

The Next Iteration of Independent Education

School will likely look different in coming years, in everything from our markets to our staffing approach to the ubiquitous touch of technology on and off campus.



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Imagine I'm not alone in feeling a sense of optimism for the 2021-22 school year. I know it arrives with plenty of challenges and unanswered questions, but for most of us, this new school year feels like a return to some semblance of normal — which is to say, a world where we will be back on our campuses full-time, teaching students in-person and interacting with our colleagues. There's even the possibility of live theatre and team sports taking place again.

The first question, of course, is how things will turn out with this dreadful pandemic. Experts say we should have a sufficient handle on things to allow for the safe reopening of schools, with the now-obvious caveats and precautions. Much of what we do will, however, depend on the cooperation of adults in our communities. As I write this, the number of infections has risen again in some states due to the troubling confluence of the Delta variant, lifted restrictions and unvaccinated adults.

For now, though, assuming things don't go awry with COVID-19 this fall, independent schools should be able to return to full-time, in-person learning — and, given this, there's much to feel optimistic about. After all, we made it through what is likely to be the most difficult year we'll ever face in schools. In the process, we learned a great deal about our resiliency and adaptability. Specifically, we learned how to conduct remote classes well, and where there were in-person classes, how to conduct them safely. For those of us in the business office, we learned how best to help our communities make these shifts with little to no interruption in the programs. We adapted and adjusted to both this global emergency and the needs of our teachers and students.

Better, yet, given the quality of our programs, many independent schools found themselves attracting a large number of applicants. Parents were confident in our schools' ability to offer either in-person learning or high-quality virtual learning in which no student gets lost in the mix. At many schools, applications for this fall were impressively high.

On the flip side, however, are the myriad questions and challenges raised by the past year of remote learning in independent schools.

SCHOOL RECONCEIVED

A question near the top of the list centers on what exactly we mean by “school” with the lessons of 2020 behind us. Even as we gather again for in-person classes, remote learning is not going to disappear. We are not returning to school as it had been prior to the pandemic — or not entirely. The longstanding notions that all learning must take place in-person and that a school is a discrete physical space have been permanently upended by the forced experiment in virtual learning.

While the majority of students and teachers prefer to be on campus, there are students, families and faculty who have done well with distance learning and would like to continue — at least in some capacity. And the potential in asynchronous courses, in which students take greater agency over the pace and approach to learning, has opened up enormous possibilities for student-led learning on a host of subjects. These courses, in fact, have heightened the decades-long conversation on depth over breadth — and schools no doubt will spend a great deal of time debriefing on these efforts while forming extended and varied programs for the future.

How do these changes to academic program impact the business office? For one, independent schools understand more clearly now that, through remote and hybrid programming, they can successfully reach a far greater number of students and offer far more varied and adaptable curriculum. As a result, with the start of the 2021-22 school year, we find ourselves entering what no doubt will be the next iteration of independent education, which may present further changes to the independent school business model.

A BETTER FUTURE?

In this new world, a number of issues have come to the fore. For one, we are facing with greater attention the question of what each of our schools means when they talk about diversity, equity and



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inclusion. Without question, this academic year will bring heightened conversation on what we have done well, where we've fallen down, and what policies and practices and curricular changes we need to establish in order to be highly effective schools dedicated to diversity and social justice.

At the leadership level, schools also need to address the current issue of teacher burn-out — and thus teacher turnover — that, while inevitable following a pandemic, is putting a strain on school communities. Headships turnover was down slightly for the 2020-21 school year, according to NAIS's most recent study, but anecdotal evidence indicates that the rates will rise in this new school year, with numerous openings for 2022-23 already in the works. In all, these personnel transitions are creating the need for various adjustments and training and community building.

On the positive side, they've underscored the need for schools to think more deeply about the onboarding of new teachers and staff as well the professional development and social and emotional health of adults in school — including in the business office. As a result, we are paying more attention to shaping the kind of life/work balance that sustains us all and makes schools stronger learning communities for the long run.

WRITING THE TELEWORK PLAYBOOK

Running parallel to the question of life/work balance is the question of in-person or remote work — for both teachers and staff. While we debate whether or not some courses can or should continue to be virtual, we'll also debate whether or not staff members need to be on campus every day. No doubt, it's essential to the notion of a dynamic educational community to have people on campus. But is it necessary for everyone to be present every day?

Many leading corporations have already made the shift to flexible, hybrid work that enables people to work remotely much of the time. At the private college and university level, this question is also taking center stage — with many arguing that flexible work and academic schedules are here to stay. “The challenge for institutional leaders,” argue Sally Amoruso and Brian Elliott in *Inside Higher Ed*, “is to find a balance between allowing greater flexibility for remote work while retaining

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the most vital face-to-face interactions that make campus life distinctively vibrant for all who work, live and study there.”

A recent poll of college presidents reveals that nearly half plan to keep some classes online post-pandemic. Many are also willing to create some form of flexible work arrangements, though most still expect staff to work predominantly on campus. This question of flexible work will no doubt be an ongoing conversation in independent schools, with obvious impact on human resource professionals and the business office. The key is not just to get the work done, or even to keep employees engaged. The key is to find a system that helps our schools thrive — and that will build on the market opportunity some schools have recently experienced.

TECH OPPORTUNITIES

To further complicate matters, tech-related issues have mushroomed in the past year. Yes, the expanded internet has created a plethora of opportunities in education that will enable schools to fulfill their missions and extend their reach, but two related issues arise. One is the continuing challenge of wisely building and maintaining the technology infrastructure. The other relates to the increasing risk management issue of cybersecurity.

On the former question, Stacey Freed writes in this issue about the expanding and increasingly central role of education technology directors. In the past, technology specialists were most often brought into conversations regarding academic planning and campus infrastructure long after strategic planning, usually just before

the implementation. In the new iteration of independent education, tech directors need to be included from the start, so that our schools are better prepared to meet current and future challenges. I'm hopeful we'll see this shift in schools this year. Going forward, given the constant evolution of educational technology and the rise of AI, I imagine this role will become increasingly important.

On the question of cybersecurity, I can only urge schools to take this matter seriously. Many threats to school data aren't new (phishing attacks, ransomware, compromised email addresses, etc.), but the brunt of their impact is increasing. The best advice we can offer schools is to engage in regular risk assessments, encrypt all devices, require two-factor authentication and purchase cyber insurance. This work is essential to protect not only the school's data, but also its students, faculty, staff and reputation.

All of these challenges, of course, have a business implication — and in 2021-22, I expect business officers will be engaged in an ever-widening range of conversations. In other words, all of these matters raise important concerns and opportunities for both how we conduct our work and how we support our institutions. In fact, in this new iteration of independent education, I expect we will see numerous changes in the structure and work of the business office itself.

I know we were all pushed to our limits in the past academic year. And it will take time to settle after being so shockingly unsettled a year ago. Yet I can't help but feel optimistic about where we are going. Indeed, 2021-22 feels like a fresh start, the marker of a new era in independent education. And the business office, as always, will be a central component in evolving and sustaining our schools. 

