

RETHINK CHANGE:

Key Education Influencer Perspectives on the Year Ahead



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Innovation, adaptation, and success aren't the result of a single windfall, aha! moment, or sudden breakthrough, but rather a continuous process that is both incremental and replicable.

—Peter Baron

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INTRODUCTION

We're getting pretty good at expecting the unexpected these days, putting our growth mindsets to the test nearly every day. At Blackbaud, we've been inspired by the K-12 school communities we serve as we've helped them navigate through unprecedented challenges and emerge with renewed purpose and energy. We've taken this opportunity to gather some of the leading voices in K-12 education for their perspectives on how schools can and should rethink change to advance their institutions, from approaching technology adoption to grappling with some of the most challenging social issues of the day.

We'd like to thank the luminaries who generously contributed to this eBook. We know you'll appreciate their insights as you consider change in your own organization.

HOMA TAVANGAR & WILL RICHARDSON

Founders, Big Questions Institute



What will you remember from 2020? Or better yet, what might you like to forget?

The pandemic? Social and racial upheaval? Unending, rancorous political campaigns? Economic suffering for some, record stock market windfalls for others? An alphabet breaking number of hurricanes?

The list of memorable events of the past year feels endless, few of which are smile inducing. No doubt, few of us are sorry to see this year pass into the history books.

For educators in particular, this year will not be remembered fondly. A forced march to online teaching and learning, endless Zoom sessions, weeks and months without a daily dose of live student interaction, stressed parents and kids, and an unending sense of fatigue. Our idea of how to do “education” has been forever altered by the events of 2020. And from pre-school to grad school, the effects will be long lasting and profound.

But it’s worth asking, what really changed? Were the fundamental purposes and practices of school reimagined in any real way? And if so, were those changes driven by a coherent new vision for teaching and learning? With some distance, we may well look back on this past year as one of the most profound learning experiences of our lives. Many teachers quickly became more nimble with technology. We embraced the discomfort of change and navigated new challenges by the day. We learned fast and iterated in the moment, and more. So much of our response to the pandemic was awe-inspiring.

But let’s be clear: 2020 wasn’t just a disruption. It was a reckoning. It was a year that forced us to stare down our demons in society as well as in education. These include:

- The very real inequities of the educational system, both in terms of access to technology as well as upward mobility through the system, and the uneven distribution of power throughout.
- The equally real absence of social and economic justice for large swaths of our students and the global population.
- The growing irrelevance of a curriculum and a pedagogy that continues to emphasize a “just in case” approach to learning instead of the “just in time” approach that was used in profound ways by teachers and leaders around the world to navigate the crisis.
- The increasing evidence that we are functionally illiterate in our ability to discern truth from lies, fact from opinion, and reality from fantasy in an inter-connected, networked world where creating information is almost as easy as consuming it.

These “truths” and others like them represent the real challenges that demand our attention now, and they should frame the focus for the required change conversations that we engage in in our school

communities. We should not plan to go “back to normal” or seek a “new normal” as much as prepare to exist in an extended period of “no normal” where change is abrupt and constant. Instead of a focus on improving traditional academic metrics, questions and discussions around how to more effectively center equity, sustainability, literacy, and well-being in schools must now be the driving force behind writing a new story of education and learning into the future.

How do we do that? Given the reality that institutional change is excruciatingly difficult, how do we think and talk about change in ways that focus on the real weaknesses of the school experience given the current realities of the world and what appears to be an increasingly uncertain future?

Those are key questions because the change work we must embrace in this moment has little to do with getting “better” at what we’ve always done and everything to do with re-envisioning our purpose and practice. So, briefly, here are some starting points:

First, we must work to develop and embrace a shared, coherent, community-wide definition of learning. After all, learning is the fundamental goal of schools and education, and no attempts to reimagine school will sustain without being anchored to a clear sense of what that is and how it happens. Then, take every practice, every structure and ask “Does this contribute to learning as we have defined it?” You might be surprised at how much needs to change just in that context.

Next, we must ask “What aspects of the current school experience are sacred? What do we want to make sure doesn’t change as we think about the future?” Clarifying what’s most important will inform your greater sense of purpose as a school community.

Third, we must make sure everyone has a twenty-first century perspective on the world that informs their conversations about change. In our work, we’ve found that generally, schools and school communities are not in tune with the larger, meta changes and contexts occurring around them right now. The outcomes for which schools were originally built are increasingly irrelevant when preparing students to thrive in complexity and constant change. Take time to build the capacity of teachers, students, parents, and leaders to engage in change conversations with a modern lens that sees the world as it is, not as it was.

Finally, be willing to be “radical,” as in pulling up old thinking and practice by the root to reimagine them for the new realities we face. A good start is to think about the dispositions that are most powerful to bring to our work in schools, like empathy, kindness, belonging, hope, and wellness. Then ask, for example, “What would happen if we applied ‘radical kindness’ to our thinking about assessments?” We’ve found that honest conversations around questions like those can provide a great way to get out of old mindsets about schooling. So, we’ve gamified the process. Access our free RRAGE (Random Radical Acts Generator for Education) cards at bigquestions.institute/rrage.

As we navigate through a period that has interchangeably been called a reckoning, a rupture, a crisis and more, our responsibility as educators is to wade through the noise and seek the light. How might this crisis help us create a better, more just world? What is the responsibility of our schools in realizing this big question? To realize meaningful change, let’s consider what is worth carrying through the portal. Our task is to choose wisely, to choose a new narrative of school and education that we can absolutely fight for in the way it serves children, communities, and learning. That means summoning up the courage not just to engage in navigating this unique, fraught moment in human history. It also means having the courage to leave so much of that history behind.

DR. ASHLEY CROSS

Director of Membership, Association of Technology Leaders in Independent Schools



Innovation in the face of adversity throughout the pandemic has been astounding. During a monumental challenge, schools have reconfigured to new norms of student-centeredness. It's now time to reflect. What worked well? What did we learn through the pandemic? As a school leader, what changes in pedagogy do we want to encourage long term? What support does our faculty need right now?

One area to focus on moving forward is cyber safety and data privacy. If your faculty signed up for free applications during the pandemic, reviewing and managing the myriad of tools can be a difficult but important step. Moving forward, create a policy for vetting apps that ensures student privacy is a top priority. Schools typically invest in cybersecurity insurance, and when they do, they are committed to upholding tenants of the contract. A best practice is to establish a task force for cybersecurity that creates a crisis response plan. Members of this task force often include your communications director, technology director, business officer, head of school, and a faculty member. Schools are a prime target for cyber incidents that disrupt learning and tarnish the reputation of a school. If you need a place to start, check out ATLIS' Cybersecurity Recommendations. Lean on the expertise of your peers and the associations where thought leadership is happening.

Regarding change moving forward, there is a principle from SCRUM that espouses distributed leadership, and it has a direct application to schools. Changing team performance is exponentially greater than making individuals better. Don't over plan and wait to see if something works; instead, utilize pilot programs. Move forward quickly to find out if things are effective. At the end of a project, be sure to reflect. Consider how it worked, and what made it go well or not go well.

As you move forward, keep your focus on what people need. Invest in your people. It can be tempting to throw money at problems in the form of equipment and technology, but don't forget to bring along your staff. At the end of the day, people can advance your mission and carry you into the future.

Last, but certainly not least, be intentional. Leaders need time to gather with peers. Make time to plan strategically, take care of yourself, and make space for your own professional growth. Schools across the country are making amazing strides. There are things to learn from each other. We're better together!



While the pandemic highlighted many things, the most notable has been the dedication of teachers, students, parents, staff, and administrators to the great cause of education. The world is a better place when every person reaches their full potential. The promise of the potential impact on every student, and therefore the world, is what motivates many to dedicate their lives to the education field.

It is that same dedication that requires us to think differently about what our educational systems need to evolve towards. Every student can have access to a diverse set of technologies and educational resources, clear paths to opportunity and curriculum constructed to enable talent development. As education leaders, we need to realize that we are the change agents responsible for creating the future.

We also need to think differently about collaboration as a game changer for advancing individual districts as well as collective advancement. More effective collaboration on the challenges and solutions is needed. Individual districts or schools do not have the resources to significantly advance education on their own, regardless of size. If districts work in partnership to invent the future of education and put educational technology infrastructure in place, they can learn from each other and accelerate progress among the many, not the few. These partnerships can extend to higher education as well. The pandemic highlights the unevenness in terms of having enabling technologies and instructional practices in place. Collaboration among institutions can accelerate a more effective EdTech industry by guiding suppliers to create better products that work together for the purposes that educators seek.

We need to think differently about cooperative investment for collaboration to be more than just an interesting exchange of ideas. The role of state and district leaders is to put in place the “systems” that enable the dedicated individuals “on the front lines” to help every student. Collaborative investment in foundational technologies gets us to the future faster. In many industries there are very significant collaborative investments that lift all participants. We can do the same in the education sector. Investments today are spread thin, creating uneven points of light that don’t have a systemic impact. Points of light are good, but the future we seek is more like a power grid that enables all participants. We can work together on investments that have a clear return both today and tomorrow across the entire sector.

I feel that while the pandemic highlighted many things, it emphasizes how our education systems must evolve to meet the needs of the future and that effective leadership, collaboration, and investment are the keys to going beyond what is possible today. I believe that as educational leaders we can think differently to enable a widely available, sustainable technology ecosystem for education that supports and accelerates the innovation in education that the future depends upon.

BRENDAN SCHNEIDER

Founder & President, SchneiderB Media



I was amused recently after viewing a t-shirt advertised on Facebook that says “2020” and rates it with 1 out of 5 stars. The narrative comment simply states, “Would not recommend.” While 2020 certainly was memorable for many bad reasons that we would all love to forget soon, I tend to focus on the opportunity presented, mainly due to COVID-19.

For years, I’ve written about schools’ necessity to adopt an inbound marketing strategy to recruit students. The urgency for schools to shift their marketing strategy, though, hasn’t been there, aside from schools that needed to make the change due to dwindling inquiries or a school with the internal expertise to make the transition.

The lack of urgency changed in mid-March of 2020 as COVID-19 began to shut the country down and change the way our prospective families engage with the world around them. These changes were always coming in full transparency, but schools have been slow to accept or acknowledge those changes. All COVID-19 did was accelerate those changes faster than anyone could have anticipated.

Due to lock-downs, virtual school, and an accelerated reliance on the internet, schools have an opportunity, and those that seize this change now will benefit significantly in the years ahead.

To embrace the change that is already here, I would recommend that a school learn about and begin implementing inbound marketing, which includes:

1. Developing personas
2. Identifying keywords
3. Conducting search engine optimization on your website
4. Creating content
5. Using social media to promote that content

The final key that weaves through these steps is to create opportunities for prospective families to convert on a school’s website in ways that are in addition to an inquiry form.

While 2020 might be worthy of a 1 out of 5-star rating, those schools that begin to embrace inbound marketing will help 2021 get off to a 5 out of 5-star rating.

GREG BAMFORD

Co-Founder, Leadership + Design



In Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises," one character asks another: "How did you go bankrupt?" He responds: "Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly."

I'm reminded of this moment when I think about the wave of change that came crashing over schools in 2020. Yes, things changed suddenly—but the changes we need to make in response have been with us for a while now.

What should schools do as they design themselves for a post-COVID environment? Here are four imperatives that have been with us for a while, but became even more urgent this year.

Reset your organizational thermostat around the pace of learning. Edu-thinkers have told us for years that disruptive change is coming. Technology specialists have been popping into classrooms, encouraging us to learn new tools. And even before COVID, organizations like Global Online Academy or One Schoolhouse were showing us the potential of online collaboration with geographically dispersed classroom cohorts. But for many schools, 2020 was the year we had no choice but to leap forward. We found new ways to embed a cycle of professional learning in our cultures. We spent more time sharing emerging best practices and lessons learned. We built a new, higher expectation for EdTech proficiency. Let's not go backwards now! This is an opportunity to embrace what J. Ross Peters calls a "progress culture." The expectation that all teachers have a strong baseline of technological knowledge and that all teachers engage with a professional learning community, should be maintained in a post-COVID world.

Make in-person learning environments more richly human, tactile, and experiential. Even before COVID, the best schools were integrating real-world learning in the core of their academic programs, whether using the mantra of project-based learning, design thinking, expeditionary learning, or place-based learning. But while educators like to mourn what we've lost in the move to remote learning, we didn't lose as much as we should have. Many in-person classrooms lacked intentional focus on building relationships and fostering emotional intelligence, relied too much on direct instruction, or lacked tactile connections to the real world.

When we return to an unmasked, in-person learning environment, let's commit to the kind of engaging experiences that leverage the human immediacy of in-person interaction. Let's design experiences that are tactile and relevant. Let's promote and teach for emotional intelligence and collaboration skills, rather than putting students in groups and assuming they'll teach themselves.

Change business models to invest in relationships, experiences, and agility over facilities and other fixed costs. Even before COVID, models like Minerva University were emphasizing powerful learning experiences with no fixed campus. Rather than directing money to large capital investments, they

provided a variety of temporary basecamps for students to learn around the world. The savings funds global travel—and a radically lower price point. What has your school stopped doing this year? What pieces do you miss, and what was time to stop doing anyway? This has been a year to strip down our programs. That space creates room for new practices, but it also creates space for healthier financial models and increased educational access.

Hold ourselves accountable for building antiracist schools. 2020 was a year when racial injustice came back to the headlines, and our students and communities are holding us more accountable to making progress toward racial justice. But while the attention some are giving systemic racism may be new, racism itself is not. Educators need to hold our institutions accountable for continued progress even when the spotlight on racism recedes. And white educators like me need to hold ourselves more accountable as individuals: to be willing to be uncomfortable, to not be the center of the discussion, and to hold ourselves accountable to advancing antiracist programs, systems, and cultures.

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SUE CUNNINGHAM

President & CEO, Council for Advancement and Support of Education



At the outset of the pandemic, CASE began a series of podcasts. One featured a headmaster of a school in the UK founded in 1382. He said something that has framed our thinking since then: This [pandemic] is not ‘unprecedented’. Because for his school, having weathered over six hundred years including previous plagues, it was not unprecedented.

The lesson was to think differently—to trust that we will come out the other side wiser. We have witnessed the resilience of our members, our students, our families, and our communities throughout this crisis. However, at CASE we have sought to serve members who are experiencing real difficulty.

Schools have adjusted and made rapid changes underscoring their resilience and agility. This proves we are capable of making meaningful change to our operations, strategies and practices. Here are three areas ripe for change:

1. Focus on the student experience, inclusion, and belonging.

From an advancement perspective, we are seeing a renewed focus on the student experience, with advancement leaders engaging communities to support those needs, and communities responding. This is mission-critical now, especially with the urgency brought by the important Black Lives Matter movement and the rapid demographic changes in our sector. It is an imperative. We see progress in creating a sense of belonging and inclusion across our populations and developing communities from a distance, for example, connecting alumni with students locally, while students are studying from home, in the case of boarding schools.

2. Commit to integrated advancement.

We see an increased importance in ensuring advancement teams are functioning together across disciplines—marketing, communications, alumni relations, fundraising, and increasingly enrollment management—taking an integrated approach to ensure schools are leveraging staff resources toward common goals. We find that in independent school advancement, professional staff sometimes begin in one area like admissions, and then move into another, like development, or marketing, or fundraising. An integrated approach especially helps small shops where advancement staff do many things at once. It also helps the entire school team understand the value of and their place in advancing the institution.

3. Stop the facilities arms race!

One of the greatest fundraising needs we are hearing from our members is for financial aid and student support which has become a high priority in order to keep current students and attract new students, particularly in schools that are heavily tuition dependent. For advancement, this is where fundraising for current use and for unrestricted endowment is so important. This type of philanthropy

enables leaders to apply the funds to the most important strategic uses—from direct student financial aid, to supporting targeted initiatives recruiting a more diverse faculty and staff pool, to vital work that supports your mission.

Living through and emerging from the pandemic marks a period of true innovation in education. Around the sector, schools pivoted to online. This happened worldwide, at places where it had not even been considered. And it happened overnight.

While we will return to place-based education as the norm, we have proven that connections, real connections, can occur in other ways. We have opened the door to **THINKING DIFFERENTLY** and we must not close that door. Our communities are dispersed, but our community need not be.



PETER BARON

Chief Member Relations Officer, Enrollment Management Association



If I told you a year ago our entire industry would rethink everything about how we teach and learn, work and play, recruit and enroll all in a matter of days or weeks, you would have looked at me like I was crazy. But not only have we shifted the way we do things this year, many of us are also discovering that we can keep building. Over the course of the last nine months, we've spoken with more than 45 educators, school leaders, and industry luminaries on our *Enrollment Spectrum Podcast*. Their conversations have described transformations, struggles, successes, and hopes, and as I reflect on what we've heard, a clear theme has emerged.

Innovation, adaptation, and success aren't the result of a single windfall, aha! moment, or sudden breakthrough, but rather a continuous process that is both incremental and replicable. When Baylor School formed partnerships with regional organizations, one of the outcomes was an onsite research lab. When Providence Country Day School asked hard questions about their tuition and their academic program one of the outcomes was an online program for international students. Neither Baylor nor Providence Country Day could have predicted the disruption COVID-19 would cause but both, it turns out, were prepared. Baylor School pivoted their research lab to provide COVID-19 testing and a new revenue stream. Providence Country Day scaled up its virtual program to include domestic students outside of their normal recruitment areas. In each case, neither innovation was a direct reaction to COVID-19 but their boards and school leaders were ready to shift because of a culture of adaptability and innovation with a side of entrepreneurship and a sprinkle of good fortune.

What binds Providence Country Day, Baylor, and so many other examples together is actually a simple recipe: combine support from leadership, a faculty and staff culture that supports experimentation, the permission to try new things, and a readiness to scale new initiatives up or down as dictated by opportunity.

What is remarkable about this moment is every school in the world has been forced into this posture. Certainly, it feels disorientating and unsettling but it also sets up for change in the future that we may not see just yet. We can predict neither the threats nor opportunities that the future may bring, but adopting institutional habits that prepare us to see opportunities, try new things with experimentation, stop doing what's not working, and scale up what proves valuable will help us grow regardless of the hurdles that lie ahead.

DONNA OREM

President, National Association of Independent Schools



As schools work to recover from a tumultuous year, how can we also reinvent and innovate?

This question, which I've been tackling with the leaders of NAIS independent schools, is part of a larger challenge for all leaders in this moment in time: to not only manage the many changes facing them but also to lead through them.

I know that the first “ask” implicit in my question—recovery—is no small feat. School leaders have an enormous task at hand helping students recover from the very real academic, social, and emotional impact of the pandemic and the economic crisis. In addition, they need to attend to their own recovery; they have faced challenges from every angle of their work throughout this exhausting year.

And yet, I think we are all starting, collectively, to see the “light ahead.” This moment in time—as fraught as it is—is also energized by the possibility that we can make real change. This possibility inspires us to do better, to rethink our practices and our systems.

With this energy and inspiration to bolster us, how should we approach innovation and reinvention as we plan for 2021 and beyond?

First, I think it's important to better understand innovation itself. As Greg Satell writes in Harvard Business Review's “The 4 Types of Innovation and the Problems They Solve,” there are as many types of innovation as there are problems to solve. In “normal” times, we spend most of our innovation energy in an area he calls “sustaining innovation,” taking steps to do what we do better. But the COVID crisis is anything but normal. The pandemic has accelerated many forces affecting schools like declining birth rates, speed of adoption of emerging technologies, and the equity gap. And the millennial generation has been further damaged economically by COVID, putting even more pressure on schools to rethink their tuitions and overall business models. Given some of these landscape changes, other approaches to innovation may be necessary.

Second, it's critical to embrace a dual perspective. In the midst of a crisis, it's easy to fall into the trap of focusing only on short-term needs—today's fire to be put out. But we simply must keep one eye fixed on the equally important long view. Why? Our faculty and staff need us to lay out a clear path forward—the near-and long-term paths. What's more, for the legacy of our schools, we must take the opportunities this crisis presents to make important long-term changes in how we operate our schools, educate our students, and correct social injustices.

Finally, leaders should consider what part of a leadership skill set to rely on in this moment of great change. Which characteristics will allow them to embrace the opportunities that exist in the change? The Deloitte report *The Heart of Resilient Leadership: Responding to COVID-19* lays out five qualities that



allow leaders to thrive during crises. Resilient leaders, the report states, (1) “design from the heart... and the head.” They (2) “put the mission first” and (3) “aim for speed over elegance.” They also (4) “own the narrative,” that is, they are transparent about current realities while also painting a compelling picture of the future. Finally, they (5) “embrace the long view,” anticipating new business models and opportunities for innovation.

School leaders are experts in agility; helping children learn requires educators to practice flexibility all the time. This skill will serve schools well in the months ahead as we work to recover and reinvent education.

WILLIAM BULLARD

Founder, EdChanges



The dreadful year of 2020, with its pandemic, social upheaval, electoral chaos, and ravaged business sectors, is reshaping society. This turmoil has had powerful effects on education, creating makeshift new models of teaching, learning, socialization, and more. Like virtually every set of institutions, K-12 schools have been forced, as Apple suggested, to “think different.”

Business legend Jack Welch famously advocated: “Change, before you have to.” That ship has unfortunately sailed for independent schools. Few schools have addressed the strategic reality: change is here, now. Private education is being roiled by demographic, societal, financial, competitive, and global forces, and independent schools are already feeling the effects.

Many solutions to these issues are beyond my capabilities. However, I believe strongly in the power of innovative, targeted marketing to transform opportunities for independent schools. These three types of marketing are among the best-suited to drive positive change for K-12 schools:

- **Strategic marketing:** I moved into school marketing in 2012 after a career in leading-edge business marketing. One of my first observations was the lack of rigorous thinking about marketing. This remains a big drawback for schools, as many communications directors see weekly newsletters, website updates, social media posts, and Facebook ads as their primary focus. However, while these media are important, they rarely address critical strategic questions: What is your vision and mission? Do you understand what your local constituents and prospects think of your brand? How have you segmented your target audience and what is your unique value proposition for each audience? Only when you do the hard work to fully understand these strategic factors can you develop your marketing campaigns.
- **Data-driven marketing** is another powerful tool to drive change. Though analyzing your newsletter’s open and click rates, page views of your website, and sources of fundraising is necessary, it is not sufficient. Schools must regularly dig deeper to assess what topics get the most engagement on your site and social media, the time readers spend on your videos, and which constituents are contributing to your community and using their influence to persuade prospective families. Data is more than just numbers—it also includes the demographics you use to choose optimal prospects, paths down the admission funnel, keywords for SEO, and hundreds more cases.
- **Personalization:** We live in a personalized world! Devices track your movie and music preferences, food choices and destinations, and browsing habits, while retargeting ads follow you around the web. It’s been known for decades that smart personalized marketing increases response. Admissions officers understand the strengths and goals of each prospective student. However,

few schools are capitalizing on this sea change in marketing; they rarely leverage the personalizing opportunities of mainstay media like their email, website, social media, or video. Even fewer schools have discovered technology—or even old-fashioned elbow grease—to develop personas (profiles) of their prospective students and build micro-targeted communications from inquiry through matriculation. Personalization is a change agent-in-waiting for the right institutions.

There are many avenues to achieve change for K-12 schools. Several of these ideas to improve your admissions, retention, and fundraising can be achieved by rethinking your marketing goals and strategies versus increasing your marketing investment.

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for the right institutions.

JEFFREY SHIELDS

FASAE, CAE, President and CEO of the National Business Officers Association



Twenty years into the 21st century, the PK-12 independent school community has faced two major national crises: first the Great Recession, from 2007-9, and now the COVID-19 pandemic. As immense as the pandemic's challenges are, it pays to remember that the issues exposed in the earlier crisis are still with us today and will continue to impact how we innovate in years to come.

Independent schools experienced a golden age prior to the Great Recession. Over a 10-year period, tuitions rose 30%; overall staffing rose 32%; student-to-teacher ratios were getting smaller; financial aid dollars rose 38%; and school enrollments rose 20%. The recession changed our operations and outlook remarkably fast. Enrollments declined, demand for financial aid increased, endowments sank underwater, and giving declined as well, creating paralysis within the community.

Many schools made great progress toward partial or full recovery between 2010 and 2020, but as a whole, the recession exposed many challenges associated with the traditional independent school business model. As schools became even more tuition- and fundraising-dependent, the gap between operating expenses and operating revenues widened. Thus in recent years, well before the virus surfaced in the U.S. and elsewhere around the world, many schools explored new business models and operational practices.

None of us who work in or for independent schools can effectively address in a silo the complex problems that our schools face. At the National Business Officers Association (NBOA), our work often focuses on strengthening the business officer's partnerships with the head of school and board of trustees, but we emphasize other essential partnerships as well—with enrollment management, advancement/development, and academic leadership among others. If the school business officer didn't already have a strong relationship with these colleagues, the pandemic response has likely helped individuals work more closely together. Making a concerted effort to foster these relationships will improve school leadership and benefit the operations and financial stability of the entire school community.

With these relationships in place, our schools will be prepared to face the next 10 years—and consider how we will need to evolve. Will the coming years hold greater competition? Smaller enrollments? New staffing and compensation models? Greater emphasis on online learning? More remote work? Enhanced use of technology for business office functions? Smaller physical plants? We cannot be sure.

We can be sure, however, that our schools will not return to the status quo of pre-pandemic operations. Too many weaknesses have been exposed, in both good and bad ways. We have proven that we can rethink long-standing practices, and we learned how resilient we can be. We know we

can tackle big challenges and operate our schools in completely different ways—with success—on practically a moment’s notice.

From NBOA’s perspective, when considering the “next normal,” the following issues rise to the top:

- The pandemic provided a stark reminder of our heavy reliance on tuition revenue. Schools need to reexamine opportunities for new revenue sources. These include leveraging their professional staff, campuses, facilities, land and other available assets to adapt their business model for a post pandemic future.
- Now that we have trained the vast majority of school faculty to function in an online environment, how will this type of learning be incorporated into our program delivery? Schools may have opportunities to rethink class size and faculty FTE, both of which significantly impact a school’s ability to financially sustain itself in the long-term.
- Cash reserves are top of mind, and leaders are examining expense management. The cash we have on hand and otherwise accessible to us has taken on greater importance, and schools should be exploring their cash management policies and practices to help ensure financial resources are available if and when they are critically necessary.
- Many schools have a crisis response plan, but these were likely designed around a natural disaster, cyber threat or act of terrorism. It is unlikely that the plans prepared us for the physical separation of teachers, students and administrators for months on end. Crisis response plans and teams are critically important, but schools must remain flexible. Communicating transparently has been key to supporting the community and conveying our value proposition.
- Many schools are rethinking how to best deploy staff by leveraging automation and remote work. Many schools have developed a different point of view on remote work that may increase satisfaction among administrative colleagues and direct reports to the business office at little to no additional expense.
- Redefining our value proposition will likely impact how we think about our physical plant. We may invest in it differently and rely more heavily on creating vibrant learning communities. It’s been underscored that schools are not really made of bricks and mortar but rather the relationships of the community.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has been unlike anything we in the independent school community have encountered in our careers, we can use lessons learned from both the past year and a decade before to grow stronger and lay a more sustainable future for our school communities. With strong relationships, an open mind and awareness of key financial issues, we can successfully prepare for both the knowns and the unknowns ahead.



To really rethink change, schools must seriously contemplate the ways in which change impacts parents. Presumably the purpose of change is to improve the educational experience. That, in turn, will have positive impact on enrollment, which is the lifeline of schools. If change is perceived negatively, enrollment is at risk. As the decision-maker about which school children attend, parents are critical to the success of change initiatives. To truly improve, schools must see parents as their partners in change. Here are some ways they can do that.

- **Let empathy rule.** There are so many possible reasons for change—efficiency, productivity, improving outcomes—and most frequently parents are not at the root cause. But they are almost always impacted by change—whether it affects what they do or what they think. Schools need to practice empathy by putting themselves in the shoes of parents and imagining what parents will think and feel about intended changes. Using that lens may alter plans for change, shift the evaluation of intended change or it might lead to better ways of managing change.
- **Be pragmatic.** Maybe a school didn't prioritize empathy or maybe its empathetic process reached the wrong conclusion. If change is being met negatively by parents, its chances of success diminish strongly. In the face of opposition, many schools dig in and explain to parents that they are incapable of understanding the true benefit of change. Smart schools are resilient and listen and make changes to their proposed change.
- **Plan to communicate.** As we discovered in the last year, in times of change you can't communicate too much. Parents need to understand what precipitated the need for change, how change will impact their lives and the lives of their children, what is being done to assess the success of change, and what future change can be expected. That requires a near constant stream of communication, all developed proactively but implemented with the agility to adjust to reactions.
- **Demonstrate success.** Change will always be met with uncertainty. Even exciting change like getting a new computer or an iPad comes with trepidation. The best way to melt away reservations is to provide evidence—both quantitative and qualitative—that success is having impact. The reality is that the imperative to empirically establish success is as critical to the process of change as it is to the way change will be received. The data that is being used to assess the success of an initiative is the same data that should be presented to parents. Compelling data combined with genuine testimonials will always be convincing.
- **Align change with brand.** Change for simply the sake of change is always a bad idea. That includes change that is being implemented for only competitive reasons. Change that emanates from a school's mission and aligns with its brand will be more successful—both in terms of its impact and the way it is received. When change seems like a natural extension of parents' experience, they will embrace it.

To improve in the current moment, K–12 schools should rethink change by making it a partnership with parents.

TRAVIS WARREN

President & General Manager, Blackbaud K-12



In almost all aspects of society, from grocery shopping to a doctor's visit and the way we work, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerating technology adoption. A recent survey by the cloud communications company Twilio found that COVID-19 has accelerated digital communications strategies in companies by six year¹. Of course, this is very much true in K-12 education as well. We've seen a dramatic increase in the use and utilization of Blackbaud Learning Management System™ capabilities, such as class topic pages, assignments, and online discussion boards, as well as a massive increase in video uploads, as learning shifted online and then into hybrid modes. And while utilization across all these areas isn't likely to be sustained at current levels, it's safe to say they won't go back to the way they used to be. We're going from a new temporary normal to the next normal. This is school technology leaders to rethink the role of technology at their schools and its impact on both the digital learning and family experience.

A study Blackbaud conducted with YouGov in late Summer showed that family expectations regarding school technology have shifted. Can we imagine returning to a day when assignments are not available online or academic progress isn't available to families on a real-time basis? Today's families, and even the faculty, can't either.

In fact, 71% of families surveyed said that technology for teaching and learning has become more important as a result of the pandemic school experience. Likewise, many educators who received a crash course in educational tools over the last year plan to keep using their favorites to enhance the learning experience for students. Educational technology leaders I speak with confess that despite the circumstances by which it happened, remote learning injected technology-driven innovation into their classrooms. Now, they're working to vet and integrate these tools into their technology stack with consistent access and security standards. It will be fascinating to see how schools emboldened by acceptance of technology introduce bold changes in their approach.

When we look back in history, we'll likely view the COVID-19 pandemic as a turning point in K-12 education. Many schools have already taken giant steps forward in their EdTech capabilities, and 70% of parents want this trend to continue because they've experienced how technology strengthens their partnership with the school.

¹ <https://www.twilio.com/covid-19-digital-engagement-report>

About Blackbaud K-12

Blackbaud Cloud Solutions for K-12 Schools is an integrated total school management solution for K-12 private schools. These solutions, which include Enrollment and Tuition Management, Student and Learning Management (SIS/LMS), Website and Communications, Fund Accounting and Fundraising, can be used school-wide or in just a single office.

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About Blackbaud

Blackbaud (NASDAQ: BLKB) is the world's leading cloud software company powering social good. Serving the entire social good community—nonprofits, foundations, companies, education institutions, healthcare organizations, and individual change agents—Blackbaud connects and empowers organizations to increase their impact through cloud software, services, expertise, and data intelligence. The Blackbaud portfolio is tailored to the unique needs of vertical markets, with solutions for fundraising and relationship management, marketing and engagement, financial management, grant and award management, organizational and program management, social responsibility, payment services, and analytics. Serving the industry for more than three decades, Blackbaud is headquartered in Charleston, South Carolina, and has operations in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. For more information, visit www.blackbaud.com.

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