

What's Missing at School: A Wellness Check for Grown-Ups



— Jennifer Bryan, Ph.D.

How are the adults in your school community doing today?

Here's a question independent schools barely have time to ask (or answer) at the moment, because everyone is in a frenzy managing day-to-day operations. The effort expended by individuals and teams to keep schools functioning right now is massive.



As a result, school personnel are exhausted. Speaking openly about systemic fatigue and the unsustainability of this flat-out way of working, however, is risky. Yet, an honest assessment of and conversation about how people are faring currently is the most humane — and strategic — way forward this fall/winter.

Spring and Summer Shifts



An adrenaline fueled response to the sudden emergency of Covid last March demonstrated that schools are capable of adapting quickly. By working harder, longer, and faster, administrators, staff and teachers created an acceptable emergency on-line school experience for most students.

Yet when the virtual graduation and end-of-year goodbyes were over, the novelty of the pandemic challenge had evaporated. Everyone was spent and wondered what would happen next.

What happened next is school communities went all in to make opening back up this fall a reality. There was no summer vacation for many staff and administrators who strategized, mapped, budgeted, and measured endlessly, shifting plans each time the state guidelines changed. So, to pause now and question the sustainability of your exhaustive model may feel like a defeat. It's not.

Simply put, what is possible in the short term is different from what is sustainable over the long term. It doesn't matter whether you are using the best remote technology ever, teaching in a tent wearing a mask, or doing the hybrid shuffle three days a week. What got you through September will not get you through January 2021.

Speaking Truth, Building Resilience, Motivating Community



There are several reasons why having this conversation about adult wellness feels so precarious. If you make room now for a truly honest assessment of the collective health and well-being of the adults who work at your institution, you will be compelled to course correct, as soon as possible. Yet who wants to be that administrator who tells their community, “We need to make yet another substantial change”?

Loss is hard, and it is not made easier by platitudes. Paradoxically, by not sugarcoating loss, resilience may be more likely to emerge. Acknowledge the hard reality that your people are experiencing, and have faith that they (and you) can emerge stronger.

— Sara Deren, Fast Company,
[*What Grief Management Can Teach Us About Leadership During Hard Times*](#)

Courageous leaders must lean in and message the truth, that modifying this current phase of pandemic-school is exactly what your organization must do to survive. **When you name the unsustainability of the current way of working, people will feel validated, relieved and ultimately, motivated to stay in the game.**

There is a tremendous opportunity in putting together the next iteration of school. Rather than administrators hunkering down for weeks on end (which isn't even possible), creating this course correction should involve all personnel. With 6+ months of pandemic school under their belts, everyone from the maintenance crew to the tech support team to department chairs to the school nurse knows what does and doesn't work. They know what is and isn't sustainable over time. You can gladly announce, "We have met the solution and it is us!"

Practices That Hinder Wellness

In order to fully support your employees, you will need accurate data about how people are faring. It's critical, then, to assess wellness and sustainability by focusing on those issues and practices that are the real mental health differentiators. Here are a few of them.



1. Boundaries Around Space and Time

During a voluntary zoom forum a couple of weeks ago, one participant's cell phone rang three different times during our meeting. It was 7:30 on a Thursday night, and each time the participant picked up her phone and looked at the caller I.D., she would shake her head and say, "It's school again." A head of school who needs to have uninterrupted time

schedules important meetings for Saturday morning (and Sunday evening). And a teacher participating in a virtual faculty meeting after school, while at the same time driving to pick up her own child from daycare, gets distracted, and blurts out, unmuted, “I just missed the f***ing exit!”

Working from home, working in the car, living at work, more meetings, longer meetings, meetings at any hour...all of these pandemic practices erode the temporal and spatial boundaries that human beings need to self-regulate, allocate internal resources, and function optimally. The running joke that “every day is Wednesday” betrays a level of disorientation that can actually be debilitating. The mini mental status exam clinicians use with patients to differentiate between neurological and psychiatric disorders includes asking if people know (a) who they are, (b) where they are and (c) what day it is!

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Educators are planners. The absence of predictable and firm external boundaries diminishes teachers’ capacities to plan, prepare and deliver. This, in turn, creates a sense of disorder that undermines our internal equilibrium. In addition, the cumulative effect of longer days of work and the lack of distinction between work/home disrupts our ability to eat healthy regular meals, get enough sleep and exercise. There is no getting around the fact (i.e. based in scientific research) that chronically diffuse boundaries create dysregulation, stress and fatigue.

Additionally, the violations of what would previously have been considered personal boundaries do not affect everyone in the school community the same way. Pandemic-school has pointedly and painfully highlighted inequities that exist for adults and students alike in terms of where we live, how we live, what resources we have and don’t have (e.g. technology, space, food, supportive family members). People who have involuntarily had these truths exposed are burdened with an additional layer of stress, and those who are bearing witness to these inequities are also impacted.



2. No Time For Grieving

The global pandemic is a grief multiplier. It used to be that we could identify those people who suffered a loss. That's the person who was fired. Or, He's the coach who retired after 35 years and misses the game. Or, Her company lost so many people in the North Tower on 9/11. Now, in this moment, we are all grieving, all of us at the same time, strangers, friends, family alike. Most of us have not experienced loss in this intense, pervasive and protracted way before.

On a societal and personal level we are contending with deaths, illness, racial injustice, political unrest and economic ruin. We've lost basic freedoms like moving around a store, going to work, playing a sport, gathering with friends, sitting shiva, singing in church, chatting with the conductor on a train. No retirement party. No prom. No second grade play! In Re-Set School workshops we often hear people say that there are so many losses, they've stopped keeping track.

'Closure' is a term that has become widely accepted as a natural thing to seek in light of a loss, but more often than not and definitely in the case of ambiguous loss, the closure we desire isn't available to us.

— Dr. Pauline Boss

www.ambiguousloss.com

Pauline Boss's work on ambiguous loss provides a framework for understanding the ways our uncertainty about what is happening to us (and around us) complicates our grief. Enduring small, medium, and large daily losses with no clear ending in sight takes a tremendous toll on our mental health.

We have even lost the ability to look forward to positive events (e.g. big gatherings at Thanksgiving, the winter musical, a 16th birthday celebration) because we don't know if they will happen. As school personnel valiantly power through to get the job done, there is little room for

grieving and, perhaps as important, there are doubts about whether talking about loss is such a good idea.

Rest assured, it's a good idea. Unprocessed grief just piles up over time. So does disenfranchised grief, as when we label the cancellation of the 5th grade rite of passage of visiting Nature's Classroom insignificant, because, in comparison, others have lost so much more. Weighing the legitimacy of one's feelings about a given loss is a futile defense and only serves to interfere with a natural process of feeling bereft, reconciling loss, and moving on. The work of grieving is itself a task, a most human task. To learn how to grieve is to develop a lifelong capacity that helps us deal with a lifetime of inevitable losses more effectively.



3. The Push for Productivity

Independent schools are known and valued for their high standards and enriched programs, touting academic excellence and instilling an enduring love of learning. Parents pay top dollar to provide their PreK-12 age children with a superior educational experience. Yet the more-on-top-of-more culture of private schools has escalated over the years, creating unhealthy performance expectations for students and adults alike. And trying to maintain that competitive, driven, perfectionistic culture during the pandemic is exacting an exceptionally high price on our well-being.

Everything about pandemic-school takes more time, so teachers have modified their curricula accordingly, probably more than once. Yet in spite of certain allowances, the expectations for content mastery, task completion, and overall productivity are deeply ingrained habits of mind. The idea that context, process and care should supercede academic rigor throws a proverbial wrench in the works. *We don't want our students to fall behind. We need to remain competitive!*

Fall behind whom? Competitive for what? Consider the value proposition of sending a child to an independent school right now, today, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. Is it really about making sure that student doesn't fall behind in Math? While it's tempting to believe that, at this moment, keeping students up to speed in a given subject area is actually within teachers' control, the reality is, it's not. When teachers are exhausted, and when students start turning off their cameras, learning Algebra II stops.

It's what our parents expect! Contending with anxious (or demanding parents) who are worried about the school's program is not a new challenge. However, there is a specific need right now to shift parental expectations about what school is, and can be, during the ongoing pandemic. "Learning" may look different than what parents expect, because it must tilt towards what is socially and emotionally most meaningful to students right now. Why? Because making whatever they learn relevant and meaningful is the way we are going to keep students engaged in the months ahead.



Here are some examples.

- The 7th grade unit on spoken word poetry may lead to ongoing, extended immersion into the social justice issues that matter most to middle school students at the moment.
- The experience of 3rd graders who have lost and/or are missing grandparents may become a two-week-long exploration of the lives of elders, across all subjects, culminating in a tribute song that is recorded and shared with families.
- High school science class may veer into an extended study of the impact of sleep on mood and level of functioning, with students designing the study and using themselves and their teacher as subjects.

There is good news. This is an opportunity to imbed Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into the curriculum in exactly the manner it's meant to be, not as an add-on, but as a driving force of intellectual inquiry.¹ We must reassure parents that during pandemic school, if their child is practicing loud, imperfect, emotional poems in the mirror, or repeatedly looking through old family photo albums or even sleeping till noon in the service of science, these are all opportunities for learning.



4. The Fragmentation of Community

Independent schools know the value of community. Along with a shared sense of purpose, close relationships between and among students, faculty, staff, administrators, families, and alums are the heart center of a private school. Fortifying the connectedness of your community, and prioritizing care for your students casts floodlights on what independent schools are uniquely positioned to offer right now. **This is what “a superior educational experience” looks like in a pandemic.**

In a recent 2 hour Re-Set School workshop for LGBTQ+ educators and allies, the co-facilitators shared very little content. What this group of 40 people needed was a structured opportunity to reflect, share, listen and be together. Ideas for helping students and practical strategies for addressing challenges were amply shared throughout the session (i.e. the work got done), but the real value was in the time spent being together, listening to and supporting one another.

Right now, school leaders must prioritize bringing people together, not to accomplish more tasks, but to help everyone recognize the reality of this shared moment, to pay

¹I highly recommend Lauren Porosoff and Jonathan Weinstein's book, [Two For One Teaching: Connection Instruction to Student Values](#).

attention to each other, to move deeper into making meaning and clarifying purpose. Leaders must create and hold space, both literally and figuratively, to stabilize and sustain community. **The superior educational experience you promise to deliver depends entirely on the wellness and resilience of your personnel.**

Surviving the Storm and Beyond

In a recent on-line forum [Leadership for a Changing World](#), Margaret Wheatley suggested that the skills we have focused on in leadership development over the years, such as systems thinking, conflict resolution, giving/receiving feedback are not adequate in this challenge of a lifetime. Administrators, teachers, and staff are equipped with plenty of skills, but it is a robust, determined capacity to care for one another, as a strategy for moving forward, that is essential in this time of drawn-out pandemic-school.

Think of it this way. We are all experiencing the same storm, yet we are in different boats. Based on your adult wellness assessment², you determine that it is time to pull into the nearest port to re-supply and task your crew with retrofitting your vessel for the next leg of this voyage. Give people permission to **(1)** center wellness for all, **(2)** determine what programming is worthwhile and sustainable over the next 4 weeks, and **(3)** design the plan.

How many days in port? Share with parents the need for a new course of action, be frank about the serious condition of the crew, and clarify the value proposition of your community wellness focus. **Then take two school days to design and transition to what's next.** This is a strategy for the immediate survival of your school, and, it also builds resilience for the long voyage of uncertainty that lies ahead of us.

Relationships are all there is. Healthy change requires respect for and full engagement with people. Community is the most effective locus of change.

—Margaret Wheatley

²[Re-Set School](#) can help you conduct a wellness assessment.

Are we really going to take two days in port?!

Yes. Adopting this strategy and taking this time sends multiple messages to your constituents.

First, you are paying attention to and caring about the true condition of your community. **Second**, you believe that changing course now will allow you to best serve your students (and their families) in the uncertain months ahead. **Third**, you have faith in your personnel; they are exactly the right people to create and execute the next iteration of pandemic school. And **last**, you will not leave port without a sturdy keel in place, which is a cohesive, collaborative and healthy version of the faculty and staff you are holding right now.

Holding is a more obscure and seldom celebrated facet of leadership than vision, but no less important. And when crises hit, it becomes essential. In groups whose leaders can hold, mutual support abounds, work continues, and a new vision eventually emerges. When leaders cannot hold, and we can't hold each other, anxiety, anger, and fragmentation ensue.

— Gianpiero Petriglieri, Harvard Business Review. *The Psychology Behind Effective Crisis Leadership*

Re-Set School



Through consultancy, training, speaking, research and collaborative projects Re-Set School helps independent schools navigate the ever-changing landscape of PreK-12 education. During the Covid-19 pandemic Re-Set is committed to helping schools sustain safe and inclusive learning communities. Beyond the pandemic we are dedicated to growing the capacity of educators and institutions for living humanely and equitably on the planet and serving in this complex, multicultural world.

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Re-Set School, PO Box 961, Northampton, MA 01061