



The People-Centered School:

How COVID Helped Us Find Our Focus



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Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, we have all learned a lot about dealing with challenges. Hopefully we have also learned a lot about ourselves, those around us, and the organizations we are a part of and lead. In working with private and Christian schools across the country, I've seen many schools successfully deal with the challenges presented by a global pandemic. In every case, they quickly pivoted in order to effectively support student learning, faculty care, parent transparency, and school community engagement. But they did something else even more important. What helped Christian schools succeed throughout COVID-19 is the same thing that will keep them strong long after the pandemic is over: keeping people, rather than programs or policies, at the center of their focus.

Successful Schools Keep Students at the Center

On Friday, March 13, 2020, the governor of Michigan, my state, announced the closure of all K-12 schools in response to rising numbers

of COVID-19 cases. Shortly afterward, one head of school reviewed her "to-do" list with me. My jaw dropped. The school had one weekend to figure out how to make the shift to 100 percent online learning. But this head of school knew they could do it. She encouraged her faculty with these words: "If we remember to ask 'What will be best for the student?' I believe we will get through this and help continue their learning uninterrupted." Over the weekend, every teacher did what they needed to do to pivot as they took learning online.

In this particular school's case, asking what students needed uncovered, among other things, a previously unrecognized need for computers at home. That meant immediately delivering laptops to some households so that children could participate in virtual classes on the coming Monday. With this need addressed, students were better set up to succeed in an unfamiliar educational model. Keeping students at the center of the focus means entering into a space of curiosity as we seek to understand their unique context and needs.

Successful Schools Care for Their Faculty's Needs

One of the things that COVID-19 displaced was our sense of well-being. How can we feel safe when something we can't see might land us, our students, or our loved ones in the hospital? Safety has always been important to schools. But during the pandemic, school safety was harder to define because it meant something different to almost everyone. There were tangible needs, such as the construction of plexiglass barriers, protocols for mask-wearing, and hand-washing stations. But there were intangible needs as well: the need to feel safe, the need for reassurance, the need for good leadership in the midst of significant fear and anxiety. At every school, faculty and staff were, and are still, under significant strain from the demands of the pandemic. Being a people-centered school means understanding and caring for employees' tangible and intangible needs.

As the 2020 graduation approached and the realities of hybrid learning were taking shape, a head of school from the Pacific Northwest shared with me the challenges of responding to the needs of her school's faculty. One teacher in particular was burdened by the constant changes coming from the governor's office, the daily questions and emails from parents, and his own anxieties about the safety of returning to the classroom. On what otherwise would have been a glorious spring day, this teacher sat in the office of the head of school, nearing a breaking point.

Successful Schools Are Transparent with Parents

Just outside Houston is a school led by a fifteen-year veteran superintendent. Under her leadership the school has grown in enrollment, successfully added grade levels, and built a student body that is unified and thriving. It's one of the best-run schools I've ever seen. Then came COVID. And so did the calls with questions from worried parents. They were anxious about a host of issues: the safety of their children, what the COVID testing and quarantine procedures would be, when school would reopen, how to prevent learning loss, and so on. On top of those anxieties, something happened that the superintendent didn't anticipate: a large employer in the community closed its doors for the foreseeable future.

Suddenly the school had many more parents requesting financial aid. The school didn't have unlimited reserves or donors to solicit, so the superintendent and her financial manager started meeting with every parent who needed help. Together they developed a personal tuition plan for each family. This process gave them the opportunity to be transparent with each other. The school learned what the parents needed and why, and vice versa. This mutual transparency built an amazing amount of trust.

When we truly seek to understand another person's needs, from their perspective rather than our own, we are able to have helpful.

interactions that deepen our learning, appreciation, and empathy for the other person. That's impossible to do unless people are at the center of our focus.

Successful Schools Engage Their Broader Community

For many organizations that depend on earned revenue, like Montessori and Christian schools, COVID-19 created financial stress and uncertainty, even with the emergency federal relief packages that became available. As the fall of 2020 was approaching and the financial realities were coming into focus, many Christian schools, including a client of mine in the greater Milwaukee area, began developing and implementing their fundraising plans. In this school's case, pandemic fundraising meant doing something that the leadership had not done before: openly sharing the school's struggles with the broader school community.

In times of uncertainty and anxiety, it can be difficult to ask for help. Some leaders project an ultra-confident exterior to give people the sense that everything is okay, that a steady hand is on the wheel, especially in a crisis. Unfortunately, this can inadvertently put the leader in the center of the focus. But at this Milwaukee school, the principal intentionally put the community at the center of the conversation. He chose very early in the pandemic to establish a regular routine of constituency communication. This included

monthly updates to the school's entire database on what the school was doing to keep students, faculty, staff, and parents safe; what faculty were doing to help support student learning and faith development online; and how the school was working with parents who found themselves in difficult financial situations. Because the channels of communication were open all along, it was no surprise to the community when the fall fundraising appeal asked for significant help in meeting the school's financial challenges. The appeal raised more money than ever before.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's taught us the importance of right priorities. Schools who are able to put students, faculty, parents, and the broader community in the center of their focus will succeed long after this strange and unsettling season is a distant memory.

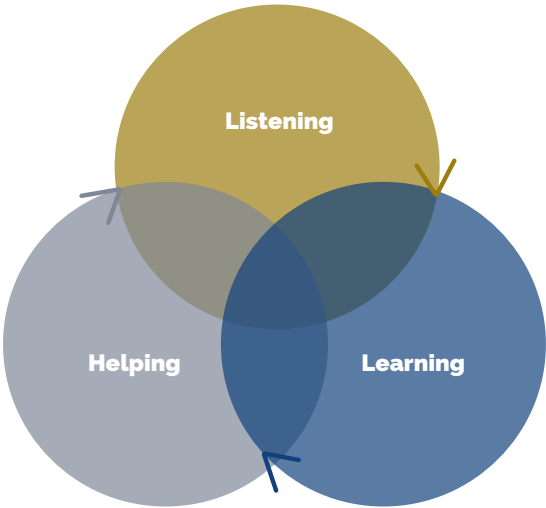
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When you walk alongside a leader, you partner with them in their transformation.

By deeply listening to what you say, we are able to co-create helpful process that begins to implement the change you are seeking. When this happens, we learn together and begin to experience the change as it takes place, creating opportunities to imbed learning deep in the organization's culture and DNA.



- LISTENING** → Our natural tendencies work against us unless we first take a **posture of listening**.
- HELPING** → Our natural tendencies work against us unless we **serve another by co-creating help with them**.
- LEARNING** → Our natural tendencies work against us unless we **partner in their learning**.



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