

Coloring Outside the Lines

Author **Richard Gerver** challenges school leaders to put passion and creativity back into education

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When Richard Gerver imagines education, his vision looks very different than your typical public school.

Instead of assessments and mandates, there is creativity and problem solving and no need to color within the lines.

“Who first taught you where you have to color in through the lines because that’s where it all goes wrong, I think,” Gerver said. “That’s the moment we stop believing we know the answer and start thinking we have to take someone else’s answer instead.”

Gerver, an author and renowned inspirational leader, spent 20 years as a teacher and principal in England where he received a British National Teaching Award for his work. In 2011, he was named Business Speaker of the Year and he has published two best-selling books about innovation in education and business. During his keynote address, Gerver shared his insights into the challenges facing public education and changes he believes would make them stronger.

He sharply criticized the tendency of politicians to continually impose mandates and policies on public schools.

“The problem is that this stuff is

nonsense,” he said, adding that keeping up with the policies has driven passion and creativity out of education. “Passion has been driven down by layers and layers of concrete. We need to think differently.”

Such pressures contribute to an epidemic of stress, which Gerver calls “the biggest disease of the 21st century.” He identified the five early warning signs of stress and warned that unless there are systemic changes in education, it will continue to be a problem.

He urged his audience to take up the challenge of being agents of change.

“You are the people who can drive and assure a climate in our schools in the 21st century that is worthy of our young people,” he said.

Gerver used stories of his encounters with some “famous friends” to illustrate the types of transformations he believes are necessary if schools are to succeed in the future. He talked about one friend, an actor and stunt man, who divided people into two types. One type are like rocks in water who just sit and let the water flow around them. The other are like the water itself, which “will always find a way.”

Traditional education tends to make children into rocks, Gerver

said. “Shouldn’t we actually be creating a world where children are encouraged to think like water?”

And educators, too, need to think like water and find a way around the obstacles that face them, he added.

Another serious problem in public education is the tendency to compare school performance and achievement internationally and obsess over putting new systems and structures in place in order to compete with others.

“Testing systems are a shocking waste of our children’s time,” he said.

Instead, educators should be asking themselves two questions: Where are we now? Where do we want to go? Learning to juggle both questions is the “greatest strategic challenge,” he said.

Gerver also reminded his audience that true education is not about mechanically reproducing a set of correct answers but about learning to solve problems by making mistakes.

“You only ever learn anything from the point of a mistake,” he said. “The truth is that the magic happens in the point. We should be thinking constantly, organically about the future and ask, ‘How do we create the culture of continuous development?’” ■

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