

**The *R* in Transition -- The 4<sup>th</sup> *R***  
**By Penny B. Evins, Head of St. Paul's School for Girls**

We are in the midst of transitions. This is life. Clearly the number of new heads and retiring heads as reported by NAIS has all of us thinking about leadership and education through the lens of supply and demand. Perhaps it is a good time to pull out of search mode and consider what the core of leadership, teaching, and schools is.

NAIS and those who tinker with predictions about what schools will look like in the future continue to call us to reimagine education. We do. We are reflective and responsive. We are creative and collaborative. We add devices, tweak schedules, do more with less and smile and wave at carpool.

We are...busy. I frequently find myself speaking to educators who are no longer working full time. They are a great generation of compassionate, principled, firm, loving, and focused professionals who left before the inbox on their phones were front and center in their professional and personal lives. They are generally mystified and upset by the current pressure on all school professionals to be ubiquitous, multifaceted, and instantly prepared to define the appropriate course of action in any given high-stakes situation. Many of us began our work before email and cell phones defined normal work life and now, we find ourselves sprinting just to keep up with professional expectations.

Currently, I am privileged to serve as Head of St. Paul's School for Girls. Our school is situated on a stunning and spacious campus. My office is in the center of the academic building. Unlike most headships, my physical location is very visible to all constituents. I know all heads strive to be seen with high touch interactions on campus and with alumnae and external leaders; however, my board expects me to be in touch with and known by my students. There are days when this is hard to accomplish. However, I am glad to be immersed in the internal daily life of school as I don't need to ask for stories before going on the road. I have them on the tip of my tongue. The interactions provide a wealth of talking points and fuel me towards the elusive goal of excellence.

Oftentimes I wonder if knowing the community is enough of a center. I can get lost in comparing my role to other heads and feel less than capable as their days are spent with data and metrics. Don't get me wrong, I too am spending time on this critical part of the job as "measuring what matters" is a large part of my dashboard. However, relationships and human interactions are central to independent schools. Graduates return and new families arrive for more than the dashboards we present to our boards and review teams. The transition in our schools is not just about innovation and disruption. The way in which we facilitate learning and what schools look like is changing; however, we should claim the core of what makes a school a learning community before it gets away from us. What, in short, makes school essential?

I recently welcomed faculty and staff back for our annual "back to school" preplanning days. In the room, I saw familiar and new faces. Together, they formed a collective of individuals who were chomping at the bit to begin the race to ready for our girls, their students. Preventing them from their instinct, their desire to prepare classroom environments and make everything just right for day one, I kept them from the presumably important tasks at hand. What salient points could I possibly make that were more worthwhile than the "to do" list they were clicking through in their heads, on their electronic calendars, or on paper? Would it be possible to "flip" the back to school faculty meeting? As I was finishing up my summer vacation, I began asking myself this question.

But I knew my audience and within it were many new and many returning members of a shared community. As is the case for all schools, a diversity of skill sets, interest levels, acumens and background knowledge were present in this faculty and staff. What we all share in common, however, is that the mystery of the school year ahead is the source of joy and anxiety for most of us. So, how do we steady the ship for the unknown currents? We speak truth. We show up for our students. We care for our students. We create communities where we know, value, understand, and stretch our learners. We open ourselves up for the same as members of educational communities. This is what we dare not overlook as we reimagine education. No data could support this conclusion and no data will ever satisfy our instinct for the interpersonal interactions, which change the course of individual futures and buoy children as they embrace learning and therein face challenges.

Few of us claim our craft as relationship builders. However, we are carpenters of the heart and mind. Yes, we code, set up labs, edit epilogues, stage productions, run drills, recite scripture, open doors, pick up dropped trays, show up for loss, mend broken fences, and have lesson plans for most of what we do. However, the schedules on our phones, tablets, or desktops are not our compass. Instead, our hearts and minds enable us to reach the learners in our educational communities. For just as school leaders address a room of adults wanting to punch through their back to school lists in late summer preplanning, our specific faculty and staff members lead their students who are similarly busy multitasking their way through various priorities. Educators are trusted as a result of the people they are, not the data and speed of their responses. Being busy is a reality. However, being connected with those in our communities must be more than a dream.

Perhaps we reimagine education by going back to the origin of our own school experiences. The true teacher knows, values, understands and trusts us. The true teacher does not need a charger that plugs into the wall. Instead, she or he is recharged through human interactions and taking time to guide young people through the process of learning about the world and themselves.

Let us consider the transitions we face in our educational communities and keep personal interactions at the center of what we do, regardless of the next wave of technology. Keeping our schools ripe with possibility and engagement is dependent on many things, but the essential ingredient is the relationships amongst educators, students, parents, coaches, graduates, and community members within and beyond our reach. Just as the infant needs to know loving arms await them to pull them up after a fall, so do our students need to know caring and familiar adults are in abundance as they synthesize information and take healthy risks to reimagine with us. The value proposition is the REALITY OF invaluable relationships that will help each child feel safe on the journey towards realizing HER potential.

So what I chose to share with the impatient faculty ready to ready their rooms was a day of teaming, playing, and getting to know one another better. Without technology, we blended. What I shared is that the ability to convey care for all on one's roster is the game changer. I encouraged my faculty and staff to take some time that day and every day to get back to the core of what we do. No matter what shape the future takes, no matter how many or few new members are in our communities, the relationships we forge at school every day will be, just as they always have been, at the center of our work as excellent educators.