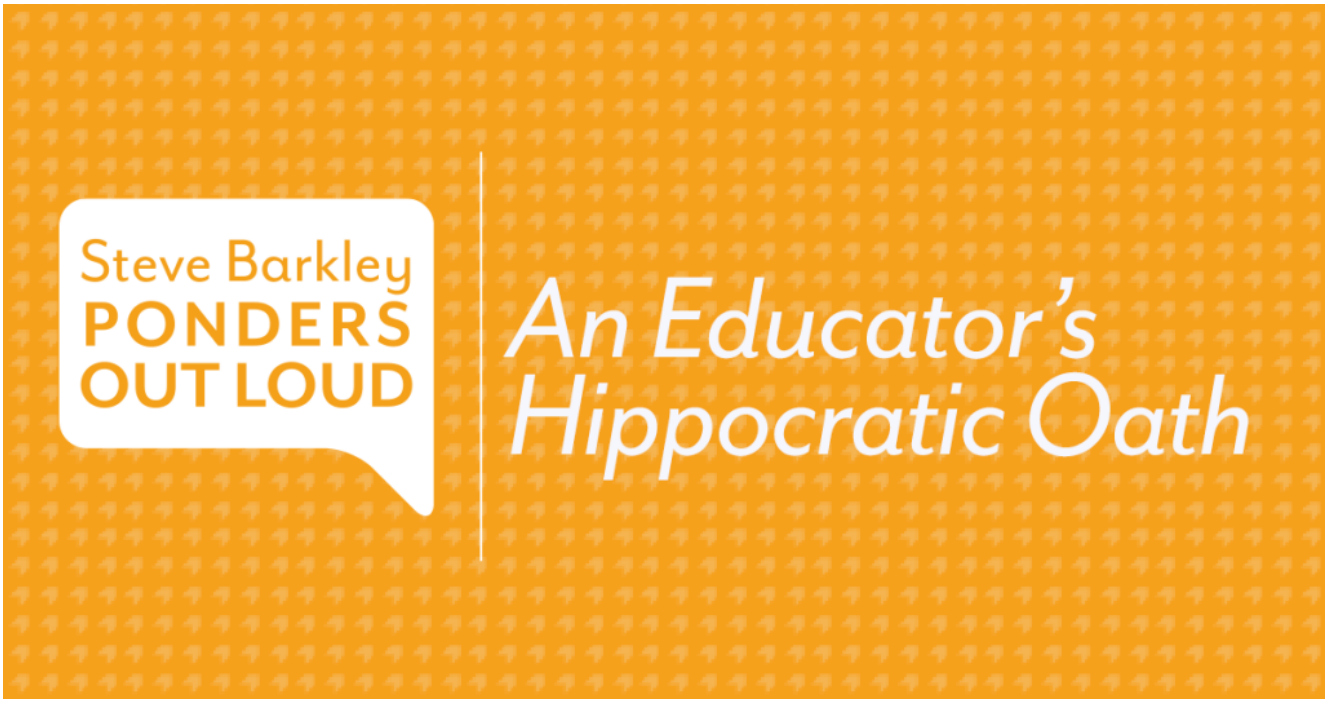
Podcast: An Educator's Hippocratic Oath



Robert Landau, education futurist and strategist, discusses establishing a hippocratic oath for the educators. Such a pledge would bind us to ethical, equitable, and progressive educational practices that place students' growth and welfare at the core of everything we do. "*The traditional Hippocratic Oath is a pledge taken by physicians to uphold specific ethical standards and prioritize the wellbeing of their patients. Similarly, applying an oath to education emphasizes the importance of ethical behavior, responsibility, and a commitment to the* ***wellbeing of students and relationships with all learners*** *built on trust.*"

Visit the Two Roads Education website here.

Read Robert's article, "A Hippocratic Oath for the Education Sector" here.

Visit the Hampsted Academy website here.

Subscribe to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast on iTunes or visit BarkleyPD.com to find new episodes!

Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.320] – Steve [Intro]

Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:30.630] – Steve

Our podcast guest today is Robert Landau. Described as a strategist and futurist, Robert's company, Two Roads Education, provides educational consulting to explore and redefine how to best prepare the next generation. He has a long history leading international schools around the world, as well as serving as the Executive Director of Hawaii Association of Independent Schools. I reached out to Robert after reading an article of his titled, "A Hippocratic Oath for the Education Sector," originally published in What Schools Could Be Chronicle. An interesting aside, Robert and I met many years back when I was presenting to the European international school leaders, and Robert agreed to model a coaching mentoring conference with me on stage. Participants were convinced we rehearsed the dialog, but actually we had just met on stage. It's great to be reconnecting with you, Robert.

[00:01:35.200] – Robert

Wow, when you contacted me after so many years, it zoomed right back to those wonderful years together in Europe, and it's great to be here with you today.

[00:01:44.850] – Steve

For starters, tell us a little bit more about Two Roads Education and the activities that you're engaged in there.

[00:01:52.640] – Robert

Well, after many, many years, over almost 50 years in education, international as a teacher, principal, and head of school, like many of my colleagues, when we look at the word retire and don't know how to spell it or pronounce it, we want to continue on our journey. I decided, and it's a bit cliché, to become a consultant, but I still have so much to say and do around education. My sense of urgency now is about my grandchildren, of which I'm about to have a third in August so that really occupies my thinking what school it could be or should be for them. When I decided to start a consulting company, I literally came up with the name in 10 seconds because I read the Robert Frost poem, "The Road Less Traveled," to every graduating class of every school I've ever worked in. I think that I have been that person who has always come to the fork of the road and taken the one less traveled, sometimes moving countries because of it. I definitely, if you look at my logo, I'm there to guide those schools or those individuals who really want to make a true difference or an impact in education.

[00:03:13.720] – Steve

I'm wondering, what are you identifying, currently, as some of the greatest challenges facing educational systems?

[00:03:22.350] – Robert

Well, I know we don't have 17 hours to have answer to that question but part of it stems back back to a decision my parents made when I was a kid to enroll me in what was called the University Elementary School, which is a lab school on the UCLA campus. It's now called the UCLA Lab School. I still think it's one of the best examples of an educational

institution in this world, let alone this country. I entered the school as a second grader. The names I'm about to give you, the younger generation may not remember these names, but you do. My first principal was John Goodlad.

[00:04:04.240] – Steve

Wow.

[00:04:05.210] – Robert

Then in fourth grade, we got a new principal, and her name was Madeline Hunter, Dr. Madeline Hunter.

[00:04:11.150] – Steve

I thought that might be coming. [laughter]

[00:04:13.050] – Robert

These two individuals were my principals in a school that John Dewey would have been happy to have been head of. Everything we did was about learn, do, and act. It was truly experiential. I was doing project-based learning the age of eight in the late '50s. That's what I thought school was. I thought school was about spending a certain amount of time learning, then practicing it, and then going out and doing it. And it's the doing where you're really embedding the learning because you have had the experience. You can say that you have mastered something by doing it. Then I entered public junior high school, public high school, and it just made me very unhappy. I happened to have a passion for recreation, so I was a YMCA junior leader and camp counselor. I realized that was so much fun because I was doing the three things that are most important about learning with these kids – building relationships, acting as a coach, a facilitator, mentor for their activities, and then providing them with meaningful activities that were fun and that they could develop a passion around. It was through that I thought education was. Then I decided to become a teacher because I thought, Oh, I could be

that teacher who could make a difference.

[00:05:39.470] – Robert

But that has been a long and winding road, and it’s been a challenge. That was a long way of answering your question. Education needs to be more about relationships, about coaching, mentoring, and facilitating, and providing our students with memorable events, activities, and opportunities that they can then make their own decision on which path they’re going to take. That’s not the way most schools are designed.

[00:06:06.150] – Steve

It’s interesting. As I was listening to you, my founder of the PLS 3rd Learning company that I’m with today, 40 years ago, was suggesting that students should do extracurricular from 9:00 to 3:00 and take a couple of classes after school. We really had the system backwards.

[00:06:31.930] – Robert

We do. And again, there are barriers. And the barriers are that school is still a universal daycare system from the age of approximately 3 to 18 because kids need to be in a place, more and more tension around work and parents needing dual incomes. And then teachers are hired for 185 days provide work and to provide the learning to kids and to keep them busy, especially at home. Until we break that barrier and we turn teachers into coaches, mentors, and facilitators, and counselors, and until we have less of the academic content acquisition time, I still think it’s okay to have a place called school. It’s just we need to change the job description of our teachers and change the curriculum and the program that they are doing. I have been doing a lot of thinking about that since COVID.

[00:07:38.200] – Steve

I’m guessing that thinking is what took you down the path of the Hippocratic oath.

[00:07:43.740] – Robert

So the idea of a Hippocratic oath may seem a little silly or cliché or provocative, but I’ve been thinking a lot. Again, I don’t want to go on the political side of COVID because it was politicized, But let’s just take on face value that the medical community, medical researchers, doctors, had to come up with a solution quicker than ever before because the world was waiting to save lives. They literally broke a lot of rules to create the vaccines and get that out to the public quickly because it was an emergency situation. The medical profession knows that their primary purpose is to save lives and to do no harm in the process of that. If you look at the technology sector, they are absolutely involved with research and development. They are never satisfied with what the current product is, and they’re looking for the next product. Why is it that the education sector is all about doing what we’ve always done because we’re afraid to make the changes necessary based on the and the brain research and the fact that all of the things we’re looking at the future is, if we continue down this path of traditional education, our children will not be prepared for their future.

[00:09:12.370] – Robert

I love the quote by Ian Jukes,” We need to prepare students for their future and not our past.” I said, why doesn’t the education sector take an oath like the medical profession is that we will not do harm for kids? And I do believe that millions of children are sitting in schools each day where we are doing harm. We are not protecting them. We are not providing an equitable opportunity for them to take their place in the future. I know it sounds provocative, but we need to do something to prepare our students for the social,

economic, environmental, and health challenges that are ahead of us. Our curriculum, our program, our purpose needs to be focused on their future and not our past. But the problem is education is provided, is designed, is regulated by adults. We've done school. We think we know what's best for kids. Why don't we just become great servant leaders for our kids and take them on their journey towards their future as guides, counselors, coaches, mentors, and facilitators? I think we need to take an oath when we get into the profession. We need to take an oath as a Minister of Education in a developing country.

[00:10:36.780] – Robert

We need to take an oath as a senator or a congressperson when they talk about education, but everything is still regulated towards college acceptance and preparatory tests and standardize approach. We need to take an oath that we're going to be like the medical profession and do no harm and provide best process for our children's educational health.

[00:11:05.240] – Steve

You're pushing my provocative button now. [laughter]

[00:11:11.290] – Steve

I'm wondering if, since you picked COVID as the example of medical urgency being needed, I'm wondering if some ways, if we aren't facing a similar urgency with youth in our school today, post-COVID?

[00:11:33.020] – Robert

Well, look, that's a great question. My four compass points for the process that I've developed, which I think is the framework for the future, my compass points are the ones I mentioned before, the economy, our social system, our health, and our environment. There's nothing else that has greater impact on our kids' future than those four. But the social

side is the point that we are having trouble getting along with each other, not just within our country, but country to country. Education is not equitable. In any classroom, there are kids that are excelling and kids who are struggling and kids are in the middle, but we have a one-size-fits-all approach, not in all schools, but in most. I've done a lot of work overseas in developing countries, and it's diabolical when you're in a school in rural Cambodia and there's 75 kids sitting in a room with no fan, and all the teacher is doing for about $80 a month is just giving stuff. But I work with a project there where we identified children with potential. We moved them to a progressive environment, and it's like goldfish taking them out of a bowl and putting them into a pond.

[00:12:46.710] – Robert

They just grew exponentially. It's just not fair that our children are not being given an equitable opportunity to excel. Where we really got it wrong in COVID is the social-emotional side, where we told kids that you don't have to go to school anymore to get an education, and we're going to provide it online, and that that not meet the learning styles for so many kids or teachers. Then when they came back, we told them that they were behind. And so we doubled down on traditional education. I was reading Michael Horn during COVID, and that's what prompted me to come up with what I call Impact: A Framework For the Future, where people like Michael Horn and others were saying, we're going to get out of COVID, and we're finally going to take a different path. And we haven't. So it's made me more impatient and angrier. I quote at the beginning of my article, the line from the film, Network, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore."

[00:13:54.440] – Steve

So how would you imagine such an oath impacting teachers? I got a little gas on my part, but I'd like to hear yours first.

[00:14:04.980] – Robert

Well, Steve, it starts with the mission and vision of the school. I've done a lot of work with schools around mission and vision. It started at Western Academy of Beijing in 2008 when I was the head of school. I came in and I realized the mission and vision were on the wall. It was a paragraph. I asked people what the mission of our school was, and everybody had their own answer because they really didn't know the paragraph. We literally spent a year with focus groups, and we had over a thousand words and phrases. At the end of it, we came up with a mission, Connect, Inspire, Challenge. That's the mission. The vision is to make a difference. Everything from then on drove what we were doing. Connect, inspire, challenge. Kids need to connect with the school, the school with kids, connect with the teacher, the teacher with kids. They They need to connect with what they're doing. They need to be inspired, and every child needs to be challenged according to their starting place. That was like taking an oath. Why do I arrive each day at that school? It's to connect, inspire, challenge.

[00:15:17.000] – Robert

A lot of mission and vision statements are just as eduspeak, and it really is not embedded in the daily life of the school. I believe that I started that work with helping schools, and I work with a lot of schools now that have turned their paragraph into three words and a phrase. It's often translated into the language of the host country. I just worked with a school here in Hawaii where the three words are in Hawaiian, and it was really cool to come up with that. I think it starts with truly being a mission and vision-driven school, taking that oath. Then everything stems from that, the way that we design curriculum and our program, the way we evaluate. I don't think we should be evaluating teachers anymore. I think we should be focusing on their professional growth, and mission and vision needs to be part of that, and contributing

to a healthy organizational climate needs to be part of that. And so that we're all there for the same purpose. I also think a school's mission and vision should be about serving our constituents and providing them with a better future. The solutions and the challenges and the problems that are connected to that should be the way we design curriculum.

[00:16:40.880] – Robert

I also realized that we're spending the majority of our time on content. We still are. Steve, you can get a high school diploma for $1,200 online. $1,200, you can get your 27 and a half credits. And a lot of kids can do that in a fraction of the time than they are now because they're sitting in a classroom with a bunch of other people. And if we could capture that time, then we could focus on the environment, the economy, social, and our health concerns that impact our kids' future.

[00:17:17.140] – Steve

I just had a phone call today with the high school principal I'm working with, looking at bringing change into his school. He shared with me that they've convinced kids that they can do the work online. Now they got major chunks of time that kids aren't coming to school. They're replacing it with online work. The staff is trying to figure out how to make the online more difficult than coming to school is to get them to come to school. Instead of deciding what we're doing in school ought to be more important more engaging and more fun, and that's why the kid would want to go.

[00:18:05.650] – Robert

Well, I have a different view towards that. I don't think the kids should be at home online. I think they should be at school online. My concept is three hubs, the academic hub, experiential hub, and expeditionary hub. In the academic hub, you would have a room and kids would be getting their credits.

In that room, there would be two mentors members, coaches, facilitators, one humanities person and one math science person who would help them acquire that credit part. You could literally do that for the majority of kids in a fraction of the time. Then you move them from that knowledge part to the experiential part where they're practicing, they're dabbling. I actually use the scuba diving certification as my analogy. To get certified in scuba diving, you start in a classroom, you have to have content, you move to the swimming pool where you practice. The teacher has now moved from up front to in the water with you, getting you to practice what you learned in the classroom, but you get certified in the open water, and that's your expeditionary part. Teachers would be hired first to facilitate learning in the academic hub. Then they would become coaches, mentors, facilitators, camp counselors for kids to practice practice.

[00:19:31.170] – Robert

Then the kids would then design their expeditionary learning, again, with the adults taking more of a side view than before. But I still think it needs to happen together. Kids need that social place, and parents need a place to send their kids. But what you do in that perimeter has to fundamentally change. The only we're going to break the barrier is to reduce the content, skill, rote memory, testing time. Again, I believe for the majority of kids, you can save between 10 to 40% of time to then move them towards what really matters.

[00:20:14.210] – Steve

As I was listening to you do that, the driver's exam was going through my head that in most places, you have to pass the computerized test before you can get the learners' permit to go do that piece. Almost every kid has no trouble knocking that piece off to get it to get into action. Back when I asked you what impact would have on teachers, I want to float this by you. The thought that hit me is if I signed the oath, it would increase my risk-taking. From the standpoint, I would

know that what was happening wasn’t fulfilling the oath. I would be more willing to step outside outside a perceived box to make the oath happen.

[00:21:08.150] – Robert

Well, yeah, because right now, the oath that a lot of teachers sign to work on a school is called a contract. That contract says that you are there to work 100 X number of days, providing AP physics to X number of kids based on a predetermined outcome. It doesn’t necessarily say that you are abiding by and believing and fulfilling the mission and vision of the school. It doesn’t say that you’re going to be collaborative, that you’re going to be a team member, that you’re going to increase the healthy organizational climate of the school. It doesn’t necessarily say that. Those need to be part of the contract. It needs to be part of the professional growth standards. That’s my Hippocratic Oath. My Hippocratic Oath is how you grow your teachers. And because the number one job of a teacher is the growth of the kids. And so they are signing oath to saying that every student under my control or my supervision will grow, will move forward on a continuum. That’s my oath. And if they’re struggling, I will assist them. If they’re excelling, I will provide not another work notebook or another test, but challenges and opportunities and problems to solve.

[00:22:36.370] – Robert

It’s an oath, but a different format.

[00:22:39.630] – Steve

How does the community fit into the educational picture that you’re envisioning?

[00:22:46.760] – Robert

Well, again, I may be naive, but when you put your child in a school, that mission and vision is for you, too, as a parent.

If a school is trying to be more future-focused focused and they are taking risks, I don't think they're risks, but to some people they think it's a risk. If they are trying to provide more time for kids to have that experience from an expeditionary side, I think whether you're a public school parent or a private school or charter school parents that you say, I am part of this community, and I am going to help the school move our children towards their future. I have this belief, Steve, that adults, we need to take a parallel view of parenting and educating, not a perpendicular view. A third-grade teacher has been teaching third grade for 20 years. They're hitting those kids perpendicular. Like, I know what this year is going to be before I even start. Rather than this every day in third grade is the first day of third grade for that child, the teacher should be taking them on that third grade journey, just like parents should be taking their children on a life journey and coming in and assisting them and then letting them have their independence to empower and give that child agency.

[00:24:06.010] – Robert

But that's not the way we do it. As adults, we're constantly impacting them and telling them you're not doing it right and telling them it's not good enough and telling them this and telling them that, rather than allowing the child to take life's journey, to take that road less traveled for each and every child. But we adults always think we know better.

[00:24:28.030] – Steve

Before we close out, I'm I'm wondering – have you got a school, a place that you've worked with that's implemented quite a few of the elements that you're describing that you could tell us about?

[00:24:41.390] – Robert

Yeah, I'm working with a little school in New Hampshire now

called Hamsted Academy, and it's part of an education group that I'm consulting with. Through a lot of trial and tribulation, we finally found the absolutely super duper head of school who believes entirely in what's called Impact. The Impact website is impact-bound.com and the school is called Hamsted Academy. If you look at their website, you'll see a correlation between the Impact website and the school. Next year, they are moving towards a concept I developed in another school, which was actually not sustained, called Impact Wednesday, where we're going to get that 20% Google time all in one day. You're basically telling teachers on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, you're preparing for Wednesday. And Wednesday is the day that we were out there doing this impactful work, and we're doing it all day. And in the last school that I worked in with that, we had third and fourth graders starting their own companies and making a profit at eight years old because they had the time. And the teacher stepped aside, and now they were guiding the kids. They didn't have to teach the kids. So yeah, Hamsted Academy is where we're trying to implement impact.

[00:26:04.770] – Robert

I see impact as a framework, just like the group that I was with in the early '90s that created the International School Curriculum Project, which was a grassroots project of schools trying to come up with a more international social studies and science framework, and that later became the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program. I think it's time for another grassroots movement to change the way we do school with all schools using the same framework that is impacting our children's lives in those four compass points I mentioned earlier. My solution is impact. Other schools have other solutions, but we need to come together as schools and focus on the same future for my grandchildren.

[00:26:51.630] – Steve

Well, Robert, I'm so excited that I found your article and

traced back to reconnect with you. I'll put the link to the article you wrote on the oath to the lead into the podcast. What's the best way for listeners to follow up with you if they've got a question and want to learn more about what you're doing?

[00:27:17.280] – Robert

Well, they could look at my website, which is tworoads.org, and they can contact me through the website.

[00:27:24.270] – Steve

Alright. We'll put that in the podcast lead-in. Thank you so much.

[00:27:29.430] – Robert

Thank you so much.

[00:27:32.650] – Steve [Outro]

Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn at Steve Barkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.