

Freedom from Fear

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As we have had literally hundreds of conversations and other interactions with academic leaders this spring and now into the early summer of this plague year, we at One Schoolhouse continue to be inspired by the deep, deep desire of educators to step up and do the hard, hard work required to finish up the 2019–2020 academic year and plan for the next. Through successes and failures, experiments that have worked and others that haven't, and the multifarious frustrations of students, families, and colleagues, school folks have carried on.

Through it all (so far) we've encountered a few new terms: quaranteenagers, sync and async, and social distancing, not to mention COVID considerations, COVID contradictions, and COVID casualties (in multiple, generally tragic forms). And hybrid, a word that in my life once meant abundant crops of corn and then cars with some electric power available—and that now means education that can switch back and forth between online and on-campus. For us at One Schoolhouse, hybrid is not just a term of art but a term of hope, predicated on our belief that on-campus learning will be back, and not just back, but better.

One of the strategies that we've been recommending to schools is to take this opportunity to do some difficult work around aligning their curricula to their missions and values. Nothing we're suggesting is new: analyze your aspirational and foundational statements and work backwards from this analysis to build a learning program that will prepare students to take the school's ideals out into the world. What seems new is that we've offered a schema for this learning program: a set of standards to guide teachers in designing, building, and teaching this mission-aligned curriculum built for their very own students in their very own schools.

We believe, strongly, in curriculum built around goals for learning and understanding and not around the exigencies of content coverage. And we believe that such a curriculum, mediated by mission and values considerations, can liberate teachers and teaching. We believe that such curricula foster cultures of teaching and learning that give more than lip service to the actual lives of students. Within such cultures, real-world considerations—of relevance, of social justice, of insistent urgent current issues—may take their places in classrooms not as “tangents” or distractions but as central to the learning and teaching enterprise.

But enough about what we believe, because we have also become aware of a special kind of challenge facing school leaders and academic administrators, a challenge that has been around all along but has been revealed in some of the responses we have encountered to our recommendations.

Existential fear.

Will our school survive or not? Will less than stellar performance in the dispersal to distance mode this spring plus uncertainties around the return of international students and the nature of the new school year's opening—on campus, online, on hold—spell doom for the institution itself? Will the school become another COVID casualty?

Fear of faculty.

Teachers have busted their humps since learning went home in March, and for many the struggles to adapt have ravaged their sense of competence and confidence. The looming necessity to make far more fundamental adaptations—by following the One Schoolhouse recommendations, for example—has put many already disheartened teachers in a hard, fearful, and defensive place. Being asked not only to spend a summer of regrouping and preparation but also a summer of learning and re-learning is a heavy, heavy lift. And some teachers are inclined to dig in their heels.

Add words like “standards” to the conversation, and some anxious teachers begin to unravel. Recommend ways to streamline and regularize communication to reduce student (and family) confusion and stress, and the unraveling accelerates.

Many of us at One Schoolhouse have led faculties through a process of change. One of our past administrators, Lorri Palko, is now a consultant on change management, and she has offered a [webinar for us on the challenges of change during the current crisis](#). Change, like grief, is a process with certain predictable stages, and it can be led and managed in ways that minimize disruption and distress. It’s not easy, but it can be done.

The changes of the summer of 2020 are epic in scope and substance, and as we work with school administrators and instructional leaders, we encounter fear in various forms. Fear of faculty predominates in our how-to conversations, and we have heard expressed in many ways and in various degrees a deep anxiety about having to adopt practices that might infringe on a faculty’s traditional “autonomy” as well as teacher creativity and individuality. These anxieties, when expressed, are often code for “We are afraid to ask our faculty to make any significant changes in any aspect of their practice.”

We have to look to school cultures to fully understand this. We know that in far too many independent schools—despite or even in opposition to the waves of change that have been sweeping through schools in the past three decades and the clear and even strident calls for more forward-thinking curriculum and assessment that takes into account new understandings of how children learn and grow—past practices have insulated faculties from the imperatives to change and develop. I have been asked to come to schools to present to and sometimes work with faculties that had remained more or less untouched by the hand of professional development for years.

But no school can be insulated any more in the age of COVID-19. If we’ve allowed “professional distancing” from unsettling new ideas to get in the way of doing better work here and there, let us embrace the reality of social distancing and its causes and meaning as a potentially powerful albeit sometimes painful impetus that might move us all forward.

It’s not just the usual doom-sayers who are pointing out the existential threat to schools posed by COVID-19; we’ve already seen closings happen. Schools that have been teetering on the brink have gone over the edge, sometimes for demographic reasons that may have been inevitable. Even so, now there is danger for every school.

The present opportunity: being fearless.

There is also opportunity. We are all too well aware of the degree to which pandemic isolation and dislocation has pushed us as individuals to anxious reflection, and I am sure I am not alone in the internal vows I have made to be better about this and that. (Whether I keep all these vows will be another story.) Schools, too, as collective bodies of spirit, belief, and hope, need to start doing the same kinds of reflection.



Schools as institutions can reflect in many ways. Leaders can second-guess policies and decisions and actions and whether the logo is right and how the website athletics pages could be better. These can be more-or-less honest blame games or even real exercises in self-awareness. But they miss the point.

The point, when faced with an existential threat that doesn't involve an earthly cataclysm of some sort, is to ask existential questions: Who are we? Why are we here? What are we meant to be doing?

In my occasional marketing and identity work involving schools (I have friends who get me involved in the darnedest things), I have learned several important lessons related to these very questions, and these can be summed up as aphorisms that might well serve as mantras or even credos:

1. Figure out who your school is, and then BE it as authentically as you can.
2. The unexamined curriculum is not worth teaching.
3. The unexamined curriculum is not worth marketing.

The first is perhaps a little deceptive, because if you consider yourself as a business entity only, BEing who you are is just a practical matter of filling seats and ending the year with no parentheses on the financial statement.

Your school's founders had a different idea. Working from my own experience, I'll go back to not my father's school but my grandfather's. He was an ambitious man with a houseful of daughters who had twice been passed over for key administrative positions at the boys schools where he worked. But he had also been intrigued by the problem of students who were clearly bright but for whom reading and spelling tasks were hugely challenging. He'd already worked with a New York doctor named Samuel Orton to develop strategies for helping these kids and even held a summer camp where he'd been able to hone his methods on some real students. At some point, aged 40, he left his established school and started his own on a few dozen acres of clapped-out farmland thirty-some miles from the nearest city.

Yes, he wanted to make a living, but more than that he really wanted to develop his ideas for helping students with language-based learning difficulties, then all clumped under the heading, "dyslexia." By the time he died thirty years later he'd been able to afford a new Buick, and his son and son-in-law continued the work; it was still a proprietary school, the family business. In the 1970s, the existential threats of a dilapidated campus and no resources for telling its story to prospective families and students brought the school to the brink of closing; to raise the funds to upgrade campus and programs, the school became a 501(c)3 non-profit. At that point, the school had to write its first real "mission statement," per the requirements of the State of New York and the IRS.

But the school's mission had been crystal clear from the first lines of its first brochure in 1926: this was a college-preparatory school for dyslexic boys. It's shorthand, of course, but the students attended churches in the nearby town, played soccer and lacrosse, skied on the hill on the west side of the campus, and wore coats and ties seven days a week. Young men who had almost all been written off by their previous schools as irredeemably stupid or lazy and who had often been despaired of by their own families learned that they could learn and learned that they could succeed. The school, even in its Spartan state in the founding decades, knew what it was, and it did what was necessary to BE it. It's still around today, full of students of all genders and still offering soccer and lacrosse and featuring a serious dress code.



Who is your school? What reason does it have to exist? What does it offer, built up perhaps from the dreams and impulses of its founders and the vision of its leaders since, that no other school can offer? If its teachers and leaders were free to offer the education that they know in their deepest hearts and highest minds would be the best and most true to their beliefs and ideals, what would that education be like? This is the school you must imagine, and this is the school you must BE.

This fearless school, having looked into its soul and decided who to be and how best to be it, is the school that has the best chance of survival. You may believe that families are interested only in a plain vanilla experience for their children—generic curriculum, generic policies and practices—but what they really want, what they crave, is an education that means something. And an education that means anything is built up from values and beliefs—the things of which your mission statement is made and of which your programs must be made, too.

You must take that unexamined curriculum and examine it through the lenses of your mission and values and how these play in the mixed up, messed up world in which we are living right now. Where in the learning experiences you offer children is there space for real-world connections, for conversations about injustice, for conversations about bringing hope and change to the people of our planet?

You must not be afraid to enlist your faculty in the work required to bring your school through the current crisis. Take heart from your own belief in the work and make the case to your faculty for doing it with the greatest will.

Because there is another thing we have observed in our work over these past few months. If some leaders show signs of fear of their faculties, others show a profound faith in the teachers with whom they work, a faith that manifests itself in a proud assurance that their teachers can and will take up the work not only of preparing for the uncertainties of 2020–21 but also of carrying the school and its programs forward toward a more full and heartfelt expression of its mission and values. Not just the curriculum will be mission aligned; the faculty itself will be united around the school's beliefs as its members' personal statements of purpose and values.

I believe that this faith in a faculty's will to pitch in and do what's needed is far more likely than not to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Standing up to fear of disease by working to adapt the curriculum and pedagogy is in fact standing up to fear of the loss of the school. And rejecting the impulse to fear the faculty and instead to see and imbue teachers with the same spirit of growth mindset with which we see our students will bring positive results and carry us, our schools, and our students all through this ever-evolving crisis.

We can do this, and we will.

