is that many of these problems are being caused by the system itself.

All systems behave in ways that are particular to them. When I was in my twenties in Liverpool, I made a visit to an abattoir. (I don't remember why now. I was probably on a date.) Abattoirs are designed to kill animals. And they work. Very few escape and form survivors clubs. As we came to the end, we passed a door that was marked "veterinarian." I imagined this person was fairly depressed at the end of an average day, and I asked the guide why the abattoir had a veterinarian. Wasn't it a bit late for that? He said that the veterinarian came in periodically to conduct random autopsies. I thought, he must've seen a pattern by now.

If you design a system to do something specific, don't be surprised if it does it. If you run an education system based on standardization and conformity that suppresses individuality, imagination, and creativity, don't be surprised if that's what it does.

There's a difference between symptoms and causes. There are many symptoms of the current malaise in education, and they won't be relieved unless we understand the deeper problems that underlie them. One is the industrial character of public education. The issue in a nutshell is this: most of the developed countries did not have mass systems of public education much before the middle of the nineteenth century. These systems were developed in large part to meet the labor needs of the Industrial Revolution and they are organized on the principles of mass production. The standards movement is allegedly focused on making these systems more efficient and accountable. The problem is that these systems are inherently unsuited to the wholly different circumstances of the twenty-first century.

In the last forty years, the population of the world has doubled from less than three billion to more than seven billion. We are the largest population of human beings ever to be on Earth at the same time, and the numbers are rising precipitously. At the same time, digital technologies are transforming how we all work, play, think, feel, and relate to each other. That revolution has barely begun. The old systems of education were not designed with this world in mind. Improving them by raising conventional standards will not meet the challenges we now face.

Don't mistake me; I'm not suggesting that all schools are terrible or that the whole system is a mess. Of course not. Public education has benefited millions of people in all sorts of ways, including me. I could not have had the life I've had but for the free public education I received in England. Growing up in a large working-class family in 1950s Liverpool, my life could have gone in a completely different direction. Education opened my mind to the world around me and gave me the foundations on which I've created my life.

For countless others, public education has been the path to personal fulfillment or the route out of poverty and disadvantage. Numerous people have succeeded in the system and done well by it. It would be ridiculous to suggest otherwise. But far too many have not benefited as they should from the long years of public education. The success of those who do well in the system comes at a high price for the many who do not. As the standards movement gathers pace, even more students are paying the price of failure. Too often, those who are succeeding are doing so in spite of the dominant culture of education, not because of it.

So what can you do? Whether you're a student, an educator, a parent, an administrator, or a policymaker—if you're involved in education in any way—you can be part of the change. To do that, you need three forms of understanding: a *critique* of the way things are, a *vision* of how they should be, and a *theory of change* for how to move from one to the other. These are what I offer in this book, based on my own experience and that of many other people too. Three types of material are woven through the following chapters: analysis, principles, and examples.

If you want to change education, it's important to recognize what sort of system it is. It is neither monolithic nor unchanging, which is why you can do something about it. It has many faces, many intersecting interests,

and many potential points of innovation. Knowing this helps to explain why and how you can change it.

The revolution I'm advocating is based on different principles from those of the standards movement. It is based on a belief in the value of the individual, the right to self-determination, our potential to evolve and live a fulfilled life, and the importance of civic responsibility and respect for others. As we go on, I'll elaborate on what I see as the four basic purposes of education: personal, cultural, social, and economic. As I see it, the aims of education are *to enable students to understand the world around them and the talents within them so that they can become fulfilled individuals and active, compassionate citizens.*

This book is full of examples from many sorts of schools. It draws on the work of thousands of people and organizations working to transform education. It is also supported by the most current research available that is being put into effective practice. My aim here is to offer a coherent overview of the changes that are urgently needed in and to schools. It includes the transforming context of education, the dynamics of changing schools, and core issues of learning, teaching, curriculum, assessment, and policy. The inevitable price of a big picture is reduced detail in parts of it. For that reason, I refer you often to the work of others, which dwells more deeply than I can here on some of the issues I need to cover more quickly.

I'm fully aware of the intense political pressures bearing down on education. The policies through which these pressures exert themselves must be challenged and changed. Part of my appeal (as it were) is to policymakers themselves to embrace the need for radical change. But revolutions don't wait for legislation. They emerge from what people do at the ground level. Education doesn't happen in the committee rooms of the legislatures or in the rhetoric of politicians. It's what goes on between learners and teachers in actual schools. If you're a teacher, for your students *you are* the system. If you're a school principal, for your community *you are* the system. If you're a policymaker, for the schools you control *you are* the system.

If you're involved in education in any way you have three options: you can make changes within the system, you can press for changes to the system, or you can take initiatives outside the system. A lot of the examples in this book are of innovations within the system as it is. Systems as a whole are capable of changing too, and in many ways they already are. The more innovation there is within them, the more likely they are to evolve as a whole.

For most of my life, I lived and worked in England. In 2001, my family and I moved to the United States. Since then, I've traveled extensively throughout the country working with teachers, school districts, professional associations, and policymakers at all levels of education. For these reasons, this book looks especially at what is happening in the United States and in the U.K. But the issues affecting education are global, and there are examples throughout the book from other parts of the world.

The focus of the book is mainly on education from early childhood to the end of high school. The issues we deal with have major implications for secondary education too, and many of those institutions are changing radically with the world around them. I refer generally to those changes, but looking at them properly would take a book of its own.

In a recent interview, I was asked about my theories. I replied that they are not simply theories. I do offer various theoretical perspectives on the approach I'm suggesting, but what I'm arguing for is not hypothetical. It's based on long experience and study of what works in education, what motivates students and teachers to achieve their best and what does not. In doing this, I stand in a long tradition. The approach I'm recommending has deep roots in the history of teaching and learning since ancient times. It is not a fashion or trend. It is based on principles that have always inspired transformative education, principles that industrial education, for all else it has achieved, has systematically pushed to the margins.

The challenges we face on Earth are not theoretical either; they are all too real and they are mostly being

created by people. In 2009, the BBC's *Horizon* series aired an episode about how many people can live on Earth. It was called *How Many People Can Live on Planet Earth?* (The BBC has a gift for titles.) There are now 7.2 billion people on Earth. That's nearly twice as many as in 1970, and we're heading for nine billion by the middle of the century and twelve billion by the end of it. We all have the same basic needs for clean air, water, food, and fuel for the lives we lead. So how many people can the Earth sustain?

The episode consulted some of the world's leading experts on population, water, food production, and energy. They concluded that if everyone on Earth consumed at the same rate as the average person in India, the Earth could sustain a maximum population of fifteen billion. On that basis, we are halfway there. The trouble is that we don't all consume at that rate. If everyone consumed at the same rate as the average person in North America, we're told, the planet could sustain a maximum population of 1.5 billion. We are nearly five times past that already.

So, if everyone wanted to consume as we do in North America, and it seems they do, by the middle of the century we would need five more planets to make that feasible. The need for radical innovation in how we think, live, and relate to each other could hardly be more pressing. In the meantime, we are as divided as ever by cultural differences and by economic competition for the same resources.

It's often said that we have to save the planet. I'm not so sure. The Earth has been around for almost five billion years, and it has another five billion years to run before it crashes into the sun. As far as we know, modern human beings like us emerged less than two hundred thousand years ago. If you imagine the whole history of the Earth as one year, we showed up at less than one minute to midnight on December 31. The danger is not to the planet, but to the conditions of our own survival on it. The Earth may well conclude that it tried humanity and is not impressed. Bacteria are much less trouble, which may be why they've survived for billions of years.

It was probably this sort of thing that the science fiction writer and futurist H. G. Wells had in mind when he said that civilization is a race between education and catastrophe. Education is indeed our best hope. Not the old style of industrial education, which was designed to meet the needs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but a new style of education suited to the challenges we now face and the real talents that lie deep within us all.

As we face a very uncertain future, the answer is not to do better what we've done before. We have to do something else. The challenge is not to fix this system but to change it; not to *reform* it but to *transform* it. The great irony in the current malaise in education is that we actually know what works. We just don't do it on a wide enough scale. We are in position as never before to use our creative and technological resources to change that. We now have limitless opportunities to engage young people's imaginations and to provide forms of teaching and learning that are highly customized to them.

Although education is now a global issue, it is inevitably a grassroots process. Understanding that is the key to transformation. The world is undergoing revolutionary changes; we need a revolution in education too. Like most revolutions, this one has been brewing for a long time, and in many places it is already well under way. It is not coming from the top down; it is coming, as it must do, from the ground up.

CHAPTER ONE

Back to Basics

DR. LAURIE BARRON would have forgiven her students and colleagues if they'd fitted her office with a revolving door before her first day as principal of Smokey Road Middle School in Newnan, Georgia. After all, the school had been open for only five years, and it had already seen four other principals. "It wasn't that we had poor or ineffective leaders," she told me. "In fact, most of those leaders who preceded me were very successful, older principals. Three of them became superintendents. It was the lack of stable leadership. They weren't there long enough to make anything happen."

This was especially problematic in Smokey Road, where the numbers were not in the school's favor. Located about thirty-five miles from Atlanta, nearly 20 percent of Newnan's population are living below the poverty line, and more than 60 percent of Smokey Road's students qualify as economically disadvantaged. When Laurie arrived at Smokey Road in 2004, the school consistently had the lowest academic achievement of the five middle schools in its district. It also had the highest number of absences, the highest number of discipline referrals, the highest number of charges filed with the juvenile justice system, and the highest number of students placed in alternative education systems because of discipline problems. Smokey Road needed help at a variety of levels, but Laurie decided that what it needed first was a sense of stability and safety.

"I spent that first year jumping over tables breaking up fights. People would ask me what kind of data I had, and I would tell them that I jump over tables; I don't know anything about data. I'm very organized and data driven, but when I look back over my notebooks for my nine years there, I realize I don't have any notebooks from that first year. The only thing I did that first year was to try to establish safety. None of the students felt comfortable, because there were all kinds of confrontations going on."

Laurie spent a great deal of time in her initial year getting kids out of each other's faces and, more often than she wanted, sending them home on suspension. It was necessary. Laurie realized that learning was nearly impossible when students were either picking fights or worried about getting into a fight. By the end of that first year, she'd put enough ground rules in place for the students to begin to understand what kind of behavior was expected of them. Most important of all, she came back for a second year. This put a halt to the revolving door and allowed the school to get to work on a productive long-term plan—a plan that had to break the habits that had become ingrained in the school's culture.

"Our school wasn't perceived as a good school, but this was just accepted. No one was disappointed in how we were performing. It was almost like, 'Hey, you're doing a good job with what you've got.' It was fine to be what we were. That second year was when we really started to think about what we wanted to be about. We needed to get the kids to the point where they wanted to be here. We spent the whole year developing our mission and vision. That's when we realized that we needed to get to know these kids. It was a very long process with involvement from teachers, students, business partners, and community members. We organized a parent-teacher organization. I believe a lot of the teachers believed in the kids, but holistically as a school, I don't think *we* believed in the kids, and our community didn't believe in the kids. I think some of the teachers did, because we had some quality teachers there who are still there today, but we didn't have a big-picture mission."

This vision evolved into a four-step plan. The first step was making sure that the kids came to school in the first place. Smokey Road had a very poor attendance record, and Laurie realized that the school had not created a culture where kids felt that it mattered that they were there—and that *she* was part of the problem. "I was suspending them all the time for fighting," she said, "so I certainly wasn't showing them that I wanted them to be there."

Next, she and her team needed to make the students feel safe while they were at the school. The confrontations at Smokey Road rarely got to the point where anyone was getting seriously hurt, but the

regular outbreaks had to stop if the kids were going to feel secure and undistracted.

After this, the next step was to help students feel valued as individuals. The true turnaround came when Laurie and her staff realized that they needed to deal with every student based on the needs and interests of each individual. (More on this in a moment.)

The fourth step was teaching the appropriate curriculum that the students needed for future success. It's notable that Laurie saw this as the last of the four key steps. Curriculum was important, but only once the other objectives were in place. The same was true with evaluating her teachers.

“We really didn't focus on teaching, because we had been teaching all along. I didn't feel that the problem was that teachers didn't know how to teach. It was that there were so many hindrances to teaching curriculum. I felt that if we could give them the kids for seventy-five minutes, they could do something with them. Once we had those other things in place, then we could look at the teachers. Before then, we couldn't tell if the teacher struggled or not, because the problem could have been safety and classroom management or building relationships with kids. We were in every classroom every week. I had two assistant principals, and the three of us would visit every teacher every week. We couldn't do that when we had seventy kids in our office every day for disciplinary reasons.”

Only when Laurie started to think about what mattered to her kids did things start to change at Smokey Road. “Whatever is important to the student is the most important thing. Nothing is more important than something else: football, band, math, English. We weren't going to tell the students that football wasn't important, that math was what was important. Our approach was that if football was most important to you, then we were going to do whatever it takes to keep you in football. When we started taking that approach, when kids started seeing that we valued what they valued, they started giving back to us what we valued. Once we started building relationships with the kids, they'd feel guilty about letting us down. They might not like math, but they didn't want to let that math teacher down. Then the teachers could finally teach, instead of writing discipline referrals.

“I've got some teachers who couldn't care less about football, but they'll go to the football game and cheer on Bobby and then use Bobby in a science equation the next day. Bobby will do all the science in the world for that teacher.”

This kind of approach required Laurie to forgo the models she was getting from the state and from the federal government, and to let go of any elements of “we've always done it that way” thinking that might have remained. And it worked brilliantly with so many of the students. One of her students was a good athlete, but he failed sixth grade, largely because he'd received thirty-three discipline referrals. When Laurie finally got him to see that she agreed that athletics were the most important thing in his life, the discipline problems abated. “He had two referrals total in seventh and eighth grades. And he passed every standardized test. He was black, special education, free and reduced-cost lunch—he was a statistic waiting to happen. We told him that football could be more important than anything else he did, but we would have to help him get through that.”

She gave me another example. “We have a girl in chorus: white female, special education, economically disadvantaged. Her father died when she was in fourth grade. She shut down, didn't want to do anything. She was failing sixth grade. My chorus teacher saw something in her and gave her a solo. She sang the solo in November and made all A's the rest of the year. She would have never made it, but the teacher said that all she wanted to do was sing. You've got to listen to what's important to the child.

“Our teachers don't get in front of the class and say, ‘You all have to pass the math test.’ They go to each kid: ‘Hey, you want to be in band; you want to play first chair? Doing well in math is going to help you.’

You can get anyone to do you a favor. You can't get groups to follow a mandate." The change in Smokey Road was obvious to everyone, and the stats improved dramatically as well. Test scores were up in every subgroup—special education student test scores improved 60 percent in math and reading—and there was a dramatic increase in attendance and a significant drop in discipline referrals.

The turnaround at Smokey Road was so profound that the school was named a Georgia Title I Distinguished School and a 2011 MetLife Foundation–NASSP Breakthrough School for being high achieving while serving a large number of students living in poverty. Laurie Barron herself was named 2013 MetLife/NASSP National Middle Level Principal of the Year.¹

What Laurie Barron saw at Smokey Road was a school in desperate need of reform—not the kind of reform that comes from state mandates or federal standards, but the kind that comes from the ground up when you truly understand your students and your educators. Laurie embodies the kind of reform so necessary in our schools. But, as we're about to see, "reform" has different definitions for different people.

The Standards Movement

Reform isn't new in education. There have always been debates about what education is for and what should be taught and how. But now it's different. The modern standards movement is global. Pasi Sahlberg, a leading commentator on international trends in education, deftly refers to it as the Global Education Reform Movement, or GERM. It certainly does seem to be contagious, to judge by how many countries are catching the bug. National education policies used to be mainly domestic affairs. These days, governments scrutinize each other's education systems as earnestly as their defense policies.

The political stakes are high. In 1992, Bill Clinton said he wanted to be known as the education president. So too did George W. Bush, who made education reform a top priority of his first presidential term. In January 2002, on the eve of Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, Bush said he believed education was the civil rights issue of the time, going on to say, "We have overcome the institutionalized bigotry that Dr. King fought. . . . Now our challenge is to make sure that every child has a fair chance to succeed in life."² President Obama made reforming education one of the highest priorities of his administration. China is promoting massive reforms in education as a centerpiece of national transformation.³ Dilma Rousseff, the first female president of Brazil, put education at the heart of her government's strategy for renewal.⁴ Wherever you look, education is high on the agenda of governments around the globe.

Since 2000, the standards movement has been turbocharged by the league tables of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). These tables are based on student performance in standardized tests in mathematics, reading, and science, which are administered by the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). PISA runs the tests every three years with groups of fifteen-year-olds in countries around the world. The number of countries taking part has increased from thirty-two in 2000 to sixty-five in 2012, and the number of students being tested has almost doubled from 265,000 in 2000 to 510,000.⁵

The political impact of PISA has grown too. In 2001, the results attracted relatively mild attention in the European press. In 2013, they made headlines around the world and sent tremors through governments everywhere.⁶ Ministers of education now compare their respective rankings like bodybuilders flexing their biceps. Like the press, they seem to treat the rankings as an absolute measure of their success.

When the Chinese district of Shanghai took part in PISA for the first time in 2009, it took the top spot in all three categories. That result shook Western states to the core. In 2012, Shanghai was at the top again, followed by Singapore, Hong Kong, and Chinese Taipei. The Western press speculated feverishly about the power of "the Asian model" of education and delivered a louder call to politicians in their own countries to

do more to raise standards and keep pace with global competition.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan commented, “The big picture of U.S. performance on the 2012 PISA is straightforward and stark: It is a picture of educational stagnation.” These results, he said, “must serve as a wake-up call against educational complacency and low expectations. The problem is not that our fifteen-year-olds are performing worse today than before. . . . [It is that] our students are basically losing ground. We’re running in place, as other high-performing countries start to lap us.”⁷ Appropriately enough, the major education initiative by the Obama administration is called Race to the Top, a national program of financial incentives for school improvement that is driven by standards and testing.⁸

Why is education such a hot political issue? The first reason is *economic*. Education has huge implications for economic prosperity. In the last twenty-five years, business has been transformed by the rapid developments in digital technology and massive population growth. In the process, economic competition has intensified in trade, manufacturing, and services. Governments know that a well-educated workforce is crucial to national economic prosperity, and their policies are peppered with rhetoric about innovation, entrepreneurship, and “twenty-first-century skills.” It’s why they spend so much money on education and why it’s one of the world’s biggest businesses. In the United States alone, education and training cost \$632 billion in 2013.⁹ Worldwide, the figure was more than \$4 trillion.¹⁰

The second reason is *cultural*. Education is one of the main ways that communities pass on their values and traditions from one generation to the next. For some, education is a way of preserving a culture against outside influences; for others, it is a way of promoting cultural tolerance. It is partly because of its cultural significance that there is such political heat around the content of education.

The third reason is *social*. One of the declared aims of public education is to provide all students, whatever their backgrounds and circumstances, with opportunities to prosper and succeed and to become active and engaged citizens. In practice, governments also want education to promote whatever attitudes and behaviors they think necessary for social stability. Those vary, of course, from one political system to another.

The fourth reason is *personal*. Most statements of public policy for education contain ritual passages about the need for all students to realize their potential and to live fulfilled and productive lives.

So how are governments going about achieving these goals?

Taking Control

Governments everywhere are now yanking firmly on the reins of public education, telling schools what to teach, imposing systems of testing to hold them accountable, and levying penalties if they don’t make the grade. In some countries, governments have always had a strong role in education. In others, politicians have traditionally kept their distance from schools. In the United States, for example, education is mainly organized at the state level and, until recently, the role of the federal government was relatively weak. All that changed in 2001 when Congress passed the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). In the years since, federal and state governments combined have spent more than eight hundred billion dollars on thousands of programs and new systems of testing.¹¹

Although there are some important differences between countries, the reform strategies in many of them do have various features in common. The typical reform story goes like this:

A high-performing education system is critical to national economic prosperity and to staying ahead of our competitors. Standards of academic achievement must be as high as possible, and schools must give priority to subjects and methods of teaching that promote these standards. Given the growth of the knowledge

economy, it's essential that as many people as possible go on to higher education, especially four-year colleges and universities.

Because these matters are too important to be left to the discretion of schools, government needs to take control of education by setting the standards, specifying the content of the curriculum, testing students systematically to check that standards are being met, and making education more efficient through increased accountability and competition.

Like the general story of education I gave earlier, this reform story looks highly plausible. It is also deeply flawed, as we'll see. But let's look first at how this story is being played out in practice.

Raising Standards

Raising standards in education certainly seems like a good idea. There's no point lowering them. But standards of what? Why do we choose them, and how do we implement them? A common mantra is that schools have to get "back to basics." It's a phrase with an appealing, folksy ring that suggests a commonsense, down-to-earth approach. It's like eating your vegetables and getting enough sleep. What are these basics the schools should be getting back to? The reform movement has four priorities: the three R's, raising academic standards, STEM disciplines, and going to college.

In some countries, including the U.K. and the United States, a long-term concern has been that standards are too low in *literacy* and *mathematics*. The reformers are not wrong about this. There are problems, and they are not new. In 1983, the U.S. Department of Education published "A Nation at Risk."¹² The report warned that the United States was drowning under a "rising tide of mediocrity" that threatened the future of the country's economy and social well-being. The reformers give high priority to teaching correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation, along with basic mathematics.

The standards movement is concerned with raising *academic standards* in particular. Again, that may seem reasonable. But academic work is only part of education. It mainly involves certain sorts of analytical reasoning, especially with words and numbers, and a focus on what is usually called "propositional knowledge." For various reasons, as we'll see, education is dominated by this idea.

Ironically, the standards movement is also supposed to be about preparing students for the world of work and tackling overseas competition, hence the emphasis on the STEM disciplines: science, technology, engineering, and math. You may see a curious contradiction here. On one hand, politicians are pushing for more academic work in schools; on the other, they say they're all about economic relevance. Yet academics are often thought to be remote from the real world, living in ivory towers, immersed in pure theory. How academic work in the modern world came to be seen as the economic salvation of nations is an interesting issue to which we will return.

Finally, many countries are increasing the numbers of students who go to college. In Europe and the United States in the fifties and sixties, about one in twenty people went to college. Between 1970 and 2000, there was a global increase of almost 300 percent.¹³ In the developed economies at least, about one in three high school graduates now heads for college. Getting to college is now widely seen as the ultimate purpose of high school.¹⁴

So what are the reformers doing to promote this agenda? There are three main strategies: standardization, competition, and corporatization.

STANDARDIZATION

Formal education is made up of three main elements: curriculum, teaching, and assessment. The basic strategy is to standardize them as much as possible. Many countries now have firm guidelines for what schools should teach, usually year by year, in some sort of national curriculum. This is true in England, France, Germany, China, and many other countries. Some countries have looser frameworks, including Finland, Scotland, and, so far, the United States and Singapore.

Most national curricula are based on the idea of discrete subjects. In most systems there is a hierarchy to these subjects. At the top are literacy, mathematics, and now the STEM disciplines. Next come the humanities, including history, geography, and social studies. Because the standards movement emphasizes academic study, it places less value on practical disciplines like art, drama, dance, music, design, and physical education and on “soft subjects” like communications and media studies, which are all thought to be nonacademic. Within the arts, visual arts and music are usually given higher priority than drama and dance. Often these last two are not taught at all. Vocational programs like shop and home economics have also disappeared from many schools. In some countries, provision for all of these “nonessential” disciplines has been devastated.

In terms of *teaching*, the standards movement favors direct instruction of factual information and skills and whole-class teaching rather than group activities. It is skeptical about creativity, personal expression, and nonverbal, nonmathematical modes of work and of learning by discovery and imaginative play, even in preschool.

When it comes to *assessment*, the standards movement emphasizes formal, written examinations and extensive use of multiple-choice tests so that students’ answers can be easily codified and processed. It is skeptical too of course work, portfolios, open-book tests, teacher evaluation, peer assessment, and other approaches that are not so easily quantifiable. This is partly why students spend so much time sitting at desks, working on their own.

COMPETITION

One of the aims of testing is to increase competition between students, teachers, and schools, on the assumption that it will drive up standards. In this new environment, students compete with each other, teachers are judged mainly on their students’ test results, and schools and districts go head-to-head to win resources. Standards-based tests influence funding allocations, staff promotions, and whether or not schools stay open or are placed under different leadership. This is why they are called “high-stakes” assessments. As we’ve seen, the competition is now increasingly international in character.

CORPORATIZATION

For more than a hundred years, mass education in the industrialized countries was paid for by taxation and was seen as an investment in the public good. Some governments are now encouraging investment in education by private corporations and entrepreneurs. Their involvement ranges from selling products and services to schools to running their own schools for commercial profit. Governments are promoting different categories of public school—such as academies, charters, and free schools—in which some strictures of the standards movement are deliberately relaxed. There are several motives here. One is to intensify competition; a second is to promote diversity of provision; a third is to ease the burden on the public purse; and a fourth is profit. As I said, education is one of the world’s biggest businesses.¹⁵

How’s It Going?

If the standards movement were working as intended, there would be nothing more to say. But it isn’t. Take the three R’s. In spite of the billions of dollars spent, the standards movement has been at best a partial

success. Countries like the United States and England have sacrificed much in a desperate drive to raise standards in literacy and numeracy. Yet test scores in the targeted disciplines have hardly improved.

In 2012, 17 percent of high school graduates in the United States were unable to read or write fluently and had basic problems with spelling, grammar, and punctuation (below level 2 on the PISA scales).¹⁶ More than 50 percent of adults were below level 3 of literacy.¹⁷ “Although a few scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have slowly inched upward,” said Paul R. Lehman, a past president of the National Association for Music Education, in 2012, “many have remained essentially unchanged in recent years, and in March 2013, Arne Duncan warned Congress that more than 80 percent of the nation’s schools will likely be labeled as failing in 2014 under NCLB.”¹⁸

The problems are not only in “basic skills.” American students struggle with elementary cultural knowledge. In 2006, *National Geographic* ran a survey of cultural knowledge in America. Twenty-one percent of young adults aged eighteen to twenty-four could not identify the Pacific Ocean on the map. Even more alarmingly (for me, anyway), 65 percent could not identify the U.K. on a map, which is a disgrace by anyone’s standards.¹⁹ The situation isn’t much better in the U.K. itself, wherever it is.²⁰

The standards movement is not meeting the *economic* challenges we face. One of the declared priorities is to prepare young people for work. And yet, youth unemployment around the world is at record levels. There are about six hundred million people on Earth between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. About seventy-three million of them are long-term unemployed.²¹ That’s the largest number ever recorded—nearly 13 percent of the total population in that age group. From 2008 to 2013, youth unemployment in Europe increased dramatically, reaching almost 24 percent.²²

The blight of unemployment is even affecting young people who’ve done everything that was expected of them and graduated from college. Between 1950 and 1980, a college degree was pretty much a guarantee of a good job. If you had a degree, employers formed a line to interview you. They don’t now.²³ The essential problem is not the quality of degrees, but the quantity. Academic qualifications are a form of currency, and like all currencies their value varies with market conditions. A college degree used to be so valuable because relatively few people had one. In a world bristling with graduates, a college degree is no longer the distinction it once was.

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