

# Roundtable News

## Education and Creativity



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*Sir Kenneth Robinson accepts “Friend of Public Education” award from Roundtable director James Harvey*

We are preparing students for a world we cannot know. That was the central message at the Roundtable’s Fall meeting, co-sponsored by RAND and Santa Monica-Malibu Unified Schools. Whether it was Ben Drati, SMMUSD superintendent, the University of Kansas’s Zhong Zhao, or Sir Kenneth Robinson, famous for his seminal 2006 TED Talk, “Do Schools Kill Creativity?”, the lesson was the same: Our future depends on nurturing the creativity of our children.

“Think about it,” said Drati. “What other institution is capable of preparing our young people for the complex future they face?” Yong Zhao worried that students from upper-income families are

being prepared with 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, while those from low-income families receive basic skills instruction equipping them for disappearing factory work. Students are more than “brains on legs,” argued Robinson.

Also on hand: A tribute to Bob Koff, godfather of the Roundtable; superintendents describing district efforts to encourage creativity; RAND surveys of administrators and teachers; and two young cartoonists describing art as the engine driving the multi-billion dollar entertainment industry.



*Santa Monica High’s Chamber Orchestra, Joni Swenson conducting, welcomes Roundtable with spectacular performance*

## MORE THAN “BRAINS ON LEGS”

“In the 1940’s, if you had told King George VI that in a generation all of the power of England and the empire that was Britain’s would be swept away, people would have thought you slightly mad,” observed Sir Kenneth Robinson at the outset of his remarks. “But it’s all gone.”



*Sir Kenneth Robinson*

“Think of it,” mused Robinson, in a dazzling speech that combined erudition and deep knowledge of learning theory with a wry, engaging manner. “The empires of Rome, Greece, Russia, Britain, and Turkey all withered away.” The United States, he said, is now as great a global force as Britain was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “There’s no guarantee that will still be true in 50 years.”

It’s the vitality of America that let it develop, Robinson argued, insisting that maintaining innovation and optimism about the future was essential to maintaining America’s place in the world. That vitality is threatened, he said, by an education system that ignores the reality that all children are full of “boundless possibilities.” We have “atomized knowledge and reduced our understanding of intelligence to academic ability.”

Many people, including parents and business leaders, are searching for a new kind of schooling, remarked Robinson, former professor of arts education at the University of Warwick. “They’re not quite sure how to do it.”

How many of you, he asked, recall school as a place that helped you define how to make your way in life? Not a hand went up. “How many of you recall a teacher who

made a difference?” Hands shot into the air. “We have people and we have the system. We don’t need to fix the people, it’s the system that needs attention.”

What H.G. Wells once said is truer today than ever, Robinson noted: “Civilization is in a race between education and catastrophe.” We must get education right, he argued. We have to help people searching for a new kind of schooling by offering them ideas about how to proceed.

The place to start is with young children, the most amazing people. “They learn to speak because they want to and they can.” They are endlessly curious.

Let’s face it, he argued, life is chaos. We only make sense of our own lives when we look back on them. The idea that we can prepare children for a straight line through life is preposterous. “We tack and weave like sailors to get through life.” So how, he asked, do we discover what it is we are meant to do in life?



*Enjoying Robinson’s droll delivery*

We are not “brains on legs,” he insisted. Intelligence is not something between our ears. “I saw a news report recently about recess being restored in Texas schools. Why should it be newsworthy that children are now allowed to play in the playgrounds of Texas? We’ve lost our minds, surely?”

Play is how children learn. They learn about their bodies. They learn the rules. They learn how to get along with others. Learning is collaborative, not competitive. It is comprehensive, not atomized. (*to p. 7*)

**PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE FUTURE?**

“If you think about it,” said Ben Drati, superintendent of Santa Monica-Malibu Unified schools in welcoming the Roundtable and introducing the spectacular chamber orchestra from Santa Monica High, “what institution other than schools can prepare our young people for the complex future they face?” The question answers itself. Enrolling some 90% of all school children in the United States, public schools are the key to preparing students for life. In this endeavor, he pointed out, schools need to develop student’s creativity.



*Yong Zhao*

Yong Zhao, Foundation Distinguished Professor in Education at the University of Kansas, took Drati’s comment as the foundation of his keynote remarks. “Are we, in fact, preparing our students for the future?” he asked. Clearly, he thought we are not. He pointed to two issues: Wealthy students are being prepared with 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, while chil-

dren of the poor are being prepared to master basic skills for work in factories that are disappearing.

Zhao’s key point: “We treat diversity as a problem. But students are all different.” Tests such as the SAT and ACT, he insisted, are designed to label kids so that we can set them aside or define some valuable average. “We are, in effect, trying to reduce diversity, which cannot be reduced, to a number.”

“We seek something that works for all people, in all settings, at all times.” Put that way, the absurdity of standardization stands out. Readiness profiles, adding competencies such as creativity, community, collaboration, critical thinking, growth mindsets—all mostly nonsense in Zhao’s view.

Why? “Because students don’t arrive at the school door as blank slates. They arrive with their own personalities, their own histories, and their own special intelligence.

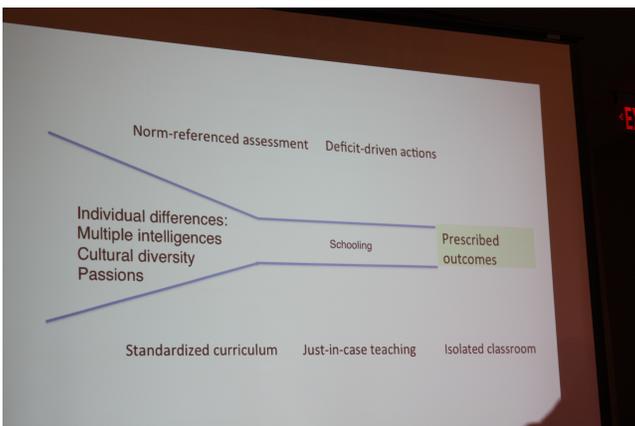
“I was never cut out to be a football player,” smiled Zhao. “Early on I rejected the idea that I could be good at sports. Or music. Or dance. I ran away from my weaknesses.”

We need, he insisted, to reject the idea that schools can make us good at everything. We all have what he called “jagged profiles,” adept in language or mathematics, skilled kinesiologically or physically, interested in mythology or technology. “We should not be aiming at ‘career or college readiness,’” suggested Zhao, but “out-of-my-parents-basement-ready” on



*Ben Drati (l) & Yong Zhao Chat*

high school graduation. “I’m proud that my son became a passionate student of art history instead of just another mediocre economist.” We’re in a good time, concluded Zhao. (to p 6)



## DISTRICTS STEP UP

Another highlight of this meeting was a panel of member superintendents describing their activities. Moderated by Gloria Davis, former superintendent in Dodge, Kansas, and Decatur, Illinois, Zandra Galván (Greenfield, California), Carla Santorno (Tacoma, Washington), and David Vroonland (Mesquite, Texas), described their districts' efforts to promote creativity and independence in their students.



*(l to r) Gloria Davis, David Vroonland, Carla Santorno & Zandra Galván*

Vroonland opened the discussion. “All most of us are asked to think about is closing the achievement gap within the model of the standardized testing model,” he said, arguing that the challenge is to open up that mindset to reach children and encourage their own talents. Mesquite, a K-12 district of 46,000 students with 84% students of color, seeks evaluation that is “locally developed, locally driven, and locally owned.” The idea, he said, is to use evaluation to learn more about students as individuals and the passions that drive them.

Tacoma, reported Santorno, is one of the largest districts in Washington state, enrolling 30,000 students. With 19 out of nearly 60 schools and learning centers designated as “innovative” by the Office of the Secretary of Public Instruction, Tacoma is the *only district in the state* designated as “innovative” by OSPI. These schools and the district are recognized for meeting a set of criteria calling for “bold, creative, and innovative educational ideas,” aligned with high standards for students and staff, and a high level of parent and community involvement.

This K-12 district, said Santorno, worries about the whole child and places a special emphasis on Social Emotional Learning. It is particularly proud of the Tacoma School of the Arts (SOTA) and the Science and Math Institute (SAMI), each built around a specific vision. “SOTA integrates academics and the arts, while SAMI, located in a park, (to p 7)

## REMEMBERING BOB KOFF

Long associated with the Danforth Foundation and Washington University, Robert H. (Bob) Koff passed away in St. Louis in December 2018. A deeply thoughtful man, Koff founded the Roundtable and a Danforth predecessor.

The Roundtable established an award honoring his memory to be bestowed annually to a public official. The first recipient was William (Bill) Purcell, former mayor of Nashville and former member of the Tennessee House of Representatives. Throughout his career, Purcell devoted his energies toward a vision of public agencies collaborating to support students in healthy families, served by excellent schools, in strong and vibrant communities, the very essence of Bob Koff’s commitment to children, families, schools, and communities.

Purcell noted that the award one of the most significant recognitions he had received and that Bob Koff’s spirit lives on and he still speaks through the Roundtable.



*Bill Purcell accepts Koff Memorial Award*

## CREATIVITY & HOLLYWOOD

Meeting in Los Angeles, the Roundtable sought the advice of creative people living and working in the entertainment industry, a massive and profitable enterprise with annual box-office revenues of nearly \$10 billion, with video games drawing in more than \$20 billion. Doodling can turn into big bucks.

Joe Johnston, an animator and producer in the television animation industry, and Megan Willoughby, artist, colorist and animator, provided us with a fascinating window into this exciting world, in a conversation moderated by Rhenda Meiser, the Roundtable’s communications consultant.



(l to r) Rhenda Meiser, Megan Willoughby and Joe Johnston

Johnston showed clips from *Steven Universe*, an animated television series on Cartoon Network, widely praised for the diversity and depth of its characters and its focus on relationships. Willoughby showed a trailer of *Bojack Horseman*, a humanoid has-been horse seeking a comeback, and stills from *Big Mouth*, an edgy Netflix show on the horrors of living through puberty.

Said Willoughby: “Those of us in this field have to make art. It’s who we are. Educators should not worry about whether they have all the technological bells and whistles. Students who want to draw just need some colored pencils and paper!” Johnston urged giving students the opportunity to interpret assignments creatively, using their special strengths. “They will feel more ownership and remember it better.”



In her public elementary school, said Willoughby, “My mother, a marine biologist, organized trips on a boat, where we could observe plant and sea life and draw it. Being able to draw and learn something scientific at the same time was memorable for me,” Johnston remembered an elementary teacher who saw him doodling in the margins of his tests and steered him toward art classes. That led him to creating an oil painting for his book report on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which he put his heart into.

For both of them, doodling turned into something big!



**RAND’S EDUCATOR PANELS**

A panel from the RAND Corporation, gracious hosts of the meeting, made a signal contribution to the meeting’s success. RAND Vice President Darleen Opfer, Laura Hamilton, director of the Center for Social and Emotional Learning Research, and David Grant, a senior RAND scientist described RAND’s “American Educator Panels,” a program to give voice to teachers and school officials, while providing policymakers with information about educators’ knowledge, attitudes, and working conditions.



*(l to r) David Grant, Laura Hamilton, & Darleen Opfer*

The voice of teachers had been “ignored,” said Opfer, while longitudinal data on educators’ attitudes had not existed. The American Teacher Panel and the School Leader Panel now take the regular pulse of 25,000 public school teachers and more than 5,000 principals, who respond to online surveys several times a year. Now, reported Opfer. “When we report a change in attitudes, it’s a real change.” The panels let RAND go to the field quickly, since drawing a new sample each time a question arises is unnecessary.

The samples are so large, reported Grant, that the researchers are able to identify teachers by elementary or secondary school and by teaching specialty. RAND surveys them on specific issues such as special education, pension reform options, or discipline policy.

“We find, for example,” said Hamilton, “that teachers are committed to supporting all students, but they don’t feel they have leadership support to assist students with special needs.” There is very broad agreement from teachers and principals, she said, that addressing social and emotional learning will improve student engagement and achieve-

ment, while improving school climate and student behavior. She also reported that teachers are generally not using the best instructional materials, a finding pointing to a need for more professional development.

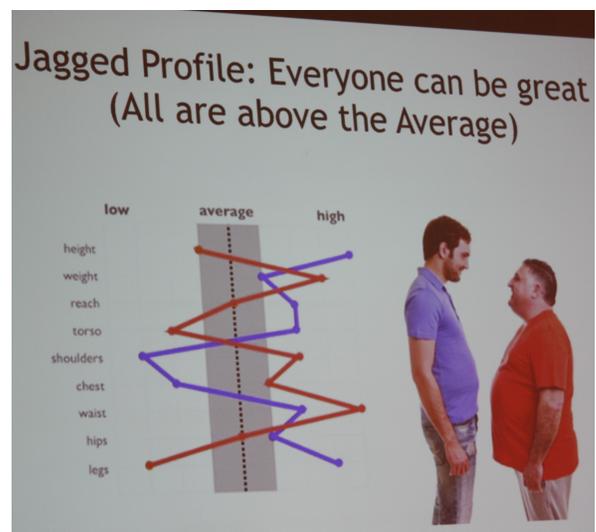
Response rates are not entirely satisfactory, the panel agreed, noting that respondents are offered gift cards. Roundtable members suggested reducing the amount of time required for the surveys (they can run to 30 minutes). Gift cards might be an inducement for teachers and classroom materials, but most administrators will not respond. Greater use of focus groups, crowd-sourcing responses, and one-page issue briefs might help too.

A portal for school leaders seeking results from the educator panels is available at: [www.rand.org/aep](http://www.rand.org/aep)

**YONG ZHAO (CONT’D)**

Washington is pre-occupied. “The ‘reform agenda’ is being rethought. The country is ready for change.”

What should that change consist of? A world-class education should be global, creative, and entrepreneurial and offer student autonomy, product-oriented learning, and global competence. Zhao suggested: First, encourage the creative and entrepreneurial instincts of the child. Second, replace today’s sausage-making system with one that sees diversity as an asset. Finally: “Teach the child, not the curriculum.”



*Yong Zhao: Averages are meaningless*

**SIR KENNETH  
(CONT'D)**

All of us have been taught that there are five senses, said Robinson. But that’s not true. A physiologist would say there are at least nine. Start with sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch, and then add balance, pain, temperature, and proprioception (awareness of the position of the body). “The only reason most of think we have five is that the number was driven

bilities” of all children—and all their senses.

**DISTRICTS STEP  
UP (CONT'D)**

lets students study amidst more than 700 acres of saltwater beaches and natural old-growth forests.” SAMI, noted Santorno, is a unique partnership involving the school, Metro

Park, which owns the zoo, and the city of Tacoma, which owns the land. “We couldn’t build a school on city land,” smiled Santorno, “but after two years of negotiations about this, we re-named it an ‘environmental learning center’ and suddenly it was OK!”

Zandra Galván leads Greenfield, a K-8 district, enrolling 9,400 in Salinas Valley, “The Salad Bowl of the World.” Employment revolves around seasonal fruit and

vegetable picking. Galván shared a video of a Turnaround Arts model at Mary Chapa Elementary, funded by architect Frank Gehry through the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. “All the pain and suffering our students carry with them started pouring out in the art and music,” said one teacher.

What keeps us from doing more of this? asked Davis.

We’re our own worst problem, thought Galván. If we want the arts, we need to say “yes.” “It’s lack of the courage of our convictions,” agreed Vroonland.

Asked how to make sure parents and the public support these programs produced a gusher of good ideas. “The community needs to own these initiatives, not the district,” said Vroonland. “We try to encourage parents that if they move their children as part of the migrant stream, their children stand to lose a fantastic future,” said Galván. “We used to have transiency rate of 30%; today it is 5%.” “We have a ‘next move’ program of high school students,” said Santorno. These students intern in local businesses. They help firms with their technology. They give the lie to the perception that students are lazy, don’t show up on time, and don’t want to collaborate, she said. “They are fantastic ambassadors for our schools.”



*Roundtable members gather around Robinson*

into our heads.”

“If we are selling the senses short, how much damage are we doing with our understanding of what intelligence is?” The world is changing. Technology now dominates our lives. Fully 40% of current jobs will be done by machines. “But machines are not as intelligent as we are.”

We need, he concluded, to start working on a conception of schools as collections of learners that encourage students to focus on what’s around them, not what’s within them. Let’s promote the “boundless possi-



*Music and Arts at Mary Chapa Elementary*

**HERE AND THERE**

*Calendar and Contact*

**The Roundtable's 2020 meeting agenda is under development.**

It will almost certainly include:

1. A meeting in late July at the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum in College Station, Texas.
2. A meeting in October at the Jimmy Carter Library and Museum in Atlanta, Georgia
3. A study mission to examine schools in Australia from late June to early July

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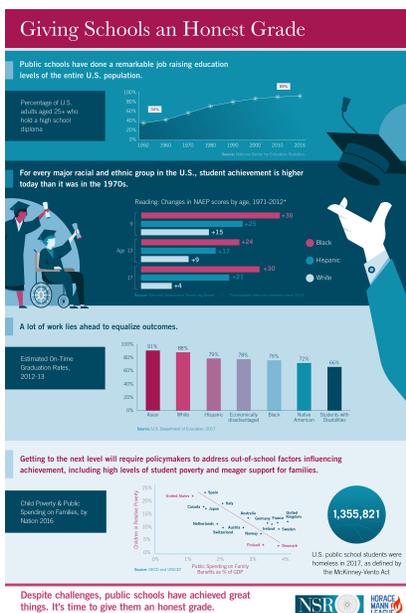
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Reports on career and technical education in Europe, American school performance in an international context, the unreasonable nature of the NAEP benchmarks, and an infographic insisting that schools deserve an honest grade are available free on the Roundtable's website: [superintendentsforum.org](http://superintendentsforum.org)

Early in November, Valerie Strauss of the *Washington Post* published an opinion piece highlighting the infographic by Roundtable director James Harvey & Jack McKay of the

Horace Mann League. Find it here: <http://tinyurl.com/yxpdr6kq>

The Roundtable subsequently distributed a shorter press release and the infographic to nearly 150 newspapers and radio and television outlets serving more than 60 million readers, viewers, and listeners. That press release can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/trqsbrz>



*Superintendents Speak*

**Why are you here?**

Quality of keynote speakers  
National and global perspectives  
Networking with small intimate group of colleagues  
Combat the isolation of the superintendency  
Value of interaction with urban/rural/suburban colleagues  
Wanted to explore creativity and how it can change our schools  
Discussions are practical, useful, and inspirational

**What have you learned?**

Importance of creativity  
Inspired by superintendents' panel  
Need to focus on right things  
Wonderful to hear young people describe the value of their public school experience

The importance of recognizing how amazing our kids are

**What will you do on Monday?**

Send Robinson's TED talk to board members  
Examine how to use arts/music to leverage learning & creativity  
Engage critical stakeholders in discussions of creativity  
Work with staff and teachers to give kids more time and space for movement  
Consider the art students' point that the arts, given only one period a week, are treated as unimportant