

Powering the Flywheel

As light from the tunnel's end comes into focus, our charge is to maintain the spirit of innovation through the pandemic's final stages and beyond.



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As we near the one-year anniversary of the pandemic's first shutdowns, it's clear business at our schools remains unusual. While the coronavirus vaccine is finding its way around the U.S., we remain in mitigation mode. People are still falling ill and dying. And independent schools continue to wrestle with their varied formulas for providing a world-class education in challenging times. In this landscape, all systems remain fluid.

Yet there is also a palpable feeling of a sea-change at work — a shift from collective anxiety about an uncertain future to one of hopefulness for what now seems possible. The vaccine is here and by midyear should reach a high percentage of Americans.

I'm hearing this sense of hopefulness from independent schools as well. They have not only weathered the turmoil of the past year, but have also displayed far more resiliency than they thought possible. Indeed, they have been able to use this time to not only survive but to reinvent and reimagine their missions. As we face pandemic-driven pressures this spring term, there is a sense of confidence that we can do this, and even improve upon our learning and business practices — with the expectation that our schools will return to predominantly full-time, in-person programs in the fall.

As we start the transition to a post-pandemic world, what I hope is that we don't just settle back into business as usual in our schools. Rather, I hope we leverage the lessons we've learned this past year about resilience and flexibility, that we continue to examine our programs, elevate our strengths and address our challenges. In his best-selling book on organizational excellence, "Good to Great," Jim Collins writes about the importance of the flywheel concept. As we have witnessed this year, it takes energy to get the flywheel of institutional change in motion. Great organizations, however, not only invest

the energy to initiate change, they also understand the importance of keeping the flywheel spinning — using hard-earned momentum to generate steady, continuous institutional growth.

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This is our moment, I think, for keeping the flywheel spinning. In particular, for school business offices, this is an ideal time to take a page out of our schools' curricular playbook. In their efforts to teach students essential 21st-century skills, independent schools have been finding impressive ways to revamp their curricular programs to engage students deeply in developing essential life and learning competencies, including creative problem-solving. Many business offices have also been thinking along similar lines, engaging in creative problem-solving, in the *art of the possible*, to improve practices and address perennial challenges.

One of the feature articles in this issue of Net Assets, for instance, highlights the remarkable efforts of Ed DiYanni, the COO and CFO at the Stevenson School, in California, to help all of his school constituents understand core financial matters. This is not about sharing financial sheets and Excel charts. Rather, his work is creatively designed to get to the heart

of a theme that runs through this issue of Net Assets — building a foundation of trust. Through storytelling and regular financial update communications (15 to date, with another 10 planned), all custom-designed for the needs and interests of his constituent audience, DiYanni is quietly educating the entire school community and providing valuable context about core elements of school business matters — and in doing so, is building broad support for programs and practices, breaking down silos, generating collaboration and buy-in, and strengthening a sense of community.

For business officers, educating the community about the financial matters in such a manner falls under the heading of “good stewardship.” Indeed, as DiYanni notes about his school, the financial update initiative has generated “overwhelming support and appreciation.”

These are not just information-sharing events. Telling the “need story” behind the data, as school consultant and a frequent presenter at NBOA events Howard Teibel puts it, “has become such a fundamental way of getting people involved. Within the story, you can weave in relevant data that supports your key message.” At the same time, by presenting the financial data linked to the professional lives of constituents, business officers create greater transparency, which in turn contributes to a foundation of trust. Being out in the community also helps business officers learn more about their colleagues and develop a deeper appreciation for the work their colleagues do. Not all data can or should be shared with everyone, of course. But opening up business practices and offering narratives that explain budget decisions go a long way to develop trust and ensure a connected, high-functioning community.

DiYanni is not the only independent school business officer engaged in such creative community outreach. But the numbers could — and should — be higher, hence our showcasing of Stevenson School’s efforts. If you are not currently engaged in some form of outreach, I encourage you to find ways to connect with constituents on a regular basis, formally and informally. I encourage you to spend time at faculty presentations, student assemblies and other school events — whatever form they take in the remainder of this school year and into next. In gaining clarity about the big picture of your school, you are better able to appreciate the work of your colleagues.



Stevenson School

This will help you problem-solve with the leadership team about funding matters and business functions. It will help you understand the level of communication needed for each constituent and how much transparency to offer, while also providing insights into both how the community views the school’s business decisions and what concerns need to be addressed. In all, you are engaging in and encouraging a professional culture of communication.

The main point I’m trying to make here is that we have to stay awake to innovation this year and keep our creative problem-solving muscles active. In this way, we can be highly effective in helping schools deal with the plethora of challenges they face. What we’ve learned this past year is that there are more options on the table than we previously believed.

At the start of this new year, all of us are still deep in the process of navigating change — infusing new practices and smart innovations into our schools. What’s different now, however, is that we can see the light at the end of the pandemic tunnel. I hope this light will help us renew our energy and inspire even more institutional growth. **N**