



Episode 19:

Educational systems in 2023 with Simon Rodberg

Agnes Kunkel: Welcome to 2023 with Agnes Kunkel. Find out what the world might look like in spring in 2023, we ask experts what the future may hold and how we will need to adapt.

Agnes Kunkel: 2023, your window to a world beyond Covid-19.

Agnes Kunkel: We have for now over 115 million confirmed cases worldwide and nearly two and a half million people have been confirmed to have died. Today, we have the 3rd of March 2021. Our guest today is Simon Rodberg. We will talk about the future of schools after Covid-19. Simon Rodberg was the founding principle of DC International School, a public charter school. He now consults and teaches school leadership and organizational change at American University in Washington, DC. His articles have appeared in Harvard Business Review, Educational Leadership, Principle magazine and more. He is the author of the ASCD book, 'What If I'm Wrong? And Other Key Questions for Decisive School Leadership'. One of his most recent articles was titled 'Don't Send the Kids Back to the Factory Line', referring to post Covid schools.

Agnes Kunkel: Hi, Simon, it's great, that you found time to come as a guest to our podcast and to talk to us about academic systems, educational systems, what your profession is. And Simon, what do you think about Covid-19 and all this remote collaboration stuff? Will it change our educational system? Will it have an impact?

Simon Rodberg: I think right now it's pulling in two directions. Parents whose children are at home from school and I speak from personal experience here, desperately want their children out of the house. And so I think people see what I call the custodial function of education, the fact that they can send their children somewhere and those children will be safe and cared for and they will eat and be taken care of, that that feels

all the more necessary. And I think parents are, many parents are desperate to get their children safely out of their houses into a school building. At the same time, I think that parents are seeing that the function, the other functions of education are not necessarily being well met in a traditional school building, and that in this time they are finding other ways to better meet their child's needs and better promote their family's values. That's everything from individualized math that kids can do online through AI and smart tutoring, to taking classes of their own choice through various online providers to, for instance, a new startup in the U.S. that is doing black history courses online, aimed at promoting a positive black identity among students. And I think parents are not going to want to basically accept what schools are giving them in a masked format to go back to that and what they now recognize are the real limitations to that. So I think what we will see is a continued need for safe places for children to be, but an increased desire for parents to curate their own personalized educational experience for their children and a continuation and increase in the ecosystem of providers and options for parents to choose to remixed what was previously just done at school.

Agnes Kunkel: In the economy we see this disruptive in five or six years. You mentioned iPods is younger than your son. I have experienced here in Germany, that educational systems are very slow in adapting 10 years and nothing. 40 years and nothing. Will we see, what speed of change will we see?

Simon Rodberg: I agree that it will be very slow here in the U.S. as well. You know that we classrooms look very similar to how they did at least before Covid, three years ago. Classrooms looked very similar to how they did 70 or 80 years ago. You know, electronic projection screens had replaced whiteboards, whiteboards had replaced chalkboards. But the basic way that a classroom looked was still very similar. Covid is the first really big disruption to what that classroom looks like in many, many decades. And so I don't expect, particularly because I think parents will want to send their children, as I said, back to school buildings, for the most part. I don't expect things to look dramatically different at schools in three or five years. What I do think will be different is two things. One in the one very quickly, which is that parents are now accustomed, when they have the financial resources and the wherewithal to do so, to adding many things into their children's education to. My son really only has a remote school right now, four days a week, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. And so on Wednesday, he has two different tutors. He takes an online class. I bring him to an

outdoor education experience. I am now used to school only providing his education four days a week and me figuring out the various things I want for him one day a week.

Simon Rodberg: And I think even after Covid, that kind of thing will continue. Parents will be much more comfortable and entrusted with adding a lot more on. The question is how quickly and nimbly do schools do the same thing? Do they say, Okay, we can integrate these other providers at the school building as well? We can put kids on a computer for an hour and have them do different things that meet their particular needs or particular interests. And I think that the schools that are most responsive to that possibility and to that desire on the part of kids and parents, will handle the next few years best, because I do think that there will be a long term reduction in the number of parents who are interested in the traditional educational experience. Whether because they are now more willing to pay for a private experience or whether they choose to homeschool their children. I think that, again, that will be those things will be most available only to certain classes in society, certain economic sectors in society. But I think the desire will be much more widespread.

Agnes Kunkel: You talked about different experiences, this remote possibility, doesn't it lower the costs for certain experiences, which might have been very expensive maybe a few years ago, now you can reach out online for a Chinese teacher in China?

Simon Rodberg: Yes, absolutely. I've seen the United States spends about 10 thousand dollars per student on public schools. And I've seen one estimate that remotely, if you put together various providers that are out there, you could basically provide remote schooling for less than 4 thousand dollars per student. And I think that's true partly because you can get lower cost tutors from overseas. You can get people who are not unionized and work at lower salaries here in the US or in your home country. You can use online platforms that scale and don't really require any human intervention. I think all of those things are there. So for people, I think a lot more people will choose to home school, because it seems more possible because of these tools from the Internet. Of course, that doesn't provide the custodial function, although, again, I think that some families are already during the pandemic saying, Okay, you know, if we get 10 families together, each of whom can pay three or four thousand dollars a year, we can hire somebody who's not getting paid a teacher salary, but they can sort of look after the kids. The kids can do work online and going that method. And so I think

one of the things we will see is an increased splintering and increased fracturing in this common school experience that we've got used to. I think it's important to recognize that that common school experience is a historical anomaly. It's a 20th century thing. And, you know, a couple of hundred years ago, people were not going to school. Certainly different classes of society were not going to a single school building, a single place itself. And the various things that children needed to learn, they would learn in a much wider variety of formats, partly depending on their parenting, their class, but also they wouldn't have physical education at school because they had a much more physically active lifestyle. They wouldn't have a music class at school. They might learn an instrument at home. They might join in communal singing. And I think that we will see an unbundling of what's become bundled in the 20th century increasingly over time.

Agnes Kunkel: Is this threat to our societal coherence?

Simon Rodberg: I think yes, because I think one of the functions that schools have, at very least in democratic countries, is the is teaching students to get along with other people to collaborate, to be in a place with people who are different from them, not part of their family, do not share different views. I think that it's done better or worse, depending, for instance, in the United States on how segregated the school is, on the skills of a teacher, on how much they encourage collaboration and discussion in their classrooms. But without people coming together in a place to do that, I don't see how we get that kind of democratic training. I will say that I think it is a threat, but it's a threat that we already have. In many ways, the very rich of the United States go to private schools, be somewhat less rich, move to suburbs and other places where they can only be with other well-off people in public schools. And they also supplement with the kinds of classes, online and otherwise tutors, museum experiences, et cetera. So I think what I would prefer to see is a public system which a) Helps fund everyone to get these kind of diverse educational and enrichment experiences and b) where we do bring students together in a very integrated settings, particularly with a focus on that kind of democratic citizenship and practice working with others.

Agnes Kunkel: When we think about the public side, seeing parents running a little bit of drip dripping away and maybe not running away, but just slightly moving away, what would be your advice to public educational systems to make these schools more

attractive so that the parents and the children and students do not leave or have a tendency to leave the system?

Simon Rodberg: That's a great question. I think they need to get better at doing what only they can do and become a place that supports the more individualized response. What I mean is this if schools are the only place that students can really get that practice in collaboration and democratic citizenship, schools need to really focus on that, get good at that and really articulate that that is what they are engaged in. Similarly, it's very hard to learn to read from an online tutor. Parents don't have the skills to teach children to read. So schools, elementary schools, primary schools need to be really, really good at teaching kids to read. At the same time, if I am a Jewish parent and I want my child to learn some, for instance, Jewish cultural dances or singing, if I'm a black parent and I want my child to learn black cultural practices, schools should be supportive of that. Perhaps they should create ways that students can engage with that, provide time, supervised time, speak for the custodial function where children can engage with that online. I think that schools may actually need to do less and proportionately take fewer public resources as long as those public resources go to supporting community organizations and other ways for parents who don't have their own money to do so, to meet their children's needs and meet their family's needs.

Agnes Kunkel: If I understand correctly, you say they should be a little bit more diverse in what they are offering to the children and students and maybe accept more this custodial function. I'm a mother and I've got a lot of mothers working for me. You cannot bring the children when you want to bring them. You cannot bring them back at home at the time you want. And there are so many unpleasant details. Now when I was preparing for this podcast, I thought it's a little bit like a factory. In the morning, you ring the bell and everyone is running to the place where he has to work, like in modern times of Charlie Chaplin. And when the bell rings again, everyone is running away.

Simon Rodberg: Well, except, of course, that is a school, right. That's what we imagine a school to be. And I think that part of what we're talking about is that this is a similar sort of 20th century mindset created what we think of as the stereotypical factory like Charlie Chaplin and created what we think of as the stereotypical school. And one of those things is the the way time functions, and so schools in the United States are open one hundred and eighty days a year, about six to seven hours a day for kids, that

doesn't cover what parents need to work. And so, again, richer parents have been able to pay for after school, pay for nannies or babysitters to pick up the children, etc.. I don't blame schools for the schools aren't funded to be open 12 hours a day or six days a week. But we need to recognize the reality of working parents lives and as a society provide custodial care, preferably, you know, at a particular safe place so that so that working parents, you know, not have the stress that that school schedules currently give them.

Agnes Kunkel: When you would make a summary for our listeners, what will covid-19 and remote do to the schools?

Simon Rodberg: I think that they will become even more important for many people as a place for them to send their kids. But I think that some people will leave schools entirely because they see that they are working remotely and their children can get more of what they need individually, remotely. And I think that parents will both provide more individualized options for their children and insist that schools provide more individualized options for their children.

Agnes Kunkel: But as I understand correctly, it will take a little bit of time.

Simon Rodberg: I think it will take time, partly because many people do want to go back to what they had before, at least having their kids out of the house. I also think that schools as we know them, have survived wars. They have survived the advent of the computer age. Right. Schools are durable institutions because they serve so many functions, even if they don't serve them very well. And so I think unbuilding an institution, this complex and this big will take time. But I think that covid will accelerate the kind of unbundling that the Internet started to bring us.

Agnes Kunkel: Even such an old and durable institution as core will have a big scratch.

Simon Rodberg: Well, and I think over time it will. And it should.

Simon Rodberg: And I think if we as citizens, as parents and as educators, as people who work in schools, if we push for it and push for a different, more innovative, better future, it will come more quickly.

Agnes Kunkel: Oh, yeah, you are right. You are absolutely right.

Maybe for my grandchildren, I will I will see these changes.

Simon it was really exciting to talk to someone who has this deep insight into the educational system from academic side, from being a parent, from being a parent in a pandemic situation. Many, many thanks to you. I guess this is a topic of high interest to all our listeners, which are many, many parents with children in very different ages. And maybe we can motivate some of our listeners to stand up for modern school and educational systems, having a closer look to the needs of the students and not so much the look on this factory system that we built in the 20th century.

Thank you very much.

Simon Rodberg: It's been a pleasure. It's been really fun to talk with you. Thank you.

Agnes Kunkel: Bye bye. Have a good time and goodbye.

Simon Rodberg: Thanks so much.

Agnes Kunkel: You have been listening to 2023, you can find even more material, including transcripts of our interviews on our website at 20-23.earth

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