



SPEECH

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Thank you, Representative Hood, for that introduction.

I am honored to be here, and I want to thank Dr. Mathis and everyone here at MTSU who have granted me the privilege to speak with you – to have a conversation with you - today.

I want to use this time to talk with you about our education system. With MTSU's teacher college the biggest and one of the oldest in our state, I can think of no more fitting place to have this conversation.

Today, I want to talk about change. About real change, and the courage that is required to bring it about. This is not an easy thing to do. It takes guts to look into the heart of a thing, to admit its strengths and weaknesses. Change is uncomfortable, and inconvenient, and rarely comes easily. But to keep up in today's world, change is vital and necessary.

We all know that we face great challenges in our education system here in Tennessee, in America. I don't need to quote the statistics to you about where we rank among nations today. We know in our hearts that real change is overdue. I'm not talking today about a few special programs here or there, or an isolated remedy that might affect five schools or five hundred kids. To truly change something, we need to step out of our comfort zone.

I've been very pleased that the Board of Regents has already shown some willingness to step out of the comfort zone when it comes to our schools of education, and I encourage them to continue and expand their efforts. We have a great state school board as well; the time for action feels very ripe.

There's an old saying that's simple but holds a lot of truth: ships are safe in harbor, but that is not what ships are built for. In education, we have become too comfortable here in our harbor, here in the safety of home port. We need to take a deep breath, throw our hearts out in front of us, and venture out into the ocean.

Let's do that, together, this afternoon.

As many of you know, I've just returned from China. While I was there I learned a lot about China, and I also learned something about my own country.

The Chinese are willing to do big things; we need to rediscover that audacity here at home. I've felt for a long time that we confine ourselves far too much to frittering around the edges of opportunities—in infrastructure, in health care, and yes, in education. This trip has crystallized this feeling. Hong Kong has 7 million people, a little larger than Tennessee; I flew out of a new Hong Kong airport a couple of weeks ago that cost \$8 billion to construct. Can you even imagine an \$8 billion public infrastructure project in Tennessee? With even bigger ones on the drawing boards?

We are gathered here today at an institution of higher learning ... and I am sure everyone in this room acknowledges that such institutions have earned a bit of a reputation for being resistant to change. But I'm sure you'll also agree that when it comes to our education system, we all know too well that it is failing us in crucial areas, and that we need to do things differently.

We've already done plenty of tinkering -- over the past twenty or so years, a lot has been done in an attempt to improve our education system. A lot of money has been spent, a lot of voices have joined the choir, a lot of quick fixes and silver bullets and ideas du jour have been presented. And a lot of hands have been wrung. But little of this is real change, and unfortunately, the result of this approach is a clutter of good intentions that has often only served to complicate things, and often work in opposition to each other.

I'm going to ask you to take an imaginary trip with me for a moment. Let's leave the room - in our imaginations - and go out on the Atlantic ocean. We're way out, in international waters. It's a fresh day, whitecaps, and there's a big old three-masted sailing ship ahead, flying the stars and stripes. It's a beautiful thing, but as we look upwind we see that there are other ships, flying other flags, much further ahead. They're faster, they're pointing higher, some of them are starting to disappear over the horizon.

In case anyone needs a map here, this three-master we're looking at is the U.S.S. Public Education.

Our ship, it's plugging away, it's cutting through the waves, the crew is working hard. But as we get closer, we start to see the root of the problem.

It's an old ship - it's been seafaring for decades now - and we've has added a lot to it. It has new superstructures. Added decks that are crowded with extra rigging, extra equipment lashed to every surface. It's a fine old ship, perfectly capable of winning the race, but all those things we've added - they're only slowing us down.

The crew of the U.S.S. Public Education -- that dedicated, hardworking crew is, of course, our teachers - they're doing their best to sail our ship. Despite our crew's qualities - despite the courage, the presence of mind, the flexibility and dedication it takes to make it in their profession - their ship is faltering.

Now, you know in your hearts how to fix this. And you know in your hearts how not to fix it.

You know that it won't help to keep adding on to that ship. It won't help to install the latest GPS navigation system on the quarterdeck. All that will do is tell you more accurately how far off course you are. It won't help to install an even more accurate ultrasonic knotmeter. That will tell you how even more accurately how slow you're going, but it won't do anything to get you back up to speed. And getting a grant from a foundation to varnish the mast or paint the poop deck is beside the point.

You know in your heart that we're not going to help that ship sail better by adding yet more stuff to it. You know in your heart how to fix this: shift our focus away from the ship and put it instead on the crew.

The crew—the teachers in our analogy—they're the heart and soul of that ship. Any sea captain knows this. Without them, the ship is just a pile of timber and sail cloth adrift in the water. Assemble the right crew, train them well, give them good officers, and they will know what to do - they know what they need to sail the ship and what to tear off and throw overboard to lighten it up. Then the sails will catch the wind and the ship will cut through the waves to catch and pass the other ships out there to regain its rightful place.

I believe with all my heart that this is the real change that is needed in education: a focus on the crew - on the individual teacher; a commitment to getting the best possible people to teach in each and every classroom. I want you to leave here today looking at the problem of education in America a little differently; that the problem that faces the U.S.S Public Education is not at its core about organization or charter schools or vouchers or technology or measurement; it's about human capital, and how to create it and how to manage it. It's about teachers.

I used to be the CEO of a health care company, and one day after it got to be pretty big, I had an epiphany. I suddenly realized that CEOs were nice, that regional vice presidents and lawyers and accountants and managers were fine, but that my company was going to rise or fall based on what happened when that doctor went into the examining room with the patient.

I feel the same way about public education: governors and superintendants and school board members and central office people are all fine: but our schools and our children will succeed or fail based on what happens when that teacher goes into the classroom and closes the door. That's the whole game.

If I have a choice between sending my child to, say, sixth grade in a simple classroom in an old building with a blackboard and a great teacher, or to a state-of-the-art classroom with new computers and new desks and books and a bad teacher, which would I choose? Most everyone in this room wouldn't have to even think a moment to make that choice.

The importance of teachers has some solid basis in the data.

Here in Tennessee, we have done comprehensive testing of all students for about fifteen years now. We do value-added analysis, measuring the gain in knowledge over the course of a year. For those not up on the jargon, this is in contrast to criterion-referenced testing, solely measuring the student's absolute level of knowledge.

The value-added approach is an excellent way to measure teacher performance. Regardless of who comes into a teacher's classroom in September, it only measures how far he was able to take them on his watch.

I'm told that with our fifteen years of consistent data—same testing standards—we have the best longitudinal database in America. One of the things that you can do with a great database like this is to use sophisticated statistical techniques to mine it for information. One of the things you can do is to look at various factors - the ones that you can control - and see what they have to do with student performance. When you do this with fifteen years of Tennessee data, the answer is startling: 68% - two thirds - of the variation in student performance is explained by the identity of the teacher. Incidentally, 24% is explained by the specific school and 8% by the school system.

Let me be very clear - I am not saying that factors like race, ethnicity and poverty do not matter in education. They matter a great deal. I am saying that there is great optimism and hope in our data that shows that no matter who you are or where you have come from, if a child is in front of an excellent teacher, and more importantly, a series of excellent teachers, he will make progress and perform well. If an African-American child, a Hispanic child, and a White child all enter the same classroom at the same achievement level, they will typically leave the classroom at the same achievement level. The teacher is the key.

This issue is being recognized worldwide as the key to reform. Just last month, the McKinsey Report on education studied 25 of the world's school systems, including 10 of the world's top performers. (In case you're wondering, those ships out in front are flying the Norwegian flag, the South Korean flag, the Australian flag, the Canadian Maple Leaf, among others...). The study set out to find what these systems in the top ten have in common. And it found that what they have in common are good teachers; they have figured out how to get and keep the best possible teachers in the classroom.

What can we learn from them? How do these ships assemble their crews? It's not a factor of high salary, or even the perception of teachers in the culture, but it's done in three ways: a strong process for selecting and training teachers, good (though not great) starting compensation, and careful management of the teaching profession along the way.

At home and abroad, the evidence is there:

Teachers are the core ... of the system... of the school... of the classroom. They are the nucleus that holds it all together. Everything else is held in orbit by their gravity.

If you accept for a moment the idea that the crew is key—that the teachers are key—how do you take that idea and turn it into action, what do you change in what we are doing right now?

To start, we need to revolutionize our thinking as to *who* a teacher is.

Career teachers, of course, but also men and women who come into teaching after another career, men and women who are experts in their fields ... who may have always felt a calling to teach, but are put off by the complicated training and licensing procedures.

Likewise, men and women who are just out of college, with a degree in a subject like history or biology, who want to test the waters, or for whom a few years in teaching make sense. There are a lot of these young people out there; they often wind up teaching in private schools, which have the luxury of not requiring formal licensure. I recognize that public schools have different requirements they need to fill and are bound by many more restrictions, but if we made it more accessible for these people, I suspect we'd see a lot more of them in the public school system - where the pay is greater and the opportunity to contribute to a community can reach a deeper level.

This country is full of bright, capable people who have it in their hearts to teach. Let's get these people in the classroom, where they belong.

I think the teachers who are here today understand more than anyone the need to find colleagues of the highest caliber...and the fact is, in today's competitive job market, we need to be doing much more to ensure that.

For a long time, we have viewed teaching as a profession set apart: that is, someone starts teaching right after college and teaches until retirement day. There was a time when our culture operated that way, but times have changed. My mother, my aunts and uncles spent their careers pretty much in one job. My experience has been very different: I was a physics major in college, then on to the business world, then government. I expect my son will have four or five careers in his lifetime, and will bring more complex energy and understanding to each than if he stayed with just one. The field of teaching needs to be updated to be the same.

This is something we've begun doing here in Tennessee. The seed was this: about three years ago, a man in the Chattanooga area retired from a distinguished career in the Air Force: Air Force Academy, a PhD in Physics, combat experience as a helicopter pilot, taught at the Air Force Academy. He wanted to teach high school math and physics, approached one of our schools, and was told it would take him about two years to be qualified.

A light went off for me: there must be lots of extremely capable people out there, mid-career, for whom teaching would be a rewarding second or third career, beneficial for all concerned. We structured a two-week course combined with some valuable first year mentoring, launched an effort to recruit and place these non-traditional teachers, and called it Teach Tennessee.

With Teach Tennessee, we find mid-career professionals - veterinarians, biologists, engineers, military retirees -- who are interested in teaching, and fast-track them to our classrooms to teach primarily math and science. We are in our third year of experience, and have trained two classes each year of about 35 each. It has been astonishingly successful; the schools love them, the students love them. They bring great command of the subject matter; they bring new energy, and expose our students to a totally different set of life experiences than what they may have ever known at home. These teachers are truly equipped to answer that age-old classroom question "Why do we have to learn this?"

The real-world relevance that these people bring to their classrooms is something we need in our education system today. We need to prepare our students for the workforce they will be entering ... and we need teachers who understand that. The good news is, bring two or three of these mid-career professionals into a school, and the whole school community benefits from that experience.

Dr. Barney Griggs is a great example of this. He came through the Teach Tennessee program and is now teaching at Lebanon High School. He was a college professor in Arkansas who always knew in his heart that he wanted to teach younger students. For him, the rewards of teaching high school are greater than those of teaching college - he wants to be an integral part of his student's learning process, rather than just a lecturer. He brings to his classroom high expectations - the same level of expectations he had of his college students - and he has found that his students rise to meet them. As in many cases with our Teach Tennessee fellows, the benefits are reciprocal in the system. He has served as a great resource in his school - because of his high level of expertise in his subject, his fellow science teachers come to him for clarification of subject matter, as well as collaborations on student labs.

He, like so many Teach Tennessee participants, has found his calling and plans to teach until he retires. In three years of Teach Tennessee, we've had hundreds of applicants, and produced 140 new teachers. Now think: how many more Barney Griggs are there out there? Great people who have it in their heart to teach in our schools, but are mystified or road blocked by the system? There are thousands of potentially great teachers who are out there - we owe it to our students to find them, and make it possible for them to teach in our schools.

And not just people who are mid-career - what about that younger generation I mentioned before, people who didn't study education specifically in college, but who are bright and well-educated and might find a career of a few years in the field rewarding if we had a realistic way to accredit them. Remember, it is all about expanding the talent pool. The calling to teach is a strong one - if someone hears it, he should be able to follow it. There are national models for this - let's find a way to bring it into the main stream.

Teach for America is one of those national models - the program recruits recent graduates from the country's top colleges and universities to teach in some of our most underserved public schools, after an intensive training course. We've recently committed more state funds to the program in Memphis, where it is in its second year.

The young people who are currently teaching in Memphis through the Teach for America program are all great examples of how someone who followed a different track in college can bring enthusiasm and fresh perspective to our schools.

Rob France is teaching ESL at Sheffield High School. Here's someone who did very well at the University of Delaware, majored in International studies, worked at a community center while in college. He wanted to teach because he sees the current problems of the system ... the disparities and the achievement gap ... and wants to be part of the positive change. And now that he's been in the classroom for a year, he has plans to stay in Memphis ... and stay in education ...when his two year teaching stint is through.

If the Teach for America program can go out and find this kind of enthusiasm and dedication in people who haven't taken a single course in education, I see no reason why we can't. Why not bring bright young people - who aren't necessarily on the career track to be life-long teachers - into the mainstream teaching pipeline? Why not find a way to recruit lots more people like Rob France, provide them with the proper training, and send them into any school? Why not make the fundamental changes necessary to truly open up the system?

The underlying goal in all of this is to get the best person we possibly can in every classroom. We've found, in that data I talked about earlier, that a school cannot thrive on the presence of just a handful of great teachers. The data shows that the effect of a teacher is cumulative on a student's achievement. Take two average eight year-olds at the same level, put one in a classroom with a high-achieving teacher for three years, and one in a classroom with a low-achieving teacher for three years. At the end of it, those students' assessment scores differ by more than 50 percentile points. And the student who had three years of low-achieving teachers is likely to never catch back up.

Now, I am not saying that anyone can be a teacher ... quite the opposite is true. Teaching is a special profession, with a sense of contribution and dedication about it that most jobs don't have. It takes a certain kind of person, and it takes passion and commitment.

What I am saying is: let's make it easier for these kinds of people to find their way into the profession. Schools of education are one path, and a successful one for many. Let's make sure that there is more than one path, and that the paths are accessible and comprehensive. Let's make sure selection screens are in place, to filter out early on those who aren't suited for the profession, or who aren't up to par. Programs like Teach Tennessee and Teach for America have proven that they are effective. Now is the time to move some of these ideas out of the box of "alternative" programs, and into the mainstream.

As for the training of our teachers, any teacher will tell you that nothing you learn in an education course can prepare you for that first day you step into a classroom and twenty or thirty young faces look up at you, ready for your guidance. Nothing can replace classroom experience.

Any good captain will tell you this about his crew: you can train them and prepare them all you want on land - on dry dock, someone can certainly learn the ropes - but you've got to get out on the water and let him get his "sea legs" before he can really do his job. There's simply no substitute for that experience, or training that can prepare for it.

I'd like to see these kinds of issues addressed here in Tennessee, when it comes to training teachers. It is time we took a good look at our current system and took a courageous step in aligning it with the demands of a 21st century career in teaching. I want our schools of education here in Tennessee to be more like other professional training programs—for doctors and lawyers and accountants—to concentrate less on education theory and more on subject knowledge and practical, in the classroom experience.

Let's pause here a moment and take a deep breath.

My thesis today is simple:

First, in our public education system, we're falling behind in America, in Tennessee; we have to be bold, we have to make real changes, we have to stop frittering around the edges.

Second, that we need to look at the challenge from a new direction, that it is not about organization or technology or testing; it is fundamentally about teachers, about getting the best possible teachers in our classrooms, it's about human capital and how you create and manage it.

And third, that once you look at the problem in this new light, it opens lots of avenues, including specifically revolutionizing just who a teacher is.

There are probably a lot of teachers in this room today who are made nervous or even angry by this talk. Is he saying that I'm outmoded, that my education and the years I've put in the classroom are irrelevant?

Just the opposite.

I'm saying to you that I need your help, that I need more from you. Help me change our schools of education; tell me with your experience what was useful and what was not. Help me with how we bring other people, other experiences into the classroom, even for just a while; how should we select them, how can you help mentor them? There is an enormous opportunity for professional advancement for the teachers in our schools today—for you— in these changes.

Invent with me schools with a core of professionals like yourselves, that put great teaching first, and are not afraid to seek that special talent wherever it can be found.

As I said at the start, MTSU is a fitting place for this discussion -- your education school produces more of Tennessee's teachers than any other state school. You have the opportunity to be front runners. You have the opportunity to lead. I'm asking for your help.

It is time we got serious about our teachers - about recruiting them, selecting them, and preparing them for the job. In order to do that, we're going to have to make changes - big changes - and we're going to have to be bold.

Now let's return, one last time, to that three-master, the U.S.S. Public Education. By now I hope you have a pretty good picture of it in your mind. It's up ahead on the horizon now, sailing into the sun. I would like you to fix the image of that ship's crew in your mind. They're from a lot of different towns and backgrounds, but they're working together, lightening up the ship, hoisting sails, tacking, back on course.

And in thinking of all this, I want you to remember that old adage that I started with, when I urged you to be bold: a ship is safe in harbor, but that is not what ships are made for. Let's put a great crew together, let's pull up the anchor, let's take it out on the ocean—for the good of our children, our state, our nation, our future.

Thank you.

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