**LinkedIn Articles:**

Some of these articles are shorter than others. Links to LinkedIn site are provided.

* Teachers as Assessment Policy Makers…It’s about time!
* Global Learning Ready for Anything – Ready for Action
* A Few Words about ‘Words’
* The ‘Overstuffed’ Curriculum
* Children are Not Bar Codes
* A Glimpse inside How Much Does a Great School Cost? School Economies and School Values
* Education Doesn’t Have to Be a Fixed Puzzle
* Is Wonder Enough?
* Distance Learning Should Loosen the Rigidity of School Schedules...
* Testing Scandal…Sharing my Facebook Posting
* But What if the Authorizers only See Dashboards?
* Knowing What to Turn Around
* Civics 101
* Lined Notebooks as Tools for Engagement – I Think Not.
* What Can Betsy Do?
* The Teacher Desk and the Principal’s Office: Some New “No Go’s” for a 21st Century School
* It’s That Admissions Time Again…
* Enriching the “Who Knows Best?” Story in Education
* Charter Schools and Their Revolving Doors
* Seeking Outside Feedback for School Improvement

**Teachers as Assessment Policy Makers…It’s about time!**

LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/teachers-assessment-policy-makers-its-time-barbara-smith/

This article began as a simple request from someone in a Facebook group. "Would anyone send me a copy of an assessment policy that works?" To this request, I shared a response that included a process that worked for me in at least 2 schools:

I find that having a series of on-line or in-person workshops for interested staff led by an assessment expert (i.e. We asked Damian Cooper). After this, we asked for volunteers from the group to put together a survey of what they learned and believed were informed practices in assessment. The academic leader in the school was part of this group. Teachers were asked to complete the survey by agreeing/disagreeing or indicated they were still 'not sure'. Many items on the survey received over 95% agreement. They because the beginning parts of the assessment policy. The one teacher who wanted to give "0's", for instance, recognized that she was a minority and while not pleased about the "no zero" policy, she was much more accepting of the policy when she saw the depth and breadth of support for the more exert informed choice. The one item I recall splitting the masses was about 'reduction of grades/assignment scores' if they were handed in late. We decided that in such cases, we would make this a focused priority for professional learning. After book and article study groups examined the issue more closely and interested staff members presented their findgings to the staff, there were many more who, when surveyed, changed their minds and chose to make "no reduction in grades due to lateness" a policy. Report cards would reflect on 'life skills' such tendencies, but direct teaching of the importance of meeting deadlines for school, career and life was added to the curriculum in a newly designed character building and wellness class. Sounds like a lot, but we found most existing policies were not specific enough to address the different practices that were seen as unfair by students and parents. Designing your own policy has some professional learning advantages, and the 'buy in' can be incredible with such a transparent process...again something that sticks can take time to evolve....

**Global Learning Ready for Anything – Ready for Action**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/global-learning-ready-anything-barbara-smith/

A few years ago a school trustee asked me how his school could improve their image, so they could increase their enrollment. Having started three schools, I knew this question well. I believe the solution to such problems has to do with shining a light on what makes a school stand apart from all other schools. To do this, a school community needs to embrace continuous improvement, really embrace it – as a call to ongoing action.

When we shared our strategic plan for the Giles School on our website, we were not sharing state secrets. We were simply setting the bar high, not placing any ceiling on all we could do. When reading the ambitious lists of experiences, the question for future parents should be “What are they going to do next?” Evidence of ongoing initiatives makes it clear to future families that a progressive school is going to prepare students not just for now – but for the future, and that means they need exposure to many different kinds of experiences.

I’ve spent much time in my career paying attention to the fit between the program and a school’s documented “mission” and “vision”. I see the mission as “what is”, and the “vision” as where it can lead. Schools with integrity have ample evidence to support their mission claims. What tends to be on the leaner side of things is evidence of moving towards a stated vision.

So I asked this trustee to describe how his school was meeting its’ mission, and he clearly had oodles of examples to support their mission claims. The school had a mix of student demographics, half international boarding students, and half the students were pretty much Caucasian. The concern was that the cultures were not connecting, acting like two schools under one roof. Many schools will start a character education program to tick off a box. I, however, suggested they consider the idea of becoming a Model United Nations laboratory school, revising the curriculum and the inquiry project work to focus on solving current and anticipated world problems together. The collaboration would inspire empathy and concern for problems outside our own homes. At the time, I did not know of other schools with such a vision, so this might have been a fresh offer for the community; at the same time it might attract new admissions.

I’m not sure what that school trustee did with the idea, but a few months later, I saw an advertisement for the principal position at the Giles School. When I first read that it was a predominantly French immersion school, I really didn’t think that someone who did not speak French would be a good fit. I was, however, drawn to the “small” school size, and the interest of the Board members in supporting the development of an innovative and leading edge strategic plan. If I was going to return to a school, I wanted to be sure I could be part of a culture that was committed to being great, not just very good, but exceptional, worthy of the students’ time and family loyalty. To this end, when I discovered the talents of the teachers, it became clear that the Giles setting was ideal to build on the French immersion in the early years to a more concentrated English focus in the upper years, with varied exposures to Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, and Russian, as the small staff had the capacity to offer experiences in all six of the official United Nations languages. The vision morphed into preparing our students to be ‘world ready’. Recognizing it was not enough to prepare young people with multi-language exposure, we added three years of Model United Nations classes for all grade 6 to 8 students, adding an applied global learning experience to their Social Studies course. We also moved our mission to understanding culture through “language and industry”, and with the added emphasis on industry, we added robotics, coding and chess as part of math. Students were responsible for working with teachers to publish poetry books, memory books, and newspapers. A group of students designed and created a recording studio and are currently preparing scripts for our first *Radio Gile*s broadcast.  We paid serious attention to what experiences would truly benefit and engage a globally-minded and ready student body.

We also realized that knowledge and skills in liberal arts and science courses would not be enough. A focus on inclusion was nourished through civics and leadership classes. Students were excited about their portfolios that included creating pledges and campaigns to promote Earth Hour, setting up a composting program, planting trees, building a butterfly sanctuary garden (planting milkweed), managing a new bookstore, a school museum and an e-hospital for electronic patients in the school in need of repairs. Students created stamp clubs and coin clubs to examine the images in more depth to find out more about the landscapes and people featured on their currency and stamps from other countries. To add to these projects, students collected funds to support school, community and global service projects.

It didn’t take long for the mission to evolve into three key “I’s:” Being International; Being Innovative and Being Inclusive. When the community establishes initiatives as parts of the culture, then they contribute to the mission, leaving more room and expectations for new initiatives to carve out a path that can prepare our young people to make a global difference in their next schools, world of work and personal lives.

We believe that such a school will attract the number of families needed to be small and sustainable, but even more significant is that the Giles School will prepare students to be ready for anything, ready for action. How do other schools make global citizens? It would be great to begin a conversation, share more actions, and perhaps build a collaborative network of ambitious educators committed to making memories of the global citizen kind.

**A Few Words about ‘Words’**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/few-words-barbara-smith/

Do you read some words, and assign meaning to them - beyond perhaps the intended message? Here are a few words that are often used in education that I prefer not to read:

* "delivery" (because it infers the learner is not scaffolding anything to their prior understandings - the "empty vessel" as Dewey describes as what education should not be.) I prefer "teaching", "collaborating"...
* "training" (because this implies a one-size fits all behavioral modification approach - to adjust learners to be compliant recipients of information.) I prefer "educating", "workshopping"...
* "professional development" (because this implies the participants are not "developed". I prefer, as others recommend, "professional learning" as an ongoing process.
* "classroom management" (because it infers that schooling is about classroom control, rather than classroom engagement. I prefer a proactive approach embracing "student leadership"...
* "data" (because it infers many novices to education such as Trustees, see data as a collapsed one page dashboard (or executive summary) that can be used to make serious decisions such as closing schools, firing people or mismanaging funds...) I prefer "evidence" as that can help all stakeholders see the complexities of education, and not be misguided by only viewing easy numbers (i.e. attendance, test scores, enrollment...).
* "accountability" (because this word is usually attached to an over-simplified vision of numbers or better yet unproven and unfounded 'matrixes'. It is odd that the dashboards or elaborately and technology-fused frameworks and matrixes do not have be so accountable...hmmmm... Accountable is a word that merges progress with past standards. Time for school systems to move beyond the use of such a backwards term. I prefer "engagement", "invention", "creativity", "critical thought" - all difficult to achieve when the forces of "accountability" are hell bent on keeping the system and present status quo in place.
* "innovation" (because too many people equate this to technology). I really wish everyone would use this word to define what new original and creative things are happening in schools including, and beyond, the wires and boxes. I do like the word "invention", but actually hope people will not assume that innovation can only be guided by the technology leaders in schools...
* "scaling" and "replicating" (because this implies all schools have the same people in them - and they don't. Management companies operate as if the people and the curriculum are widgets in assembly lines - putting together the cars of tomorrow...I prefer words like "original", "distinct", "compelling", "breaking through the ceiling", "new design", "one-of-a-kind" - with the full understanding that we can afford to have schools that are not cookie-cutter replicas of the ones down the street...or in other under-funded areas of the country...
* "School Choice" (because this hides the real issue of school improvement). Too many charter school managers think this is their distinguishing feature - to this I say "Big Deal". What's the point of having choice if the goal of managing education companies is to replicate the same school models of control, budgets and staffing... Be bold and insist on "school change", "small schools", "lower teacher-student ratios", "higher pay for teachers", "prestige physical school environments"...if such evidence was in place, now there could be some "school choice".
* "Managers"...*.j'amais*.(never use)..all should be "leaders" on the education front. No one - students or teachers should be managed. They should be "inspired", "encouraged", and "engaged" - every one of them.

What words make you think twice about the message?

**The ‘Overstuffed’ Curriculum**

LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/overstuffed-curriculum-barbara-smith/

It is fitting to talk turkey and stuffing after US Thanksgiving - and if parents and educational leaders can take a few minutes to think about this metaphor, you may re-think the overstuffing of the school curriculum. Each grade has so many standards, it is difficult even for teachers to determine "where's the meat?". With so much and so many varieties of stuffing jammed into school curricula, it is no surprise that students and teachers can often feel like they are in a food coma - every day. No wonder teachers are leaving the profession and students are turning to the digital world for stimulation. Gatekeepers who assume that testing will not only tell all, but improve teaching and learning are in a sense turkeys, just gobbling about recipes designed by government officials and politicians, far away from the classroom. Teachers should be trusted to not only assess students, but design units for their students that have the potency to teach standards in an authentic context, not disconnected from any applied experience. Giving 'catch up' vouchers for tutoring or handing teachers 'lessons' prepared by others, is demoralizing for teaching professionals. When teachers have upwards of 2 hours a day to prepare for their classes and engaging units of study, on their own and with others, the school leaders who have made this happen will no longer be 'turkeys', but eagles, willing to fly beyond the stuffing that clogs thinking and innovation in our schools, and collaterally, in society, today.

**Children are Not Bar Codes**

LinkedIn article by Barbara J. Smith

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/children-bar-codes-barbara-smith/>

A conversation with a parent about a child's reading often reverts back to the bar code on a leveled book. Teachers are often forced into boxes of leveled book curriculum, and when reporting to parents about reading, they often speak in alphabet language. "Your child is at "G" level, when all the others are at "J" by now"...Grades levels in language arts, have been replaced by more and more leveled readers...reducing the time students can spend on reading as a tool for developing their multi-intelligences and habits of mind... Reading fluency and comprehension at the expense of thinking...It's time to re-think the emphasis on leveled readers. Schools and teachers should design curriculum and publishers should provide resources. For teachers to be more empowered to create curriculum, they need TIME in the day - significant time - ideally 2 hours a day to design and revise their designs based on examinations of how well their designs are implemented in their real classroom contexts. Leveled books may be viewed as "time savors", but I suggest they are "empowerment eaters", that is, they take away a teacher's autonomy and replace children with bar codes on the back of each book that no one has a choice to read. I suspect there are many teachers who instinctively knew the system of leveled books was simply a reinvented system of SRA's ...inching closer to the control (and healthy business revenues) that comes with test prep curriculum...Let's make our eyes wide open and put an end to bar coding our children. They just might enjoy school much more with a STEAM, project-based, Habits of Mind and multi-intelligence focus. Children are not bar codes!

# **A Glimpse inside How Much Does a Great School Cost? School Economies and School Values**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/glimpse-inside-how-much-does-great-school-cost-economies-smith/

“*Don't tell me what you value, show me your budget, and I'll tell you what you value.*” ~Joe Biden

**Reset (Abridged Introduction)**

If you are serious about improvement in education – hit the “reset” button. Think about what might be affordable outside the realm of how schools spend money today. This book is about looking beyond the main networks of education; it reveals examples of great practices, how much they can cost, and how we can take the remote and move towards more innovative channels in education.

We need to break away from the fixed view that teaching and learning can only happen in a ‘red schoolhouse’. As this read will expose, it takes hard work to implement new ways of doing school; there are simply no short cuts to building and re-designing great learning institutions.

When the picture on our computer or television screens is not clear, we scramble to push as many buttons as we can to remedy the problem; regrettably, however, when schooling is fuzzy, we rarely change the channel. In a way, the system is caught up in the cycle of “play”; that keeps on doing. what’s always been done.

Often, the building of a new school is trumpeted as a transforming opportunity, but sadly, these initiatives stop short of innovation. New schools may be larger with renovated lounges, lunchrooms and lockers, but many fall short of inspiring learning. After an investment of millions of dollars, these schools tend to be no more than cleaner, freshly painted mirrors of existing schools, schools that still look ‘red’.

Rather than view schooling from an outside-in perspective, this book reveals the complexities of addressing the fiscal realities of education from the inside out…Rarely do educators and other taxpayers have time to pay attention to, read about, and act on educational economic challenges and possibilities. This resource aims to take the reader on a journey outside the main networks, into the less predictable arenas of the ‘Netflicks’ in education. We need to explore new sources to move our compass beyond the limits of schools today. It’s time for schools to invest in their off-road tires, and choose new paths that can prepare our students for anything. If we value a different educational outcome for more students, then we need to push for more change.

Education does not have to be on auto-pilot; we can learn not only how to navigate the remote, but we can re-design it, so we can efficiently improve schools in cost-effective ways. What has emerged from examining educational and business literature is the notion that school values and finances are inheritably linked. Budgets remotely control our schools. Without shifting the budget, we cannot change the educational channel.

Ben Franklin’s quote: “Drive my business or it will drive thee” is a compelling insight. Is it possible that education could be driving itself, when it continues to perpetuate programs based on the replicated budgets, year after year? This book should be viewed as more than a collection of ideas or a slice in time of a school pricing catalogue. While the detailing of how much things cost in schools is necessary when comparing conventional school expenses with funding needed to operate innovative schools, the message that budgets reflect values is central to this discussion. If a school values innovation, then it will need to risk changing how funds are allocated. If schools are expected to embrace change, decision-makers must also be prepared to shift the budget allocation across the board, to reflect new emerging values.

This book addresses the fiscal factor in promoting the design, implementation, and sustainability of schools that go beyond ‘red’. It also introduces the idea of New School, one designed with a new budget framework in mind, one that functions to permit and promote innovation in teaching and learning…

Rather than provide a summary at the end of each chapter, readers are invited to collaborate with other readers by ***grappling with ideas***. Such challenges help the reader to re-think, through the lens of a task or question, the potential significance or links to their own experience in education. Such tasks may prove fruitful for professional learning conversations in schools or within undergraduate or graduate course work in education.

This book shares many stories of schooling that are real and worthy of change; at the same time, it highlights glimpses of bold ideas for imagining teaching and learning in a new light. In Linus Pauling’s words: *“The best way to have a good idea is to have a lot of ideas”.* This book does not hold back on concrete examples of greatness; if the reader is hungry for fresh ideas, you will be offered ample servings. Be ready for the detailing, but when you reach the threshold of technical examples, adjust your binoculars and simply move on to the next focus of what can be considered greatness in schools. Think about the calls for change, large and small, and what investment of time and money that such improvements might incur.

Finally, pay attention to the idea that values are entrenched, not only in the budget numbers, but in the willingness of decision-makers and implementers to be open to change. Perhaps, talking about a *New School*, such as the one featured in this book, can lead to the building of more ‘new’ schools, where greatness does not have to be an outlier anymore.

This book was written for all stakeholders who want to rally around school improvement. The pubic chooses school Trustees to be responsible for great schools. School leaders want to inspire students, staff, and families to form great schools. Teachers want to be part of great schools. Non-instructional staff want to contribute to great schools. Parents want to send their children to great schools. University researchers want to inform and be informed by great schools. Students want to have a say in shaping great schools. This text invites all stakeholders to not only celebrate ideas of greatness in schools, but come to understand that innovative and engaging practices can be affordable. These ideas and ‘grappling’ questions can build a rich context for talk about how, and at what cost, we can contribute to building more great schools.

Biden’s message that our budgets reflect our values, should give some serious pause for thought. It’s time to push the reset button!

# **Education doesn't have to be a fixed puzzle.**

LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/education-doesnt-have-fixed-puzzle-barbara-smith/>

Often those responsible for schooling feel compelled to keep it as a fixed system, but it doesn’t have to be. We can change the shape of what is learned and how students learn in our new world. The new age of the pandemiccould very well be the disrupter that enables meaningful change in schools to happen. The temptation to put the pieces back together in the same framework is there, but before we build a blended education replica, that simply duplicates what did not meet the needs of all students in the past, we might re-think how we can generate (and afford) a new way forward. My latest book, **How Much Does a Great School Cost? School Economies and School Values** features a chapter called “The Currency of Change”, which is introduced by Malala Yousafzi's quote, “If people were silent nothing would change.” This book was written for all stakeholders, hopeful for positive school change. Read on for a glimpse of the un-muted...

In this final section and chapter we compare the possibilities to respond to the question: “To change or not to change”. It can be difficult for new schools to take shape without stakeholders being aware of more options for schooling than what currently exists. Learning about what else in education is happening around the world and teasing out if the ideas capture interest is a missed step in school improvement. Furthermore, making determinations if we can afford something else is also remiss in strategic plans. It’s time as Malala suggests to speak up and reset the education compass toward new directions.

After 40 years in education, this book synthesizes many gems and secret sauces for building ideal schools of the future. Letting values drive the budget enables ideal schools to thrive... This book is now available from Amazon.com or Amazon.ca:

**Amazon USA:**

[https://www.amazon.com/Much-Does-Great-School-Cost/dp/1475858884/ref=sr\_1\_1?dchild=1&keywords=How+Much+Does+a+Great+School+Cost%3F&qid=1616177519&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.com/Much-Does-Great-School-Cost/dp/1475858884/ref%3Dsr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=How+Much+Does+a+Great+School+Cost%3F&qid=1616177519&sr=8-1)

**Amazon Canada:**

[https://www.amazon.ca/Much-Does-Great-School-Cost/dp/1475858892/ref=sr\_1\_1?dchild=1&keywords=How+much+does+a+great+school+cost%3F%5C&qid=1616177441&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.ca/Much-Does-Great-School-Cost/dp/1475858892/ref%3Dsr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=How+much+does+a+great+school+cost%3F%5C&qid=1616177441&sr=8-1)

**Is Wonder Enough?**

LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/wonder-enough-barbara-smith/

My nephew who has two high school daughters enroute to college one day soon send me article about the notion of "wonder" and asked for my thoughts about it...I've often seen it touted as a magic synapse to innovation, but felt the wondering may not lead to innovative or inventive action. Here was my response:

*I think a ‘sense of wonder’ is nice - but many schools fall short - by thinking it’s enough. From a brain stretching perspective, the individual needs time to socially use stuff they are learning (“talk it”, per say), but then they need to be on their own to think through stuff - plan, revise - kind of like being in the war room of your mind... you can’t just wonder - you need to do something about which captures your interest....You need a pen, a computer, a sketch pad - something to etch out your musings with self...when time is built in for these tuggles and tinkering with ideas, then the individual is more equipped to go take it to the social level. Vygotsky said you need to go back and forth between the social and the individual thinking modes - to develop further one’s individual and collective thoughts. Schools in NA pretty much ignore this psychology - as our systems are set up for rote learning IN A RANDOMLY SPECIFIED TIME - based on the gross assumption that this is what’s best for our kids - in terms of education - NOT. Wondering is just the tip of the iceberg, and many experts think that’s enough to make a difference. I think not.*

# Distance Learning Should Loosen the Rigidity of School Schedules...

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/distance-learning-should-loosen-rigidity-school-schedules->

smith/

And here are some reasons why our school did not replicate the same school schedule that was designed for a classroom setting. I'm often asked if there was research to support the distance learning approach we developed for our school during this time of COVID. I wish I could say that there was direct and comparable research, but there has never been an interruption to school, like this before in modern education time.

So the direct research is yet to be written...but the biggest assumption people will make, I can bet my 40 years of education on - is thinking that replicating a schedule made for a classroom will work in a completely different setting, no longer surrounded by fellow classmates. As much as the visual platform tries to emulate the classroom, it cannot replicate it. Schools that choose to simply copy the schedule, may have chosen a popular path, but such decisions, I sense, are short-sighted, lacking the deep thinking and hard work necessary to help kids and their staff in this situation. What lies before everyone is a complex challenge, and there are never simple solutions to anything that requires such significant change. There are plenty of short cuts, but for those fiercely focused on student learning, a new approach, grounded in solid understandings of teaching and learning, needs to be considered.

We decided to look at distance learning as a combination of on-line and significantly offline home study, AND build in ample amount of time for self-directed learning and wellness - for our students and our staff. We wanted our students to be able to connect with their teachers and their classmates, but we also wanted them to embrace this opportunity for independent learning, and become empowered, hopeful that their minds and ideas can some day solve significant future problems, like COVID, that we face right now.

Like most distance learning programs, they will evolve and ideally adapt based on teacher and student use. As designers of these programs, we are also in the thick of researching them in a number of ways. We consult our colleagues at other schools; we track student, teacher and parent responses, and we ground our decisions on what we know is solid research in best practices of teaching and learning. So when I was asked about distance learning decisions, I shared that our rationale was grounded in psychological needs, solid research in curriculum design and teaching, and the need for authentic learning.

Just from a psychological standpoint alone:

* The kids and the teachers need time to process this uncertainty.
* Without calling it a temporary grieving process - it is - and we need to allow the building of family relationships to help fill this gap. It's the kind of time that can't and should not be filled with a textbook or a worksheet.
* Young people need to feel a sense of "*we can solve something like this in the future*". So, now more than ever, a focus on independent problem solving without solutions, is not only authentic, it's meaningful. Young people have been trained to jump through the teacher's hoops for so long, they need time to create their own hoops, so they feel empowered to solve problems, like COVID, or others we will face in the future. They can't hope it will be someone else who can save the day; they need to feel educated enough to know they can be a part of it.

From a curriculum design and teaching and standpoint:

* The most ideal condition for learning is a low teacher:student ratio. The research that says bigger classes are better is counter to what the experts in education, especially teachers, know to be true. Smaller class sizes matter. At home, the parent becomes that 1:1 (or 1:2,,,) support, but ideally guided by a program of study prepared by experts in the field. The opportunity for learning is magnified when the child can speak about what is being learned, with an expert (their teacher), but more importantly speak like an expert with other adults and peers. (Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism). Learning in this *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) is not about regurgitating facts; it's about moving from novice to more expert use of a language using many facts. Students in a home setting, for the day, do not have to wait their turn to talk about they know, AND they have the stage to elaborate on their thinking, something that can often be cut short during a classroom Q and A session - to make time for everyone to chime in...
* We also have an opportunity to emulate the conditions of great thinkers, who moved back and forth between the "social" and individual learning environments. How did Marie Curie discover? How did the great things in history get done? They required extended periods of working on one's own, and moving back and forth with the "social" domain, and their tinkering with testing, and re-testing of their ideas - not limited by 45 minute periods, switching thinking gears randomly to focus on five to seven subjects per day. Adults would never tolerate such discontinuity in their work lives, yet it seems accepted practice to do this to our kids for over a century! We now have an opportunity to give young people more time to think and develop ideas on their own. Vygotsky's notions are key to grounding the need for creating environments for young people to pursue passions. I predict some day the best schools, will emulate the kinds of schedules where young people can focus and concentrate on one or two subjects a day - so they have the deep learning that Howard Gardner and Michael Fullan and other experts speak and write about today. Students can inquire and be inspired by such learning experiences. They can become something other than students; they can become young researchers, young scientists, young novel writers; young statisticians, young biologists, young musicians, young athletes...

Making it real...authentic learning

* The home, or any space, can be a learning laboratory. Young people can learn to understand more about viruses, for instance, by exploring other unseen micro-organisms, such as bacteria. They can learn to make agar at home. (YouTube has the recipe). They can take swabs of different areas of the home and then watch the bacteria grow. Then they can put Listerine, Lysol, or even things that you might not think would kill germs, to see what happens. This kind of understanding isn't the same when you read about it in a textbook. Students can emulate what scientists do with the "basics". Education does not have to stop short of the applied part of learning. Can we do this at school, with traditional schedules?, not really. But with this time for sustained and systematic learning, students can not only experience authentic learning, they also have an opportunity to connect, albeit virtually, and through email with their teachers or experts in any field. Young people now have a chance to put the practice into place that the theory of learning has been trying to get established in schools for more than half a century now.
* Teachers need time to listen to what the students have done with their experiences, and in turn, learn how to adapt and use the student's learning as part of the curriculum (Dewey said this in 1916). . If we bind both teacher and students up inside the traditional schedules, we limit the kind of deep thinking and authentic learning opportunities that mankind truly needs. Certainly, now more than ever, we can see that getting kids to memorize other people's facts, is not enough. Educators need to figure out how to emulate the real conditions for future learning.

Teachers as professionals, not technicians

* Some may consider this time as a wake-up call. We have an opportunity to thrive as a profession. Giving teachers real time to think and invent lessons, not simply be supervisors of someone else's textbook lessons - is the opportunity before us. In spite of the Ontario government's (and the Common Core's...) obsession with disconnected lists of 'learning objectives', teachers can be more than technical assistants to someone else's plans; we can be curriculum designers and builders of programs that promote deep thinkers and innovators; how? by being deep thinkers and innovators about what works best for each child. Everyone will agree that great teachers, truly know their kids, but our teachers need to be trusted and encouraged to build programming that will inspire and engage them.

What's ideal for teacher growth?

* What's good for teachers and what's ideal for teacher growth depends on the culture and comfort with change. Our schedules tend to be all about what's good for the teachers, not necessarily what's ideal or best for their personal growth or what's best for student learning. The amount of teaching and learning that fits into these tightly-woven 45 minute slots - can become quite sacred for some teachers. Shifting the boundary to one hour can pose an enormous threat to folks clinging to sameness, and whether intentional, or not, sameness breeds mediocrity. When I'm told our plan is not the same as replicating the schedules that other fine school have done....I say "thank goodness", as now our students and teachers are more free than ever to learn and grow. Schedules are handcuffed to sameness, and simply put, if you want improvement - then the masking tape around the sacred schedule has to be loosened. COVID, has given us this opportunity to remove it, for now. While others have scrambled to try and re-assemble it, we have taken some brave steps to say "what's in the best interest of our kids?", So, we have asked our families to trust us and support our approach, as we are committed to building the best possible education conditions, recognizing we need their help and support at home.

What's before us is a time where everyone can study education, not take the short cut to compare minutes of schedules, or try to do what the shiny school with the pillars is doing down the street. I suspect the heroes of our current crisis, like the Marie Curies, will be the people who find a way to build tunnels under rigid schedules, to find the time they need to pursue their passions and interests, far from the maddening cry of sameness.

The curriculum environment for many people right now - is the home. It makes no sense, trying to replicate a program designed for classrooms filled with students, in the home setting. It may fool some of the masses, but for experts in the field, it's a time to get real and apply best practices in teaching and learning, beyond the limits of a schedule...

**Testing Scandal…Sharing my Facebook posting**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/testing-scandalsharing-my-facebook-posting-barbara-smith/

[Barbara Smith](https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100006881559557) I do hope the issue of these timed tests (SAT, ACT, GRE...) will finally be addressed. No question cheating the system is bad - and there must be consequences for people who commit fraud - but the nature of these unfair tests must be addressed. Just because everyone takes them under the same conditions - for the same amount of time - doesn't mean they are effective tools for making decisions about college entry. Assessment experts have known these metrics are flawed - for decades. Admission directors do not need to have any background in education/assessment, so all they can do is simply trust these tools - that everyone else uses. Most students need more time to complete (and THINK) about each question on the test for starters. Right now colleges are waving a proud flag by indicating some critical mass of high scores - when all they are indicating is who answers/processes the fastest. Big Deal! When anything in society is not fair, corruption and ways around a system - happen. Let's not forget to look at the tool itself - and look at all the damage it causes...This could be a blessing in disguise - the public may wake up - question - and demand change. All it takes is some schools to not consider the scores - and see how well those students did - without putting them and their families through hell...Who will be the brave colleges that put an end to this madness?

# **But What if the Authorizers only See Dashboards?**

A LinkedIn article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-authorizers-only-see-dashboards-barbara-smith/

From time to time, I think about returning to school, and being in a classroom. I miss the spirit and excitement of these buzzing learning places. When I browsed through a list of school leader job searches yesterday, I came across one that peaked my interest. It indicated that the school has a unique arts-integrated curriculum anchored in project based learning, and aims to “prepare students for success in college, career, and society by teaching students to collaboratively invent, design, and implement creative solutions that address societal problems and injustices”. This sounds like a charter school that appreciates 21stcentury learning. However, when you read the description carefully, and in-between-the-lines, this opportunity may not be one for someone who is passionate about making a difference in education. I took some time and examined this ad; I removed the school name and reference to the state, and adapted the following collapsed description. I generally nodded in agreement with the following expectations: The school Principal/CEO shall:

* Establish and promote high standards and expectations for all students and staff for academic performance and responsibility for behavior.
* Organize and supervise procedures for identifying and addressing special needs of students including health-related concerns, as well as physical or emotional and spiritual needs.
* Serve as a role model for students, dressing professionally, demonstrating the importance and relevance of learning, accepting responsibility, and demonstrating pride in the education profession.
* Assume responsibility for the health, safety, and welfare of students, employees and visitors, including establishing school policies and procedures for co-curricular and community behaviors.
* Encourage students to take responsibility for behavior.
* File all required reports regarding violence, vandalism, attendance and discipline matters.
* Notify immediately the Board, and appropriate personnel and agencies when there is evidence of substance abuse, child abuse, child neglect, severe medical or social conditions, potential suicide or students appearing to be under the influence of alcohol or controlled substances.
* Manage, evaluate and supervise effective instructional programs, extracurricular activities, building maintenance, program evaluation, personnel management, office and financial operations, and emergency procedures.
* Ensure compliance with all laws, board policies and civil regulations.
* Maintain and periodically review procedures that create and maintain attractive, organized, functional, healthy, clean, and safe facilities, with proper attention to the visual, acoustic and temperature.
* Prepare and submit all school entitlement applications, progress reports and completion reports (Title I, II, IV, NSLP, and School Improvement grants) for the authorizer. Protect confidentiality.
* Communicate regularly with parents, seeking their support and advice, so as to create a cooperative relationship to support the student in the school.
* Oversee ongoing student recruitment efforts
* Attend required committee meetings (e.g.: fundraising, curriculum, etc.) and extra school sponsored functions or events, i.e. graduation, recruiting events, etc.
* Complete in a timely fashion all records and reports as requested by the Board.
* Identify/or create and facilitate professional development opportunities for academic faculty and staff.
* Engage in the process of continuous professional growth in the following areas: student achievement, curriculum and instruction, financial and operational solvency.
* Supervise the instructional programs of the school, evaluating lesson plans and observing classes (teaching, as duties dictate) on a regular basis to encourage the use of a variety of instructional strategies and materials consistent with research on learning and child growth and development.

I really support leaders who teach and make time to team teach in classrooms with teachers.

Where the rub came, however, was with the following listed expectations:

* Research and collect data regarding the needs of students, and other pertinent information including the collection of detail regarding student homeless, or any other barriers to the learning process, and use this data to inform/implement/enforce operational or academic practices.

**You can inform and implement without using the term, “enforce”.**

* Keep the staff informed and seek ideas for the improvement of the school. Conduct meetings, as necessary, for the proper functioning of the school: i.e. weekly meetings for full-time staff; monthly staff meetings, at the school leader s discretion.

**Regular communications need to be clear – not on an “as necessary” basis.**

* Maintain and review the annual master schedule for instructional programs, ensuring sequential learning experiences for students consistent with the school s philosophy, mission statement and instructional goals.

**The school leader should be part of a team that establishes the master schedule. Maintenance is not enough. The schedule is a key change and improvement agent. Staff need to expect it to change from year to year.**

* Preferred Qualifications: Masters degree in Education or related field with relevant experience, including but not limited to business administration, public administration, social work, or the arts.

**Ouch – Does this mean that a 21stcentury school might be led by someone who has never been a teacher in a classroom? This speaks volumes that experience and expertise in understanding quality teaching and learning is not necessary. It is not enough to have experience “leading organizations.”**

I then looked further to research the state authorizing process:

* Does the state give schools authorizer choices – so that a monopoly view of quality education does not limit the innovative potential of charter schools?
* Do the authorizers rely on the expertise of outside accreditation agencies (i.e. Middle States Accreditation) to provide a comprehensive analysis of the quality of the whole school?
* Do authorizers make decisions about closing schools based on data that fits on a single page dashboard?
* Are the authorizers present in the schools they oversee?
* Do the authorizers recommend school leaders be experts in the education field?
* Are the appointed authorizers experts in the field of education?
* What is the state process for ensuring oversight of authorizers?

Finally, even though these qualities were pitched at the end of the ad, I believe it is the secret sauce for success, often muted by those who believe that what makes a great school – great, can fit on a single page dashboard:

* Experience in or with the arts, design, community organization, and/or social activism.
* Passion, idealism, integrity, positive attitude, mission-driven, and self-directed with a great sense of humor.

As far as applying to this school – and the system that authorizes it, I will take a pass, because I see much more than dashboards in my rearview and forward-thinking mirror.

**Knowing What to Turn Around**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/knowing-what-turn-around-barbara-smith/

There are forces out there that believe we can turn-around schools by making data rooms sprinkled with attractive charts, filled with numbers going UP! For too many people responsible for schools, this is the lifeblood of improving schools. I would not be relieved, nor put much stock in the following data, but there are charter systems and grant distributers who might be convinced this data reveals a school moving in the right direction:

·     Attendance has improved from 94.3% to 94.8%.

·     Enrollment has gone up 413 students to 439 students.

·     The test scores have improved from 49% proficiency to 53% proficiency.

And qualitatively,

·     School is implementing at least quarterly practice testing emulating the big day.

·     School adds special celebrations, poster campaigns and extra food around testing days.

·     School hires staff with proven high testing results track records.

·     School includes student testing results when evaluating staff

·     Students participate in highly formulated teacher-directed classrooms.

There you go, a formula for success! Really – do you really buy this? The less understanding of rigorous peer-reviewed research in education, the easier it is to digest this over-simplified and frankly backward view of what makes a school great.

We would know more about what to turn-around if all decision-makers were life-long learners – and do the ‘grit’ needed to keep abreast of current research and best practice in education. We would know more about what to turn-around if we surveyed students each year. They know they are bored to tears in settings where they cannot construct materials and ideas. They know such turn-around formulas are not inspiring. They know such schools highly cherish the students with high scores, and prefer that weaker scoring members move on to other schools. They know what we need to turn-around – not test scores, but **dis-engagement,**that is so pervasive in schools that minimize greatness indicators.

It’s surprising that quantitative worshippers do not pay attention to other data for their dashboards such as the increasing suicide rates among students or the reduction of young people entering the teaching profession in the United States. A current system of accountability (basically hire and fire approach) is not attracting ‘ready-made’ ideal teachers. Few people want to take a chance on this profession these days. To turn-around such trends, we have to build in teacher development on-site – and make sure the budgets reflect that time is afforded for weaker teachers to work alongside stronger teachers in team teaching and planning scenarios. The system of letting staff go every year, with the ‘lalaland’ expectation that the super teachers are just around the corner – is the most ridiculous assumption, but common practice, particularly in charter schools. Check out the job advertisement sites. Lots of turn-over data there. The system of clearing out weaker teachers is simply increasing the number of lucrative headhunter recruiting businesses. The creation of a turn-style profession, is not helping. Such administrators need to stop playing roulette and begin the hard work of professional development. I am all for rigorous teaching standards – but they are not contained on a single page dashboard. Every school leader should be very familiar with Charlotte Danielson’s and Linda-Darling Hammond’s work. This is the comprehensive stuff that enables school leaders to identify areas for improvement – and do something to help teachers get there. Handing them a spreadsheet with an overall poor score – just doesn’t cut it.

The narrow focus on selected data is front and center in the problem of school turn-around.  An unhappy culture exists when educators are not developed – but rather fired or re-routed from establishing any sense of belonging. This does nothing to develop a sense of community, nor student trust that their teachers will be there for them long after their classroom experiences have ended. In such environments, they see teachers as clerks in a large department store. Such perceptions contribute to a lack of empathy which leads to schools needing to over-invest in behavior management programs – to ‘consequence’ or punish kids into a compliant existence. *This sounds like a fun place to go for six hours a day.*There are actually schools in 2019 that expect quiet in the halls. Seriously, this space could be the only time when students are permitted to put more than one sentence together! The teacher-directed “sameness” model (i.e. *Teach Like a Champion)*is boring these kids to death, and by over-testing them throughout the year, it is making the culture worse. I also predict many testing scores are random – as they do not account for test fatigue or the varied critical mass of students with special needs. There are systems that create school ranking report cards that actually believe such data has put the best schools on the top of their heap. Dream on!

Turning around schools starts with understanding that there is so much else that matters beyond the test scores, attendance and re-enrollment. The current trend in the turn-around process makes everyone pay for mistakes – when the research says – we need to learn from them. I say, where is the survey data that tells us what the students are thinking? This is a qualitative and quantitative data gap that needs to be filled. I sense we do not want to ask students for their feedback because the dashboard builders might need to create new dashboards – and they would discover that what makes a great school – just doesn’t fit on one page.

Barbara J. Smith, ZPD School and Curriculum Design (www.z-pd.ca)

**Civics 101**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/civics-101-barbara-smith/

I hope I am one of many people driven to put some words together to reflect how proud I am of what young people are doing today. The student March today against gun violence is refreshing, authentic and evidence that critical thinking is alive and well in schools and within the tunnels of social media, beyond schools and teachers. On this first official day marking one month past the cry for “enough” mass shootings in schools, students demonstrated passion and poise. Knowing full well that schools would lose money for students not signing in for attendance first thing in the morning at schools, many students chose to honor the idea of stopping school action for 17 minutes within their school day, honoring each person killed in the Parkland massacre and all who have suffered since the slaying at Sandy Hook.

Even when the news was aware of this day, there was little attention given days prior to the event. No one can say fake news manipulated students into action; rather, students rallied via social media to coordinate peaceful walks, and even when threats hurled by spineless administrators that protesting students might face suspension, this has been an incredible first step toward change. While many students on this day have demonstrated respect for the system by “signing in” for the day, there may come a time when students may feel they need to make their point heard more by giving each victim 17 days of protest. Want to get the attention of politicians, disrupt the money train. Sadly, if there are few fiscal casualties of protest, decision-makers can simply get through the day and hope the stories will run their course in the media.  Even though Americans were handed a serving of provoking news (firing, via Twitter, of Rex Tillerson; hints at shuffling cabinet members, a $31,000 purchase of a dining room set for Ben Carson…), the day before this historical march, it did not deter the passion of young people to step and be heard today.

We cannot underestimate the power of social media as young people were able to mobilize and coordinate such a important march. As I listen to broadcasts all day today, I am moved by students realizing that they are not skipping class; they are doing Civics!

**Lined Notebooks as Tools for Engagement – I Think Not.**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/lined-notebooks-tools-engagement-i-think-barbara-smith/>

I’m not sure what they call the lined notebooks in various countries around the world, but in Canada, the Hilroy is a staple on most ‘back to school’ lists. Even though many young people have high hopes of filling the pages with brilliant work, the motivation is usually short-lived. Who has researched the value of using such a tool in the classroom? How many teachers read the words on notebook pages? How many students keep these notebooks as references for future study? How many parents question the practice of throwing away volumes of many unfinished notebooks, year after year?

Even though we know that young people are more inspired to write and share ideas using graphic organizers, there is still the conventional tug for teachers to use the notebook. Why? Perhaps educators think students, who keep legible notes, will be better prepared to be successful in school, in the world of work and in their daily lives? If this is true, then where is the evidence that shows that students with neat and complete notebooks have soared to great heights in school and beyond? Or maybe they think notebook writing is preparing them for future drudgery? Bad practice prepares students to be ready for more bad practice? Perhaps educators believe that students need to put ideas in their own words and for many, in complete sentences? In effect, the neat notebook must be a gateway to great writing? If such a claim holds true, let’s see the notebooks of great writers when they were in school? If the notebook was a precursor to their writing prowess, then where are their testimonials begging schools to not do away with notebooks?

In my mind there needs to be some authentic purpose for everything we do in school. Writing is merely a mock exercise, when the destination of the notebook is to eventually fill the bags of garbage bins. Recycled or not, they tend to symbolize busy work, and for many, who struggle to write, an annoying source of frustration.

Do you remember that poem about writing on a fresh sheet of lined paper? I do recall that feeling of starting something new and feeling that sense that this notebook is going to be that one mistake-free source of pride, something I will craft until the end and make it a work of art, worthy of viewing, over and over, again. By page three, however, the romance with the notebook tends to fade, as sloppiness seeps in and gives way to more elaborate doodling. What do you think that poem might say about page 3?

David Booth from OISE-UT once said that many kids are building tunnels under teachers and learning outside conventional classrooms.  They are writing in the form of texting; they are reading to solve problems on-line. It is doubtful that student success – or not, can be traced back to the Hilroy notebook. Yet we continue to put, not just one – but multiple packs of them on our supply lists. Maybe it’s time to look more closely at the contents of the ‘back to school’ supply lists, and ask ‘why’? Anything that is simply thrown out cannot be a symbol of value. We need to study what students keep (their art work, their cherished projects, their letters to and from experts, their resumes, their sports medals, their journals, their Shutterfly books, their videos…) to find out more about ways to prompt writing of a more authentic kind. How do we make the 21st century notebooks keepsakes and diaries that elicit pride at the same time as house evidence of learning? How do we help young people see themselves as writers of reference books for further study? How do we reduce the cumbersome notebook writing for the sake of writing?  When will we see that anything thrown away is not worthy of one’s best effort?   The notebook – does it contribute to student engagement? I think not.

**What Can Betsy Do?**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-can-betsy-do-barbara-smith/

I think often about what Betsy can do to overcome the challenges in US education today.

Funding decisions must be linked to research. I have no doubt that not funding schools with poor scores will widen the gap and polarity in America. The fact that Detroit gets so much less per student than a child in Rockville, Maryland (based on the nature and fortune/non-fortune of where a child is born) - is already putting certain areas behind the starting block. At least in Canada every child gets an EQUAL opportunity for an education, and in effect, live out an 'American dream'. Funding is equalized. And no teacher is evaluated or school de-funded, based on the students in their care - not performing well on tests.

There are so many factors that contribute to the poor scores (poverty, genes, sickness...). The scores of students with disabilities are averaged into these scores. Do we really think all schools and teachers have equal distributions of kids who cannot perform well on tests? And yet, everyone uses these tests as a 'true picture' of learning? Has anyone looked at how such tests - are poorly designed - without having any research-based accountability? People assume that because it is a test, it must be a good one. Many commercial tests will not divulge what a student knows, or a teacher for that fact! No one would ever, in a reputable higher education system, consider the relationship between test scores and school/teacher capacity, causal. I agree that we must focus on what we can improve - but making sure the dollars go to the kids in school is something we should really take a look at. If Betsy had any sense at all she would get herself inside a solid education grad program and LEARN about the research. Research has alternative perspectives, but fake research and fake practice won’t cut it, as a viable option. She must read about the difference between rigorous research and perception, and understand that students need to have this understanding in order to distinguish between fact and fiction, and what is “not so clear”. I really hope Betsy will learn about Carol Dweck, Howard Gardner, Charlotte Danielson, Linda-Darling-Hammond, Andy Hargreaves, Ken Robinson, and the works of many incredible researchers who have discovered how best to teach and learn - and fund it.

The simple answer is Betsy can retire; if she cannot transform herself, how can she transform others. It's not just Betsy, I'm not sure there has ever been someone in her position who has taken on the task of understanding education, deeply. And it's not just Betsy - it's school board members, mayors, charter board directors, school leaders, parents, and the press, who must take on the challenge of learning the difference between fake education and complex and significant research. Just as I believe all students can learn, and teachers can aspire to greatness, especially within a FAIR system, I hope Betsy and others can, too. There are no short cuts on the road to finding and implementing what we know from rigorous educational research. Removing funding or supporting test scores as a basis for teacher performance is ignoring the depth and breadth of what experts have confirmed about education. Hold schools accountable for the best practices, and knowing what they are is a great first step.

# **The Teacher Desk and the Principal’s Office: Some New “No Go’s” for a**

# **21st Century School**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/teacher-desk-principals-office-some-new-gos-21st-century-smith/

What would happen if schools no longer had desks for teachers or offices for principals? The teacher desk is a classic piece of furniture I often encourage teachers to remove from their classrooms. My intent was not to shock anyone, but rather, I wanted to encourage teachers to move to where their students are at. Based on decades of classroom observations, I have found that teachers and students are more inclined to co-investigate, model thinking, apply skills and engage in rich discussions when they work side-by-side one another. Having the teacher move to the student’s learning space can help in a variety of ways, such as adjusting puzzles, browsing websites, and managing paper to pen imaging or written text. I admit the teacher desk can be a safe place to lock valuables, purses and documents, but a file drawer can do the same, while freeing up space.

The image of the students lined up to show the teacher their homework or worksheet completion – is not consistent with a 21st century culture. The larger teacher desk is simply a barrier and a reminder to students that the teacher is at the top of the food chain. The desk, like a window office, is a symbol that the teacher has a raised status in the classroom community. When students sit in rows in much smaller working spaces, they are forced into an ideal space for teacher directed-learning. While the smaller conventional desks allow for more room to pack in more students, while preserving the generous desk space for the teacher, such a configuration of space limits 21st century learning. I have viewed classrooms with revolving student desks and tables for decades, but rarely will a teacher part with the treasured desk. To paraphrase Chicken Little: *Would the sky fall in* on the classroom if the teacher desk became a vision of the past, something to talk about in an education museum.

And what about the Principal’s Office? Is it possible for a school to function without one? I realize many school leaders have earned that space, and after taking on the challenge and responsibility of being at the top of the food chain, they must feel good about being awarded the higher end desk in the building. I do recognize a school must have designated spaces to lock private documents and staff, parents and students need to engage in private conversations, separate from the classroom, but I am not convinced that the way we did the ‘office’ sixty years ago – should be the same way we have an office today.

Imagine the principal with a travelling office, meaning the principal spends most of his or her time in the classrooms, not simply observing, but co-teaching with teachers. I understand the need for ‘rounds’ throughout the day to keep a pulse on the school culture, but building in teaching time can add a valuable set of hands. Imagine a school where classrooms and generic offices were shared, without the oversized counters separating the seemingly less important from the school’s VIP’s (principal and administrative support teams)? What would happen if the reception team were positioned at entrance to the school, welcoming our ‘guests’ as ambassadors of the school (in the spirit of Disney)? Imagine if the vice principal’s office resided in the lunchroom, outside and/or in the hallways? Imagine an academic leader sharing space in the library at tables with the librarian and students? Offices can function as ‘walls’ – and given the need for education to remove global barriers, perhaps we can view how our micro-culture can further support a more progressive way of doing school. When designing school spaces, how can we do better in terms of making them more inclusive? Take some time to think about your facility use and the habits reinforced by such arrangements and use of materials. Chime in. I am all ears about what, why and how others have moved beyond the Madeline images of schools where students are fastened to learning in “rows on rows on rows”.

**It’s That Admissions time Again…**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/its-admissions-time-again-barbara-smith/

It's that time of year again for many schools to think about making sure the seats will be filled for the coming school year. The challenge of positioning the merits of any school requires a solid understanding of the strengths, the strategic plan for ongoing improvement and what makes the school distinct from other schools. The school leader, as the face of school, is the key ambassador for all things 'Admissions'. Years ago the term admissions or student recruitment was reserved for independent, private or college/university entrance, but things are different now as public schools, and in the United States, charter schools, are funded directly by the number of students they retain or admit. Finding the right fit can be a challenge for many students and parents.

The strength of any school can be measured in a number of ways. Does the school do what it says it does? (integrity). Does a school graduate students who make a positive contribution in their own lives, others, to their careers and in society? (walls of fame). Does a school score well on tests that measure fairly what students understand in the short term? (authentic classroom assessment and checks for meeting and mastering relevant standardized benchmarks). Does a school create an engaging culture for learning for ALL its students? (inclusion). Does a school develop teacher-leaders? (commitment to building an exceptional critical mass of educators).

A transparent, ambitious and easy-to-grasp strategic plan is a gift for anyone promoting the values of a school. People appreciate seeing the connection between annual parent, staff and student surveys and the direction for school improvement. The strategic plan should lay out the path from mission to vision highlighting the voices of each community member. Transparency happens when the leader uses data to deliberately sustain the strengths of the school, at the same time as he or she is planning and implementing positive changes for improvement.

Finally, the most challenging task for many schools is to demonstrate how distinct they are from other schools. There are plenty of schools that identify as 21st Century schools, laptop schools, IB schools, boys or girls schools...but what specifically, do they do differently that makes 'school x' distinct? I often ask community members to take part in 'vision quests' to find out about cutting edge innovative ideas in education before sharing their hopes and dreams for our school on strategic or school improvement surveys. In this way, they can think about experiences outside our school box - and expect more in the way of innovative programming. Having a culture eager to contribute to the "what's next?" part of the school story provides the admission team at any school with vibrant material to share. This is particularly important when you are opening a new school. You have to ask the question: "Why would anyone want to go to a new, yet to be proven, school?" Part of communicating the distinctness of a school - involves setting up a list of questions for community members to not only ask us - but ask folks back at their own schools. These questions can be shaped by rigorous progressive research that provides ongoing backed up evidence that schools are perceived as doing what they say they are doing. Examples of some questions include: "Does your school have daily physical and outdoor education?"; "Will your child publish a novel by Grade 8?" and "Will your child do robotics in every grade?"

Years ago I worked at the Institute for Child Studies (ICS) in Toronto in the teacher educator program. At the time, it was very difficult to gain admission into this cutting edge school. They said mothers lined up to fill in their applications when they were pregnant. Whenever I work at building new schools or transforming them, I keep that ICS standard as the bar I'm aiming for. While one could say that an admission team does not have to do much differently with a wait list a mile long, but I suspect that a school will have much more to offer if it is determined to sustain its' strengths, be relentless about planning strategically and implementing rigorously, while always making room for "what's next?"

**Enriching the “Who Knows Best?” Story in Education**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/enriching-who-knows-best-story-education-barbara-smith/

I know that many kids hate school because they have no say, but sometimes there is a world of experiences outside the student, the family, the teacher and the principal - that the education community, district or governmental group need to be more aware of...before making decisions about what is best for a school. In an ideal sense, we want students to take responsibility for their own learning, but there is much out there for all partners in education to consider before making decisions about school improvement. I will use the TV show "Father Knows Best" as a trigger for hopefully a lively conversation about enriching this ‘who knows best’ story in education.

Most large-scale districts/boards set the curriculum, so broad and so vast - that it is a challenge for educators to ensure that all students will demonstrate a high level of mastery. The evaluation schemes that measure "assessment of learning" (ie. A, B, C. D, and F's or 1-2-3-4 rubrics or 1-2-3-4-5-6-7 in IB) cover or expose students to curriculum, but few students are expected to learn what is taught, in a deep way. In a sense, you can squeeze in more content, because fewer kids are expected to use the skills, knowledge and understandings in expert or 'like expert' ways. If we think about it, these four or more tiered sets of assessments might be viewed as excuses for the accepted reality that not all students will master everything. I would call this scenario - "The District or Board Knows Best" approach to teaching and learning.

The reality, however, is that the control of the content and context is in the hands of the teacher (even when resources are heaped upon them at the board/district or governmental levels). When that classroom door closes - it is the teacher who makes the call to select what and how the curriculum will be taught. They may make the call to differentiate or use a one size fits all model - or not. When I've asked many teachers how they meet the needs of the all the kids and the massive number of expectations - the response is typically "I pick and choose and do my best"... In this case the learning story is "The Teacher Knows Best".

The popular Reggio and Montesssori Methods, that tends to exist more in the kinder and primary years, speaks of giving children the reigns, and letting the teacher follow their interests, passions and pursuits. Student-directed approaches are sometimes supported in upper elementary and secondary - when students have opportunities to work on integrated projects that they design and drive. In these cases, I would use the title "The Student Knows Best.". While this sounds as if this approach leads to enhanced student engagement, it remains the least common road taken JK-grade 12 in North America. How many schools or districts invite student participation in curriculum design?

I also worked in a community charter school where families and interested community members did much more than bake cookies. They were part of the school management team and were trusted with many responsibilities including the development of the vision and action teams to carry out specific goals and targets (school handbook, ‘mural-ing’, signage, parent education Ted Talk events, co-teaching and more). This "Community Knows Best" Model was quite effective when all the partners: students, staff, families and community members - trusted and supported one another.

When it comes to making priorities for strategic planning and school improvement, satisfaction surveys emerge that usually tap the input of parents and teachers (rarely students). Policy-makers, outside the classroom, typically make up the survey questions. If these administrators are not open to new ideas, or seek out best practice beyond the walls of their schools, districts, states and countries, then their data will be limited to only what they know. There may be serious changes proposed at the policy level, but only when the teacher ‘buys’ in – will they be implemented behind closed doors.

There is an important step many schools leave out before their surveys leave the 'starting gate'. This step is what I call the 'learning inside and outside the box' experience. In addition to clarifying how our current practices were addressing best practice, I also wanted all community members to be aware of great practices that we were doing – AND NOT doing. In this way students, staff and parents could weigh in on more possibilities we could consider moving forward in our quest through continuous improvement of building an ideal school. We organized a *Vision Quest* morning where families were given passports to visit 35 laptops that were set up with examples of innovative schools (ie. High Tech High, The Blue Man School; the Kindness School, the Bali Green School, 'maker space' programs, coding programming, benefits of daily physical education, media and traditional arts programming, robotics, local and global service learning opportunities, e-pals, Model UN, sitting on balls verses chairs....). The community members, teachers, and students (grade 3 +) put a green dot on laptops they wanted to promote right away, a yellow dot for programs/experiences they wanted to learn more about and a red dot sticker on laptops to indicate they did not support a particular idea. We did notice there was some alignment with parents, staff and students needs, but in several cases, they were polarized about their preferences. After everyone had a chance to view what was invited to discuss what they learned, what surprised them and what they might want to recommend for our school.

After seeing the stickers, listening to conversations, and giving community members a chance to learn about a broader range of possibilities, we then generated questions for a school survey that provided feedback about our current direction while proving insight into a larger bank of ideas for making future recommendations. Our students, staff and family members then completed the surveys that yielded a rich supply of ideas for moving forward - and reshaping our vision that helped shape a fresh new direction for the school.

So often we have scenarios where the teacher may indicate they follow the student's lead, but you we expand the student’s experience so that their ‘lead’ can lead to exceptional learning experiences. Many students will lead where their experience has been, and if we want to educate, we do need to find ways to expand their horizons, so they can choose from a larger repertoire of possibilities.

For years, I had viewed feedback from surveys assuming all community members had access and were viewing the same kinds of educational innovations I was reading about, but without an 'educating about and beyond component', there is a tendency to return to the age old, "Teacher Knows Best" story. Teachers, students and community members need time to think about options, be responsible for and have ownership over moving a school towards the best possible action.

**Charter Schools and Their Revolving Doors**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/charter-schools-revolving-doors-barbara-smith/

The revolving door for teachers and administrators is alive and well in charter schools. In fact, the passing of weaker staff, as deemed by test scores, is happening in epidemic proportions. I believe in the autonomy and promise of charter schools, but the lack of commitment to teacher development, in time and funding, is what seems to be at the heart of the matter. What propels the revolving door can be viewed from two distinct perspectives. The popular one reads like: ‘kids deserve the best – and achievement can only happen when you remove teachers from the mix who have students with lower testing scores’. The alternative solution requires dedication to teacher development. I realized the need for internal intensive development when I first came to a charter school where half the staff had been let go prior to my arrival. One would expect the consulting group who recommended these dismissals would have replaced the team with exceptional teachers. As it turned out, while some held promise to become effective educators, most required further teacher development. I realized that rather than spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on school turn around consulting companies, this money could be directed back to students and professional development funding. Given I had to invest in developing the new teachers anyway, it didn’t make sense to let go of staff, only to take in staff of the similar quality. It is a myth to assume that everyone outside the walls of the school is exceptional, and all the school has to do is let the ‘lemons’ go to make room for them. There are many charter school educators caught in the revolving door of ‘at will’ employment, who could become exceptional with support, mentorship and deliberate individual development.

In my first year I had assessed my staff as 20% exceptional, most were from the staff that had remained. By establishing a mentorship program, we were able to shift the critical mass of exceptional teachers to 45% in one year. In some cases, teachers with fixed mindsets left on their own accord, were let go, or not hired back the next year. For the most part, we developed our teachers in-house and while we hired some new talent, we managed without consultation fees, to save enough money to send a dozen teachers to Harvard Project Zerofor a week in Boston. They returned as confident teacher leaders, and in the case of math increased scores across the schools by close to 9%. The teacher mentors provided individualized support by meeting once a week to co-plan lessons with their mentees; that same week they went in for an additional hour to co-teach with them. The teacher leader schedules were flexibly adapted to enable two hours a week of dedicated mentorship. It requires a commitment to teacher development on the part of a charter board and it's administrative team.

So who benefits from the constant changing of a charter school staff? Think about it. There are 62 teaching job ads listed here on this charter school site: [https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/15834761f2596819](http://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/15834761f2596819). Different posting are listed everyday. Consultant groups are making a pretty penny for reforming/reorganizing schools.  The group at the school I was at was charging us $200/hour just for reading resumes! These companies can charge upwards of $200,000 per year for auditing a school, recommending their on-site need to fix it, and then re-stocking it with new staff. Not all charter school budgets are required to detail the names of the companies – so such payments are bundled into 'general' administrative cost categories, and remain hidden for public viewing.

The cost of sending future teacher-leaders to Harvard was $35,000, but that was inexpensive compared to the public money spent on such consulting fees. Those in charge of schools need to take responsibility for having more effective PD and evaluative practices that improve weaker teachers.

I suspect that other school leaders must be coming to some of these same conclusions. I recall asking an administrator once in a Detroit school, what he did for professional development, and he simply said, he looked at scores and that’s all he needed to know. With such a mindset, the revolving door continues to move at great speed.

**Seeking Outside Feedback for School Improvement**

A LinkedIn Article by Barbara J. Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/seeking-outside-feedback-school-improvement-barbara-smith-1/

For decades, I have often referred colleagues to Fullan and Hargreaves work. I was fortunate to be a graduate of OISE in Toronto, Canada, and with that came a compelling desire to further develop, renovate and/or craft the ideal school. When I began working in the US charter system, I realized that expertise and connection to the kind of curriculum and school leadership resources, was lacking on many fronts. Many people had to compromise best practice and understandings of rigorous research in order to qualify for funding or meet compliance standards, that simply were aligned with testing scores and attendance.

In DC, the Charter Board issued their own Qualitative Site Reviews (QSR), at a substantial cost to the taxpayer, in addition to requiring schools to take part in accreditation through an outside association or agency. Being on CAIS accreditation teams in Canada, I was aware of the value of this process, and commissioned the Middle States Association (MSA) to audit our school. After our first visit in the spring of 2013, the school was deemed ‘ready’ for a formal review, much earlier than most schools. This readiness ran counter to the DC Charter Board’s internal QSR assessment at the start of school in early September 2013.

I was unaware until the communication of their subjective review, how much this internal group did not understand the degree of improvement and the positive path we were on. Reacting to this negative report, the Board contracted a consulting group who claimed they were experts on charter schools – having worked with a few schools. At the time I trusted my Board Chair and his faith in their expertise.

I was proud of many transformations taking place at the school. We sent a dozen staff members to Harvard Project Zero's Summer Institute for a week in Boston, investing over $35,000 in professional development; they came back as confident teacher leaders and were making exceptional strides as teacher mentors. Each week a mentor co-planned with their mentee for an hour, and then went into each class and co-taught with them for an hour. In addition to regular PD, teachers were privy to two hours of weekly, individualized support. The teacher leaders also took part in the staff evaluation process, staying for the full hour class, to capture the true essence of the teaching and learning from start to finish.

The consultant team brought in by the Board did not recognize the depths of improvement, and so recommended to the tune of over $200,000 that they be hired to turn the ship around. I was shocked when the key leader of this change process thought Project Zero was a character education program, and disbanded the weekly mentor support. This support was replaced by coaches dropping into classrooms for 15 minutes and writing emails to staff about what they were doing wrong. They insisted on staff enacting a script with prescribed seconds for each class introduction, with the 'teacher talk' taking over most of the lesson. I became increasingly aware that the help was not up to date on current rigorous standards of best practice.

It was difficult to support the damage being done to staff morale and our students. I shared my concerns with the Board chair, who proceeded to put me on an Administrative Leave, not allowing me to speak to any staff member.  It was difficult leaving what was once a vibrant and promising school. Had the DC Charter Board trusted the ‘arms-length’ accreditation process, the path towards improvement would not have been obstructed by the inexperienced consulting group. This process clearly lacked integrity.

The local school Board was populated by Charter School Partners (CSP), a group that helps find and mentor Board members. I asked early into the process for university representation on our Board, but they said they avoided them. They also claim to find representatives of the school population, but during my time they found three Caucasians for us, in a school with over 96% African American population. I see now there is much better representation, but at the time, the Board members had only CSP to guide them. Rather than rely solely on such groups as Charter School Partners, I would highly recommend that Boards learn more about education from professionals who are bound by sound educational research. Fullan and Hargreaves's Professional Capital Survey (<http://michaelfullan.ca/professional-capital-online-survey/>) does not claim to perform an auditing function, but with this inexpensive tool ($600 for an individual school), school leaders can learn to make better decisions with far more credibility. The more charter schools – and especially their Boards, can read and learn more about education, the more they can add value to a child’s education. Read on: https://blog.google/topics/education/find-your-own-finland/.