



Greenwich Leadership Partners

From Financial Sustainability to “Thriveability”: Why We Need to Change the Conversation

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This article is and will likely always be a work in progress. We hope you will build upon our thinking and help us expand, refine and advance this conversation.

Stephanie Rogen

June 26, 2017

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From Financial Sustainability to “Thriveability:” Why We Need to Change the Conversation

I. Shifting the Conversation on Financial Sustainability

I have yet to encounter a single trustee or head of school who does not name financial sustainability as a major priority. It doesn't matter what kind of school it is: boarding or day, urban or rural, new or century-old.

We are all facing this challenge.

Schools that have a significant endowment and deep waitlists are just as concerned as schools that are struggling with onerous debt and low enrollment. Across the educational landscape, schools are plagued by a variety of questions related to the twin problems of securing long-term funding and ensuring access and affordability. What strategies will provide schools with the resources to meet the wide and deep needs of diverse student bodies? Will rising costs make an independent school education ever more out of reach for the vast majority of families?

The “Business as Usual” Conversation

Most schools call us because they want a strategic plan that will drive results for sustainability. They often start by focusing on what we call a “business as usual” financial diagnosis and aim for a standard set of outcomes. Schools want to increase endowment through effective fundraising, increase enrollment with better marketing and admissions efforts, improve student performance with enhanced data collection and teacher evaluation, and identify and build distinctive programs that will attract more students.

While none of these goals and tactics is ill conceived, by primarily focusing on these outcomes, schools essentially end up creating a plan full of strategies to continue doing what the school already does. Boards and heads often hope that, through the strategic planning process, the school will come up with new and creative spins on the usual levers of change. But variations on these themes are ultimately limited, and the conversation quickly becomes boxed into a tidy, familiar frame without much room for true innovation. Independent schools are facing new and unique challenges, but boards, school leaders, and prospective families are sometimes reluctant, or simply lack the context and knowledge, to seek or implement solutions that break from the status quo.

From Sustainability to “Thriveability”

We believe that many schools overlook the right questions in their leap to solutions, and as a result, they address the wrong problems.

The “business as usual” discussion typically focuses on activities that may no longer be adequate if schools are to successfully adapt. The conversation needs to pivot from the standard set of concerns around financial sustainability to a framework that allows us to better identify and tackle the new set of challenges that today’s independent schools face. Often the question is “How can we tweak our business model?” We wonder if there isn’t a better question to ask first.

Our question focuses first on the quality of the student experience. We are shifting our focus from financial sustainability—how can we ensure that the school will survive?—to what we call *thriveability*—how can we ensure that the school is genuinely successful, both now and in the future? The sustainability conversation often omits the single most important question any school must ask: ***what makes our school’s educational experience profoundly relevant, valuable and transformative for students?***

To thrive, boards and school leaders may have to reconsider long-held assumptions about educational philosophy and organizational strategy. Prospective families may share traditional assumptions about what high quality teaching and learning looks like. To thrive, schools may need to pause, diagnose internal obstacles to innovative teaching and learning, and partner with current and prospective families to reconstruct the student experience. Only after asking the right questions can schools emerge with a strong vision, the capacity to execute, a financially rational strategy, and a value proposition that delivers on the student outcomes that matter.

II. The Roots of the Sustainability Crisis: From Teaching to Service Industry

Over the past few decades, independent schools have sought to become more competitive in the marketplace by offering an increasing number of services and programs. While schools and students have reaped a degree of benefit from these changes, related educational expenses have risen much faster than the flatter inflationary climate—and arguably outcomes for students. The transformation of independent schools into educational service institutions has given rise to staggering tuition increases, increased overhead and maintenance, and stressed endowments. In other words: a central irony of the financial challenges that schools currently face is that the problems of today are rooted in strategies that previously helped guide schools to success. What schools could afford to support in a period of growth is now difficult or impossible to maintain; programs, administrators, facilities and infrastructure become an intolerable burden wrought with complexity and often disconnected from mission.

The Evolution of the Independent School Model

For many years, the independent school organizational model was clear, lean, and

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hierarchical, with most lines of authority moving up through one level of administration straight towards the head of school. Accordingly, expenses were manageable, even in trying economic times; tuition increases felt modest; and the model seemed to be sustainable. There was a management logic that resisted abrupt change and assumed ongoing stability.

The educational landscape changed dramatically in the 1980s when schools began to fundraise aggressively and feel the impact of a suddenly more competitive environment. Many schools felt compelled to distinguish themselves, and in order to meet ever-higher parental expectations and emerging student needs, a service model for independent schools emerged.

As the scope of services that independent schools provided greatly expanded, associated costs rose as well. Schools plunged into capital campaigns to construct, expand and renovate facilities. The ratio of non-teaching staff members to students grew substantially, from student support (wellness, inclusion, learning specialists) to external affairs (admissions, advancement, communications, marketing) to operations (human resources, facilities, technology). Finally, administrative salaries increased dramatically: heads of school were suddenly making substantial six-figure salaries as boards began to refashion the position as the chief executive officer of a business rather than the leader of a teaching faculty.

Meanwhile, enrollment felt strong, endowments increased, budgets were balanced—sometimes with surpluses!—so naturally, tuitions rose. Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and trustees got comfortable with this new and exciting school model. In other words: this new institutional approach seemed to be working. As schools faced the challenge of [standing out from peer institutions](#), they were able to find a solution through expanding their services and programs. Only in retrospect is it easy to recognize that these evolutions would eventually threaten financial sustainability.

The Challenges of the Financial Crisis

When the recession hit its depths in 2008 and 2009, independent school confidence was understandably rattled, regardless of a school's resources, status, or admissions profile. Schools saw applications fall, contributions to annual and capital campaigns drop, and investment returns challenged. In many cases, schools scaled back on new hiring, allowed attrition to reduce faculty and staff, and lowered or froze salaries and contributions to retirement plans.

As trustees and senior administrators tackled the difficult cost-saving measures that the financial crisis necessitated, school leaders began to consider the larger question of sustainability. While schools certainly sensed that the financial and programmatic approach that had governed the last quarter-century was threatened, they could not see a way to change the model. This was in part because a sweeping reconceptualization of the financial picture seemed to be without precedent. Schools had always endured various financial stresses and challenges, but nearly all seemed to survive, albeit with occasional evolutionary

changes (e.g. moving from single sex to co-educational, reducing or adding a grade, or reconceiving the school's mission). As such, despite concern about fiduciary operations, schools generally implemented short-term reductions rather than dramatic strategy overhauls.

The Present: “Solutions” That Don’t Solve Problems

By 2012, most austerity measures put into place during the recession were either abandoned or eased. Tuitions increased, faculty and staff returned to full compensation and benefits, and five-year budget plans showed steady annual growth. Further, most schools created their budgets showing continued rises in spending several percentage points higher than inflation, making independent education an outlier in the marketplace.

Of course, to balance those budget projections, what did schools do? They created long-range budgets that had steady tuition increases and showed admission stability pretty much in perpetuity. That is the way it was always done, but naturally there was a problem: the budget predictions were often disconnected from the shifts in demographics and admissions. Boards became alarmed.

The only way to balance the budget was to “steal” from the endowment—and many schools are currently doing just that. Unlike the business and for-profit community, traditional non-profit schools opted not to find ways to reduce program, cut staff, or flatten tuition increases as any of those “solutions” might signal a sort of death spiral weakness from which the school might never recover. Many schools have also increasingly tapped into the international market as a stopgap measure, but the law of diminishing returns has started to emerge in this strategy as well.

Many independent schools are following a path that may prove to be unsustainable. Schools are ever on the hunt for more funding to ensure that they have the resources necessary to support their services, but at the same time, tuition hikes have made schools increasingly unaffordable for families. The solutions that worked in previous eras—expansion of services to gain a competitive advantage, temporary cutbacks to weather a recession—address different problems than the challenges that today's schools face. Instead of trying slightly modified approaches to cost and revenue structures, regaining financial sustainability will require changing the conversation entirely.

III. Tackling “Adaptive Challenges”

So what are we missing? Is sustainability simply an economic problem or a confluence of factors? We think it's the latter—and that all schools are facing a complex, open-ended challenge that requires new thinking. Accordingly, we like to start our conversation with schools by confronting the structural changes and demographic trends underlying our economy and society. We explore the most up-to-date research on learning, workplace talent needs, and what predicts “success” for adults and students. Artificial intelligence, machine learning, global connectedness and demographic shifts are [changing the ways](#) in

which we live, learn, and work. Through these conversations, it becomes clear that the solutions that once “ensured” financial sustainability (increased marketing, capital campaigns) or student success (new administrative hires, physical plant improvements, stand-alone “signature” programmatic additions) no longer suffice because the game has changed. The fundamental answers to what students need to know and be able to do, what the role of the educator is, and how and where learning happens are at an inflection point.

A framework that we use to tackle these new challenges and opportunities comes from [Ron Heifitz](#), founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School, who distinguishes between what he calls technical challenges and adaptive challenges. We offer this framework to school leaders, trustees and faculty/staff members in our engagements. In [The Practice of Adaptive Leadership](#), Heifitz describes a *technical challenge* as a problem that we readily recognize and know how to solve—the work is ensuring effective execution. We know what questions to ask and we have tools and solutions to address the issue. Technical challenges, in other words, have traditionally been at the forefront of the strategic planning process.

The *adaptive challenge* is something quite different: it is the problem we do not recognize or fully understand, for which there are no easy, ready solutions. The adaptive challenge requires us to ask new questions and [reframe problems](#); it requires learning, creativity, and flexible thinking in order to be addressed successfully. This is the arena in which schools now find themselves.

The Three Most Important Adaptive Challenges Facing Schools

We’ve identified three interrelated adaptive challenges as the most important opportunities that schools face today: **talent, deeper learning, and equity in learning**. While all three are worthy topics on their own, their relationship to each other is equally crucial: *If we can get the first one right, the other two are more likely to be addressed successfully.*

1. Talent

Talent and strategic talent development are often the most overlooked and underleveraged assets in schools. Without people ready to design new and better learning experiences, it will be difficult to thrive. And we don’t confine the definition of talent to the paid adults; we include students, parents, alumni, trustees and other community members as well.

How do you know if you have the right people? This is a complex question that deserves its own paper, but the simple answer is to: (1) know your students and what kind of experience and outcomes you want for them; (2) understand the culture that creates conditions for success relative to (1); and (3) define the capacities, mindsets and experiences your faculty, your administrators and your staff need in order to achieve that culture and those outcomes. In any school that thrives, a few key mindsets are critical for *all* adults: a learning orientation, and powerful drive to design for and with students; an openness to change; expertise and passion for either the craft of teaching or their area of functional responsibility, and an authentic willingness to collaborate, initiate, and take ownership for

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problem solving relative to “how school happens.” Does this sound like your typical teacher? Your typical teacher leader? Your CFO or your COO? We know these individuals are in every school – but most schools will need to look carefully at both the individuals and the roles they occupy if they are to take on talent as an adaptive challenge.

Just as the skillsets required to adapt to the changing role of teaching and school leadership are evolving, the expanded skillset required to govern schools is also in flux. Talent is a critical issue for board performance, and ensuring that trustees bring the right composition of expertise, experience and wisdom to the role of governance has never been more important. Trustees who understand the landscape for schools and learning, and who continuously explore and address the challenges of being a school that thrives now and in the future, are core factors for success.

School leadership must also convey a commitment to a new definition of the “talented teacher” to prospective and member families. For a school to thrive, parents must no longer assume that “talented” teachers simply deliver content in engaging ways, but instead appreciate and partner with those who work “backstage” in the classroom, experimenting and collaborating with fellow faculty to create authentic, student-led learning experiences.

Once you have the right conception of talent and people engaged in the right roles, how do you harness these powerful resources and combine them in ways that expand and deepen your capacity? How do you unify them in purpose and stimulate learning, creative conflict, deep collaboration and action? How do you grow them, challenge them, and provide all the necessary conditions to foster success? And finally, how do you ensure that your talent culture supports your vision for success and the capacity and leadership you need to execute?

A key part of leveraging human capital involves streamlining a school’s organizational design to make it clear how to deploy people at their best. From what we see, complicated organizational design breeds silos, simplistic behaviors, reactivity/passivity, confusion about roles and responsibilities and a culture of workarounds. Management requirements expand and leadership is taxed.

Simpler organizations, on the other hand, facilitate transparency, clarity of purpose, communication, collaboration and a creative, entrepreneurial spirit. Management is straightforward, leadership is focused on mission, costs are controlled and faculty/staff are highly engaged. In other words, people know who is responsible for what and are freed to design collaboratively with agency and purpose.

A leaner organizational design, coupled with strategic clarity (purpose linked to defined roles, responsibilities and expectations) empowers all community members to use their talents to solve the following adaptive challenges.

2. Deeper Learning

In a complex world—shaped by globalization, the acceleration of technology, the rise of artificial intelligence and machine learning, and continuous change—our understanding of what [learning must accomplish now](#) is an ongoing conversation. The missing piece, in terms of organizational strategy, however, involves how great teaching and learning happens in order to achieve these outcomes for students. **The “how do we change school and teaching” question is the adaptive challenge.**

“[Deeper learning](#)” is the response—for we must be able to do what machines cannot. Defined in detail [here](#), these competencies are critical to success in a world where knowledge of the “what” must be coupled with knowledge of the “how.” Moreover, as educators prepare students for increasingly unknowable future contexts, the “who” matters more and more. To thrive, students must continually build emotional intelligence, cognitive flexibility, creativity, and critical thinking to prepare for a life of accelerating change.

The purposes of learning today—the what, the how, and the who—are shifting in response to these challenges, but the pace is slow. Cross-discipline work, meaningful projects, student-directed, inquiry-based learning and other knowledge and capacity building experiences are certainly happening, but they are not necessarily the norm. Today, most schools are still caught in the traps of their silo structures, tracking of students, and teaching focused on content transmission to meet the demands of standardized performance tests. Schools want to change, but face concerns about college admissions, parent perceptions and the struggles to assess and provide evidence of growth in these areas. Where to begin?

To achieve deeper learning, pedagogy and design truly matter because joint student-faculty engagement is the essential pre-condition for entry into constructing knowledge: learning and becoming excited about the “what” by also tackling the “how”—often through questions and interests presented by students. Curricula, content, and standards provide the framework to guide teachers, but they are not the source for learning. They are static and don’t drive change. Moving into the dynamic realm of pedagogy and assessment, dialogue and design, collaboration, and intentional communication will force a change to the static structures that schools often begin with.

Deeper learning relies on educators who can design and implement engaging, student-driven, experiential and inquiry-based learning experiences—and the structures and conditions that support this work must change in response to this mandate. Faculty who can facilitate the work teachers and students do, by combining and integrating a mosaic of pedagogical skills, tools and techniques that recognize and engage each learner, create optimal conditions for growth and the right conditions for learning. Tackling the adaptive challenge of talent is a crucial piece of the puzzle: without the right people on board (and substantial support for their professional growth) implementing effective pedagogy will be nearly impossible.

Courage, clarity of purpose and a commitment to mission are essential to the execution of deeper learning. And from where we sit, this shift is underway in many schools. It's a global movement, but the work is happening slowly and in pockets—particularly in contexts where the quest for AP and standardized test scores handcuff progress. What's exciting is that every school has examples of deeper learning in spite of the structural and external constraints.

These examples need to be identified and examined—they are a window into what can change.

3. Equity in Learning

Deepening learning and achieving equity in learning are inextricably linked. Learning experiences that are driven by student inquiry, designed to engage each learner's interests in pursuit of their particular needs, and weave together a range of skills serve all students well. Schools positioned to thrive in the future will focus on equity in learning as a way to expand mission impact. While, as a society, we have tended to view equity through a political lens, equity in education transcends the political. A commitment to equity embodies both the fundamental belief that all people are capable of learning and the effort to ensure that each student is afforded the best conditions needed to achieve optimal outcomes.

Traditional instruction, curriculum and assessments can preclude equity in learning because they tend to narrow the opportunities for a variety of learners and the potential for learning across a spectrum of abilities and talents. Tracking students based on perceived ability separate learners in ways that narrow rather than expand the ways in which we identify questions, frame problems, learn, and collaborate productively to produce meaningful work. Finally, inflexible curricula and standards challenge our ability to authentically “meet students where they are” as individuals with unique identities, experiences and perspectives. By segregating students we are at risk of under valuing our greatest talent resource and our greatest wellspring of diversity: our students themselves.

Few schools can afford to cull and screen their population so selectively to ensure all students have the same overall abilities and thus the same experience and outcomes—and many schools don't want to. The challenge and the opportunity is to focus on a more equitable learning environment which frees schools to authentically embrace and learn with a diverse student body.

When equity in the learning design is absent, schools that reach beyond traditional student screening profiles typically respond with watered-down or tracked courses, learning specialists, academic resource centers, and add-on learning requirements (such as service learning and co-curricular activities). Parents who can afford it supplement their children's learning with tutors and other specialized services. Students who cannot afford these interventions struggle along as best they can.

Conversely, designing for deeper learning will facilitate better outcomes, more inclusive

environments, increased engagement, and greater opportunities for students of all backgrounds. This is the road to equity. To pursue deeper learning and thrive, schools must draw faculty, students, and families into their community from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds and life experiences. While this dimension of equity can become politicized, [the research on the superiority of problem solving by socio-economically heterogeneous groups is clear](#). Schools that pursue and achieve deeper, equitable learning will seek and train skilled faculty who can facilitate and coach students to solve joint problems in diverse groups, creating vital skills that go well beyond subject matter expertise delivered through traditional instruction.

Ultimately, a focus on equity in learning will allow schools to be flexible and powerful resources in their communities—but not before committing to a new vision, capitalizing on the multitude of talents of both students and adults and optimizing organizational design to get there.

IV. Adaptive Challenges and Financial Sustainability

Tackling these adaptive challenges successfully will ultimately lead to financial sustainability as well. How? The most important variables that a school can work on to immediately improve financial sustainability involve cost structure, tuition revenue and philanthropic investment; these areas will be directly impacted by improvements stemming from cultivating talent and designing a more effective and inclusive educational experience.

Schools see financial issues as technical challenges that require technical responses; for example, if enrollment is down, a school might rethink its marketing strategy, which in turn leads to expensive solutions such as redesigning the website and hiring additional admissions and communications staff members. While this approach might bring short-term improvements, it might also fail to address the problem's root cause.

Instead, we advocate reframing these problems as adaptive challenges to improve the student experience. By placing great teaching and learning at the heart of their strategy work, schools will not only ensure that students flourish, but also implement a more rational financial structure. For example, one school seeking to bolster admissions pared back administrative positions and salaries in order to invest in a collective vision that unleashed lead/master teachers to drive pedagogical change and student engagement—it paid off in the largest gift ever bestowed to the school and steady enrollment increases, all within three years.

Designing learning experiences and curricula for deeper learning and equity opens up many opportunities to rethink how resources are deployed—time, space, people, and dollars. If we are willing to test our assumptions about the what, where, how, when, and with whom of learning, the possibilities expand dramatically. The [High Tech High](#) and [EL Networks](#) offer a window into high quality deeper learning design. Internships, heterogeneous groupings of children, and self-directed and coached learning environments also offer new ways to staff

and plan—[Summit Schools](#) and [AltSchool](#) are two such examples. Finally, “schools within schools” and partnership programs provide runways to prototype new ways of learning within an existing school system without the risks associated with wholesale change—this can be particularly effective in schools where risk tolerance is low and students are already thriving!

Models for assessment are also changing in many schools. Portfolios, mastery-based grading and public exhibitions of work offer positive approaches to measuring growth while actively engaging students in showcasing and defending their learning. By testing new environments and approaches, schools can slowly introduce, spread and demonstrate the efficacy of new practices.

The key in all of this is to bring what works in these experiments into the core of the program—so change is ultimately transformative rather than additive. Too often we see the best learning happening at the edges, in after school, extra-curricular, co-curricular or honors level and highly selective programs. This decreases equity in learning and increases complexity and cost burden in schools. As schools transform, we argue they must also work to streamline and ensure that all resources directly impact students: embedding the best learning opportunities into the core program and freeing time and resources to blend rather than add. By sustaining a lean and cohesive leadership team, reducing unnecessary layers of services and programs, and attracting, developing and authorizing talent to ensure positive outcomes, you can move faster as you control costs.

Finally, a compelling school community with a student-centered program, innovative faculty and successful learning outcomes will ensure that families continue to choose your school for their children, now and in the future. Between traditional public schools, magnet and charter schools, distance-based learning and a variety of independent school models, families have more options in the education marketplace than ever before. One eternal truth, though, is that parents are willing to pay for a great education when they are given a clear, compelling sense of how it creates desired outcomes for their children. A strong school community and engaging learning experiences, designed by creative and energized teachers, ensure a sustainable revenue stream. Today, investments in teaching and learning, more than additive administrative positions and facilities, will pay off in additional revenue through tuition and philanthropic investment.

V. Define, Test, and Reframe: How to Ask New Questions

If you agree that thriveability may be a better aim for your school—and may require a change in the conversation—then the questions that follow will help you focus on how to do this work. We’ve zeroed in on few key approaches that have early promise:

Test Old Assumptions

We regularly take schools through a rapid fire exercise to ask what we call the “dumb ‘why’ questions.” For example: Why are we a coed school? Why do we have an endowment? Why

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do we divide classes by discipline or perceived ability? Why do we offer competitive athletics? Why are we committed to diversity? Why do we have financial aid? Why do we offer program X, Y or Z?

In each instance, we collect individual responses and the data are stunning: many times people (trustees, educators, parents and students) don't know why they do something at their school or answer because "it's what we've always done." Moreover, where there are detailed and reasoned answers, they are often strikingly different across multiple respondents in the same school.

Ask New and Better Questions

Once schools acknowledge that perhaps they are not so sure about (or unified in) their understanding of why they do what they do, it's a bit easier to ask some important and probing questions and to confront what emerges. Imagine how the dialogue on financial aid or diversity programming opens up when you begin to test the purpose and the assumptions that underlie it. Asking *why* you need an innovation facility or a new athletic center will allow you to better understand the relationship between the school's programmatic needs and funding requirements.

As you dive into these new ways of framing the problem, it quickly becomes clear that what really drives a school's value proposition is not a bigger endowment or a "better business model," but a ***deep understanding of why certain strategies produce better outcomes for students***. Once you move into this territory, the path to solutions opens up and redirects the work, helping your school to align assets and resources with what is most valuable for students.

For example, schools often decide that to support learners in a rigorous program they must staff a robust team of learning specialists. We see this as a workaround. While the addition of specialists increases the ability to enroll and then support students with learning differences, outcomes are often not as strong, consistent, or widespread as hoped. Moreover, the challenges present questions about the craft of teaching, and how classrooms can be more inclusive without sacrificing rigor. The assumption that the solution is more/better specialists may miss a profound opportunity to solve a more compelling challenge—why, with so many people and supports already, are students not making big strides? We often discover that specialists are working independently from the practices or curriculum of classroom teachers. This lack of coordination and integration adds costs without capturing potential gains from specialization and, ultimately, hurts student learning. In redesigning the experience for students and promoting new practices, asking specialists to collaborate and design with faculty, schools are able to improve student experiences, build capacity in people, and improve teacher loads, often with fewer specialists.

Know What You Mean by the Words You Use

Along with asking better questions, it's essential to define the words you use and translate them into concrete examples for your school. Education is awash in jargon that quickly gets

embedded in the dialogue but rarely translates to a common understanding of or connection to actual practices. Terminology such as *inclusion*, *equity*, *personalization*, *individualization*, *differentiation*, and *innovation* are so commonly tossed about that they have lost their relevance and purpose.

Schools are quick to equate popular usage of a word or knowledge of a trend with actual programs. Stop and ask what these terms mean at your school. Why do they matter? How do they relate to your mission and your vision for success? Ensure you have a shared understanding of how you define these ideas for your context and community, their purpose, and the ways in which they translate into **actual practice** at your school. How can the value of these concepts be realized within the design of learning, rather than with the addition of yet another program or administrator?

Start the process by focusing only on identifying the outcomes you want for your students. You'll want to consider their needs and aspirations, so you need to include them in the process. Then design for those outcomes, stay focused on what learners need and your community values, and explore how those outcomes are achieved inside the core of what you do.

The opportunity is to address inclusion, character development, deeper learning, content knowledge and skill development in the core educational experience rather than add to the increasing menu of options and requirements designed to check every box. How can the core program address these needs as students read, study history, explore science and art, or debate politics and current events? Examine the programs where this may be happening already: project weeks, independent studies, or special programs that target leadership and service. What can be brought into the core for all students? What might that change about the way school happens today? What resources would be freed or redeployed through this reassessment?

Focus on the Students, Teachers and Parents of Today—and the Future

To truly thrive, schools need to be relevant and valuable for the students and families of today and ready to serve the students and families of tomorrow. Without evidence that what your school offers is valuable over time and responsive to student needs, the key indicators for sustainability (like endowment growth or admissions demand) are likely to be either irrelevant in the near term or unsustainable over time.

We've discovered that what and how today's students (Gen Z) need to learn now and for the future may not be fully addressed in most schools. Not surprisingly, given the rapid changes in the workplaces of today, what Gen X and Millennial parents want for their children is changing too. Most want a truly diverse school environment; many are concerned about the effects of standardized testing; and many are opting out of traditional models altogether. They want their children to be emotionally intelligent, culturally literate, creative, and engaged—and expect challenge that goes well beyond rote memorization, lectures and traditional testing. They are primed to see the value in moving away from

traditional, teacher centered pedagogy and testing as the central form of assessment.

At the same time, however, [the Millennial generation is also the most risk-averse generation on record](#). Many Millennial parents are saddled with debt. This underappreciated effect of the Great Recession of 2008 means that the emerging core of prospective independent school families will seek great assurance that a change in pedagogical means will produce not only the capacities and habits of mind listed above, but also the traditional measure of student success: admission to selective colleges and universities. They are likely to question the value proposition of private education with its rising tuition costs and will seek alternatives—many of which will be free.

All this is not to say we must start from scratch. Independent schools have understood, at their core, the many benefits of deeper learning. Nevertheless, the adaptive work for schools is learning what must be preserved and what is needed for the future—and then shifting to planning and executing strategically. Only then can schools truly refocus attention, resources, and communication on the factors that matter most.

Test and Confirm with Good Data

Last but not least, collect data that you can use to test and support the changes you make in tackling an adaptive challenge. Data is the salve that eases the anxieties of an increasingly risk averse pool of prospective families. Solutions must appeal to both emotion and logic, and schools will need evidence of both to bring everyone along.

What data other than scores, grades and placements? Evidence of real learning can be found in many contexts and products. We advise boards to spend much more time doing the generative work that will help schools measure what matters – and supporting educators who are willing to design new forms of assessment. If you promise leadership development for students and adults, measure it. If you promise creativity and collaboration in teaching and learning, measure it. Identifying and tracking crucial metrics will allow you to more accurately assess your school's performance and allow school leaders to effectively engage both internal and external stakeholders. These measurements should be identified for your school and do not have to be only quantitative in nature. There is lots of good work to consult relative to the assessment of student work, student experience, faculty growth and development and the demonstration of critical skills like creativity, communication, collaboration and critical thinking. As schools thread the needle to navigate the current system, they must be preparing for new and better ways to provide evidence of student growth and accomplishment and to assess teachers and leadership.

VI. Strategic Planning, Adaptive Challenges and the Opportunity

Because of the significant challenges that schools currently face, the traditional rhythm of periodic strategic planning—developing ways to improve the school every five years or so—is rarely the best approach. Consider turning away from the default planning cycle in favor of an *ongoing* process of planning, design and implementation. Such an approach encourages

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continuous organizational learning and diagnostic work that tests assumptions, asks better questions, and empowers schools to focus on talent, deeper learning and equity as the means not just to survive, but to thrive.

Tackling the adaptive challenges that independent schools currently face is an inherently demanding process. While overcoming technical challenges primarily involves optimizing strategies that are already in place, facing adaptive challenges requires calling into question fundamental ideas about the identity and effectiveness of your school. Such self-analysis may lead to difficult conversations and even a degree of conflict, especially when long-held assumptions are challenged. But the economic and societal drivers at the heart of the financial sustainability crisis demand this level of reflection and assessment, and if schools want to thrive, they must embrace the opportunity to approach this process.

Thriveability will come from a willingness to rethink learning from the bottom up and the courage to implement. Pedagogy, curricula, assessment, the role of the teacher and the role of the learner are all shifting in ways that reveal the possibility for greater economic sustainability and equity. Time and space are resources that can now be used differently and more flexibly. The only way to make this shift possible, however, is to create the conditions for change: a learning culture for all, a focus on talent, an aligned organizational design, a frank assessment of a school's operating context, resources and assets, and a cohesive vision for learning that includes data to prove the achievement of core student outcomes.

This is an opportunity for schools with solid brand reputations to leverage the quality of their program and grow; it is an opportunity for schools that are struggling to leapfrog by committing to an approach that differentiates them from their immediate competitors. **Ultimately, to serve students well, all schools must find their way towards deeper learning experiences and the people who can make them happen.** When this becomes the center of the work, schools will thrive. Only then is a sustainable future truly possible.

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About Greenwich Leadership Partners

Greenwich Leadership Partners helps schools think strategically about learning, innovation and leadership. We integrate consulting, coaching, facilitation, and industry expertise so you can tackle your future with confidence.

We believe planning is where strategy and leadership come together in a dynamic process for designing the future, making decisions and executing effectively. We consult, facilitate and coach so your school excels in a variety of strategic endeavors—from specific strategic “thinking” initiatives to comprehensive strategic planning efforts.