

The 9/11 Paradox: Opportunity Amidst Atrocity?

Early in 1998, I began presenting a workshop titled, “Noah Didn’t Build The Ark When It Was Raining.” “Noah” was a presentation on organizational change that identified the reasons why independent schools experienced unparalleled growth and success during the 1990s, and explored ways in which schools could insulate themselves against the inevitability of changing “market” forces (both internal and external). The presentation examined such things as organizational life cycles, the economy, trends in philanthropy, national high school demographics, teacher attrition rates, and trends in education, among many other key indicators. Essentially, the crux of the message was that our future strength and viability as independent schools would be determined in large part by the work that got done while these “forces” remained in near perfect alignment. Well...it’s raining!

The storm clouds of trouble were visible long before the tragic events of September 11th. Our economy was in a steep decline—and headed for a free fall. Everyday citizens, who in hindsight were only temporary millionaires and philanthropists, watched in disbelief as their euphoric wager on the stock market crumbled in tandem with their dreams of grandeur. This, in turn, led to a seemingly endless stream of stories from schools (and other non-profits) across the country about unfulfilled pledges and broken promises. Suddenly, and almost in unison, schools were forced to realize that their own fate was inextricably linked to that of the *neighbor* next door. What most schools had not even begun to comprehend was the longer-term impact this recession was going to have on enrollment, community building, endowment, and the educational climate more generally. For many it was about to start pouring!

Ironically, it is in our response to the horrific events of September 11th that we, as an entire nation, will avoid a recession. I am not speaking purely economically, either—as the stock market is sure to continue to surge and stall in a seemingly unreasoned manner. Rather, I am speaking about the awakening from a moral and values-based recession that we, as individuals and as a country, have been mired in for far too long. From the ashes of despair and crisis has emerged a social, emotional, and educational renaissance.

The future is very bright for independent schools. For many schools this “renaissance” even represents a second chance to strengthen, grow, and improve. However, only those schools that fully comprehend and respond to the changes that our country and its people have recently undergone will realize the full potential for prosperity that the future holds.

The following nine sections address observed and foreseeable changes in our society generally (sections I-V) and our school communities more specifically (sections VI-IX) in the wake of September 11, 2001. As importantly, these categories represent opportunities for all schools to better serve and fulfill their missions. Come on in out of the rain!

I. Changing of Values

In the wake of arguably one of the worst attacks on America and American values, America is standing taller than ever—and changing with each passing day. Things that seemed so vitally important just a few short weeks before seem trite in the wake of the September 11th tragedy. For many Americans, this event marked a return to the values of past generations.

Our heroes, recently clad in “Nike Sunday Red” on the 18th green or in bejeweled evening gowns at the Oscars, have been replaced again by America’s “ordinary” citizens who (as always) are doing extraordinary things. Old Glory, previously reserved for July 4th cookouts and Olympic triumph, now flies proudly in every neighborhood across our nation as a symbol of our renewed—and unwavering—pride in America. This tragedy also marks a return to family values, with millions of families reconnecting with the people who are really most important in their lives.

The role of independent schools in the lives of their students and their families is more important than ever before. We must rise to the occasion and accept the responsibility of sharing and fostering these reemerging values if we expect to forge deeper, more meaningful relationships with the members of our communities.

II. Generational Legacy

For better or for worse, each generation of Americans has left a lasting legacy that can be viewed best through the beliefs, actions, and lives of their children. While there is bound to be a cacophony of opinion in attempting to characterize an entire generation, many would argue that the words entitlement, greed, and materialism would have to be included in the language regarding the Gen Xers legacy to the Millennial Generation. However, in recent months, there seems to be a new, shared vocabulary that is being bantered about in the wake of the 11th. Words and ideals such as freedom, responsibility, respect, love, and values are rolling meaningfully off the tongues of our youth and adults alike. If the words are truly internalized, then there is great hope for the next generation of kids—and schools. Schools must explore and encourage these emotions and ideals with fervent determination, for they represent the future of our children and our country.

III. Reprofessionalization of Teaching

While our teachers may not run bravely into burning buildings or sift tirelessly through debris in search of life, our teachers save lives each and every day. They, too, are our heroes! They are the ordinary citizens whom I mentioned earlier. Unfortunately, America has never adequately embraced and even turned its back on the teaching profession some years ago.

Teaching will again assume its former position as one of the noble and important professions. Unlike some of the changes I’ve mentioned, however, this shift will take a great deal of time. It is akin to turning around a cruise-liner. Nobody will really notice

the slow, subtle turn, but eventually the “boat” will be moving in the opposite direction. We all look forward to the day that our teachers are celebrated for their work and compensated for their worth.

IV. Community

Among the most promising societal shifts that we have witnessed has been a renewed sense of civic responsibility. Blood supplies have reached capacity, donations to relief efforts have reached staggering totals, volunteerism is back in the public consciousness, and community events have emerged from coast to coast. Becoming a participating member of a larger group or community will take on a level of importance for which past generations have been known. Selfishness will soon give way to selflessness.

It is imperative that each school take the time to evaluate the manner in which it promotes and fosters a true sense of community. Schools must examine when, where, how, and why they are connecting with their various constituents. The future is about engendering deeper relationships based on common interests, beliefs, values, and vision. Seize the moment to give your constituents the opportunity to become a more vital part of your school; it will pay off in ways you never dreamed possible.

V. Curriculum Development

In much the same way that students respond academically when a connection exists with their teacher, they are far more likely to be invested in the process of learning when they are interested in the topic of study. In my experience, this means developing a curriculum that values authentic academic work and experience—that is, a curriculum that takes into account the concerns that students have and the exigencies of their lives outside of the classroom. Unfortunately, our current national obsession with standardized assessment (and the sterilized curriculum that it has sometimes entailed) is stifling the creativity and passion of our teachers—and, by extension, the creativity and passion of our students.

The present situation has heightened our awareness of the need for curriculum to respond to life beyond the school walls. For this to happen, however, we must again authorize teachers to make decisions in their classrooms, with their students, and in response to their particular and sometimes peculiar situations—without the specter of standardization looming quite so large in their minds. In short, we need again to trust that teachers and students, left to their own devices, will do remarkable things together.

VI. Re-examination of Mission

The mission statement is the heart and soul of every independent school. The mission represents the core beliefs and philosophy of the school and must serve as the guiding principle for every action and decision made across the campus. As such, the question must be asked: How did your school respond to the September 11th tragedy? Did you

live up to the core values inherent in the mission of the school, or did you just respond in the spirit of the language?

If you have not taken the time to revisit your mission statement recently with your entire school community, you should make it one of your highest priorities. The world has changed dramatically, as have people's understanding of themselves and the people and places around them. Your mission has new meaning—celebrate and embrace the opportunity to share in this common belief and bond.

Coincidentally, our school was in the process of reviewing and revising our mission when the tragedy occurred, affording us the opportunity to practice what we recently preached. I am so pleased at the way our students, our faculty, and our community responded to those challenging times. Never had our school's commitment to a family-like atmosphere been so put to the test—and never had we responded so instinctively and definitively. While our statement of mission and philosophy had always served as our guiding principle, after the 11th it has taken on more meaning than ever before. It represents the values that we share as a school community and the bond that will allow us to prosper in the face of even the most uncertain and difficult times.

VII. Teachable Moments

While most independent schools are grounded on the premise of “teachable moments,” we all hope that our teachers never again have to teach in the midst of such loss and such horror. No one, not even the teachers themselves, can fully comprehend yet what it will mean to be a teacher in the aftermath of 9/11. America should be proud of its teachers—both public and private—for shouldering the added responsibility of helping our students to process and understand the tragic events—while simultaneously trying to make sense of the senseless themselves.

The positive result of this situation is that many teachers and students have developed a deeper, more meaningful relationship through their shared experience. No longer is the only common bond between them a test on Friday afternoon. They have learned together, grieved together, and in many cases, cried together. This newfound understanding and respect for one another is sure to inspire greater learning and teaching. Exploit the opportunity to reach deeper into the lives and hearts of your students.

VIII. Fundraising

It is a fairly universal belief that most people will rise to the expectations set before them in most aspects of their lives. The same theory holds true in fundraising. That is precisely why schools set campaign goals, request specific gifts, and measure themselves against their own past performance. It is all done to help people move beyond their own expectations and to invest in something meaningful to them—at an amount commensurate with their ability and willingness to give. That being the case, why have schools done such a poor job of setting high fundraising expectations in the wake of

September 11, 2001? It is as if schools have conceded the notion that the levels of giving, whether annual or capital, are going to decrease. Are schools creating a potentially dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy?

On the evening of the 11th our administrative team sat down and discussed the potential impact of the day's events. After viewing it through the eyes of each of our constituents (students, alumni/ae, faculty, etc.) and within the context of each of our departments (educational, financial, development, etc.), we determined that we must impose our own set of expectations before another was imposed on us. From a fundraising perspective, we have already seen the tangible results of this decision. We have experienced a sharp increase in our annual fund—both in participation and dollar amount—compared to a year ago. In addition, we have met at the request of several parents and alumni to discuss where their interests and passions may intersect with the school's mission and vision. It has been a wonderful and enlightening experience for all involved. Remember, expectations and passion are only meaningful if they are shared, and the climate and culture could not be more perfect for this type of dialogue.

IX. "Splash Factor"

It is no secret that the larger, more prestigious institutions have historically cornered the market on garnering major gifts. There are multiple reasons for this phenomenon, including the fact that they typically have greater resources, more seasoned solicitors, and a status with which some people of means wish to associate themselves. However, I believe the number one reason for this occurrence is that many independent schools have not positioned themselves properly to earn these types of gifts. Yet, opportunity will soon knock for those independent schools prepared to answer the door.

While Harvard et al. will always receive major gifts, there is evidence of a movement away from the "piling on" philosophy (although Harvard might argue that 19B is not enough). A growing number of philanthropists are eschewing the "prestige factor" in place of the "splash factor." Or, quantitatively speaking, these philanthropists are seeking the "splash" or impact of giving \$1 million gifts to 50 burgeoning organizations instead of a \$50 million gift to one established institution. This is certainly good news for all independent schools, especially those that have already earned the respect and loyalty of their community.

A Lasting Legacy

A century from now a new generation of school children will read about the 11th with an absence of emotion, just as we did when studying the wars and tragedies of America's past. They will learn of the bravery of the victims without feeling the emotion of the loss. They will know the outcome of the war without knowing the terror of terrorism. They will watch the video of the twin towers without having witnessed the horror of the implosions. And, thankfully, they will inherit a better world without knowing the sacrifice of enduring freedom.

The world as we knew it on September 10, 2001 is a distant memory. As time marches on we can only hope that the positive changes that emerge from this tragedy remain in the forefront of our minds, as the horror of the reality fades from our memories. The age of innocence and complacency is over for all Americans and has been replaced by an era of values and altruism. We are embarking on a social, emotional, and educational renaissance—an opportunity amidst atrocity.