TED conference

Sir Ken Robinson

How to escape education's valley of death

Thank you very much.

I moved to America 12 years ago with my wife Terry and our two kids. Actually, truthfully, we moved to Los Angeles -- (Laughter) -- thinking we were moving to America, but anyway, it's a short plane ride from Los Angeles to America.

I got here 12 years ago, and when I got here, I was told various things, like, "Americans don't get irony." Have you come across this idea? It's not true. I've traveled the whole length and breadth of this country. I have found no evidence that Americans don't get irony. It's one of those cultural myths, like, "The British are reserved." I don't know why people think this. We've invaded every country we've encountered. (Laughter) But it's not true Americans don't get irony, but I just want you to know that that's what people are saying about you behind your back. You know, so when you leave living rooms in Europe, people say, thankfully, nobody was ironic in your presence.

But I knew that Americans get irony when I came across that legislation No Child Left Behind. Because whoever thought of that title gets irony, don't they, because -- (Laughter) (Applause) — because it's leaving millions of children behind. Now I can see that's not a very attractive name for legislation: Millions of Children Left Behind. I can see that. What's the plan? Well, we propose to leave millions of children behind, and here's how it's going to work.

And it's working beautifully. In some parts of the country, 60 percent of kids drop out of high school. In the Native American communities, it's 80 percent of kids. If we halved that number, one estimate is it would create a net gain to the U.S. economy over 10 years of nearly a trillion dollars. From an economic point of view, this is good math, isn't it, that we should do this? It actually costs an enormous amount to mop up the damage from the dropout crisis.

But the dropout crisis is just the tip of an iceberg. What it doesn't count are all the kids who are in school but being disengaged from it, who don't enjoy it, who don't get any real benefit from it.

And the reason is not that we're not spending enough money. America spends more money on education than most other countries. Class sizes are smaller than

in many countries. And there are hundreds of initiatives every year to try and improve education. The trouble is, it's all going in the wrong direction. There are three principles on which human life flourishes, and they are contradicted by the culture of education under which most teachers have to labor and most students have to endure.

The first is this, that human beings are naturally different and diverse.

Can I ask you, how many of you have got children of your own? Okay. Or grandchildren. How about two children or more? Right. And the rest of you have seen such children. (Laughter) Small people wandering about. I will make you a bet, and I am confident that I will win the bet. If you've got two children or more, I bet you they are completely different from each other. Aren't they? Aren't they? (Applause) You would never confuse them, would you? Like, "Which one are you? Remind me. Your mother and I are going to introduce some color-coding system, so we don't get confused."

Education under No Child Left Behind is based on not diversity but conformity. What schools are encouraged to do is to find out what kids can do across a very narrow spectrum of achievement. One of the effects of No Child Left Behind has been to narrow the focus onto the so-called STEM disciplines. They're very important. I'm not here to argue against science and math. On the contrary, they're necessary but they're not sufficient. A real education has to give equal weight to the arts, the humanities, to physical education. An awful lot of kids, sorry, thank you — (Applause) — One estimate in America currently is that something like 10 percent of kids, getting on that way, are being diagnosed with various conditions under the broad title of attention deficit disorder. ADHD. I'm not saying there's no such thing. I just don't believe it's an epidemic like this. If you sit kids down, hour after hour, doing low-grade clerical work, don't be surprised if they start to fidget, you know? (Laughter) (Applause) Children are not, for the most part, suffering from a psychological condition. They're suffering from childhood. (Laughter) And I know this because I spent my early life as a child. I went through the whole thing. Kids prosper best with a broad curriculum that celebrates their various talents, not just a small range of them. And by the way, the arts aren't just important because they improve math scores. They're important because they speak to parts of children's being which are otherwise untouched.

The second, thank you — (Applause)

The second principle that drives human life flourishing is curiosity. If you can light the spark of curiosity in a child, they will learn without any further assistance, very often. Children are natural learners. It's a real achievement to put that particular ability out, or to stifle it. Curiosity is the engine of achievement. Now the reason I say this is because one of the effects of the current culture here, if I can say so, has been to de-professionalize teachers. There is no system in the world or any school in the country that is better than its teachers. Teachers are the lifeblood of the success of schools. But teaching is a creative profession. Teaching, properly conceived, is not a delivery system. You know, you're not there just to pass on received information. Great teachers do that, but what great teachers also do is

mentor, stimulate, provoke, engage. You see, in the end, education is about learning. If there's no learning going on, there's no education going on. And people can spend an awful lot of time discussing education without ever discussing learning. The whole point of education is to get people to learn.

A friend of mine, an old friend -- actually very old, he's dead. (Laughter) That's as old as it gets, I'm afraid. But a wonderful guy he was, wonderful philosopher. He used to talk about the difference between the task and achievement senses of verbs. You know, you can be engaged in the activity of something, but not really be achieving it, like dieting. It's a very good example, you know. There he is. He's dieting. Is he losing any weight? Not really. Teaching is a word like that. You can say, "There's Deborah, she's in room 34, she's teaching." But if nobody's learning anything, she may be engaged in the task of teaching but not actually fulfilling it.

The role of a teacher is to facilitate learning. That's it. And part of the problem is, I think, that the dominant culture of education has come to focus on not teaching and learning, but testing. Now, testing is important. Standardized tests have a place. But they should not be the dominant culture of education. They should be diagnostic. They should help. (Applause) If I go for a medical examination, I want some standardized tests. I do. You know, I want to know what my cholesterol level is compared to everybody else's on a standard scale. I don't want to be told on some scale my doctor invented in the car.

"Your cholesterol is what I call Level Orange."

"Really? Is that good?" "We don't know."

But all that should support learning. It shouldn't obstruct it, which of course it often does. So in place of curiosity, what we have is a culture of compliance. Our children and teachers are encouraged to follow routine algorithms rather than to excite that power of imagination and curiosity. And the third principle is this: that human life is inherently creative. It's why we all have different résumés. We create our lives, and we can recreate them as we go through them. It's the common currency of being a human being. It's why human culture is so interesting and diverse and dynamic. I mean, other animals may well have imaginations and creativity, but it's not so much in evidence, is it, as ours? I mean, you may have a dog. And your dog may get depressed. You know, but it doesn't listen to Radiohead, does it? (Laughter) And sit staring out the window with a bottle of Jack Daniels. (Laughter)

And you say, "Would you like to come for a walk?"

He says, "No, I'm fine. You go. I'll wait. But take pictures."

We all create our own lives through this restless process of imagining alternatives and possibilities, and what one of the roles of education is to awaken and develop these powers of creativity. Instead, what we have is a culture of standardization.

Now, it doesn't have to be that way. It really doesn't. Finland regularly comes out on top in math, science and reading. Now, we only know that's what they do well at

because that's all that's being tested currently. That's one of the problems of the test. They don't look for other things that matter just as much. The thing about work in Finland is this: they don't obsess about those disciplines. They have a very broad approach to education which includes humanities, physical education, the arts.

Second, there is no standardized testing in Finland. I mean, there's a bit, but it's not what gets people up in the morning. It's not what keeps them at their desks.

And the third thing, and I was at a meeting recently with some people from Finland, actual Finnish people, and somebody from the American system was saying to the people in Finland, "What do you do about the dropout rate in Finland?"

And they all looked a bit bemused, and said, "Well, we don't have one. Why would you drop out? If people are in trouble, we get to them quite quickly and help them and we support them."

Now people always say, "Well, you know, you can't compare Finland to America."

No. I think there's a population of around five million in Finland. But you can compare it to a state in America. Many states in America have fewer people in them than that. I mean, I've been to some states in America and I was the only person there. (Laughter) Really. Really. I was asked to lock up when I left. (Laughter)

But what all the high-performing systems in the world do is currently what is not evident, sadly, across the systems in America -- I mean, as a whole. One is this: They individualize teaching and learning. They recognize that it's students who are learning and the system has to engage them, their curiosity, their individuality, and their creativity. That's how you get them to learn.

The second is that they attribute a very high status to the teaching profession. They recognize that you can't improve education if you don't pick great people to teach and if you don't keep giving them constant support and professional development. Investing in professional development is not a cost. It's an investment, and every other country that's succeeding well knows that, whether it's Australia, Canada, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong or Shanghai. They know that to be the case.

And the third is, they devolve responsibility to the school level for getting the job done. You see, there's a big difference here between going into a mode of command and control in education -- That's what happens in some systems. You know, central governments decide or state governments decide they know best and they're going to tell you what to do. The trouble is that education doesn't go on in the committee rooms of our legislative buildings. It happens in classrooms and schools, and the people who do it are the teachers and the students, and if you remove their discretion, it stops working. You have to put it back to the people. (Applause)

There is wonderful work happening in this country. But I have to say it's happening in spite of the dominant culture of education, not because of it. It's like people are sailing into a headwind all the time. And the reason I think is this: that many of the

current policies are based on mechanistic conceptions of education. It's like education is an industrial process that can be improved just by having better data, and somewhere in, I think, the back of the mind of some policy makers is this idea that if we fine-tune it well enough, if we just get it right, it will all hum along perfectly into the future. It won't, and it never did.

The point is that education is not a mechanical system. It's a human system. It's about people, people who either do want to learn or don't want to learn. Every student who drops out of school has a reason for it which is rooted in their own biography. They may find it boring. They may find it irrelevant. They may find that it's at odds with the life they're living outside of school. There are trends, but the stories are always unique. I was at a meeting recently in Los Angeles of -- they're called alternative education programs. These are programs designed to get kids back into education. They have certain common features. They're very personalized. They have strong support for the teachers, close links with the community and a broad and diverse curriculum, and often programs which involve students outside school as well as inside school. And they work. What's interesting to me is, these are called "alternative education." You know? And all the evidence from around the world is, if we all did that, there'd be no need for the alternative. (Applause)

So I think we have to embrace a different metaphor. We have to recognize that it's a human system, and there are conditions under which people thrive, and conditions under which they don't. We are after all organic creatures, and the culture of the school is absolutely essential. Culture is an organic term, isn't it?

Not far from where I live is a place called Death Valley. Death Valley is the hottest, driest place in America, and nothing grows there. Nothing grows there because it doesn't rain. Hence, Death Valley. In the winter of 2004, it rained in Death Valley. Seven inches of rain fell over a very short period. And in the spring of 2005, there was a phenomenon. The whole floor of Death Valley was carpeted in flowers for a while. What it proved is this: that Death Valley isn't dead. It's dormant. Right beneath the surface are these seeds of possibility waiting for the right conditions to come about, and with organic systems, if the conditions are right, life is inevitable. It happens all the time. You take an area, a school, a district, you change the conditions, give people a different sense of possibility, a different set of expectations, a broader range of opportunities, you cherish and value the relationships between teachers and learners, you offer people the discretion to be creative and to innovate in what they do, and schools that were once bereft spring to life.

Great leaders know that. The real role of leadership in education -- and I think it's true at the national level, the state level, at the school level -- is not and should not be command and control. The real role of leadership is climate control, creating a climate of possibility. And if you do that, people will rise to it and achieve things that you completely did not anticipate and couldn't have expected.

There's a wonderful quote from Benjamin Franklin. "There are three sorts of people in the world: Those who are immovable, people who don't get, they don't want to

get it, they're going to do anything about it. There are people who are movable, people who see the need for change and are prepared to listen to it. And there are people who move, people who make things happen." And if we can encourage more people, that will be a movement. And if the movement is strong enough, that's, in the best sense of the word, a revolution. And that's what we need.

Thank you very much. (Applause) Thank you very much. (Applause)