

‘WHOM MUST WE FEARLESSLY BECOME?’

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I stood before a school board not too long ago presenting the results of a wide-ranging student survey that my planning/research firm had administered at their high school. The board members were uncharacteristically stoic as they sensed the ever-present glare of cameras live-streaming their every expression to the community. They knew what was coming in the survey results because we had discussed the findings at a workshop a week earlier. They put on their best face and toughed it out.

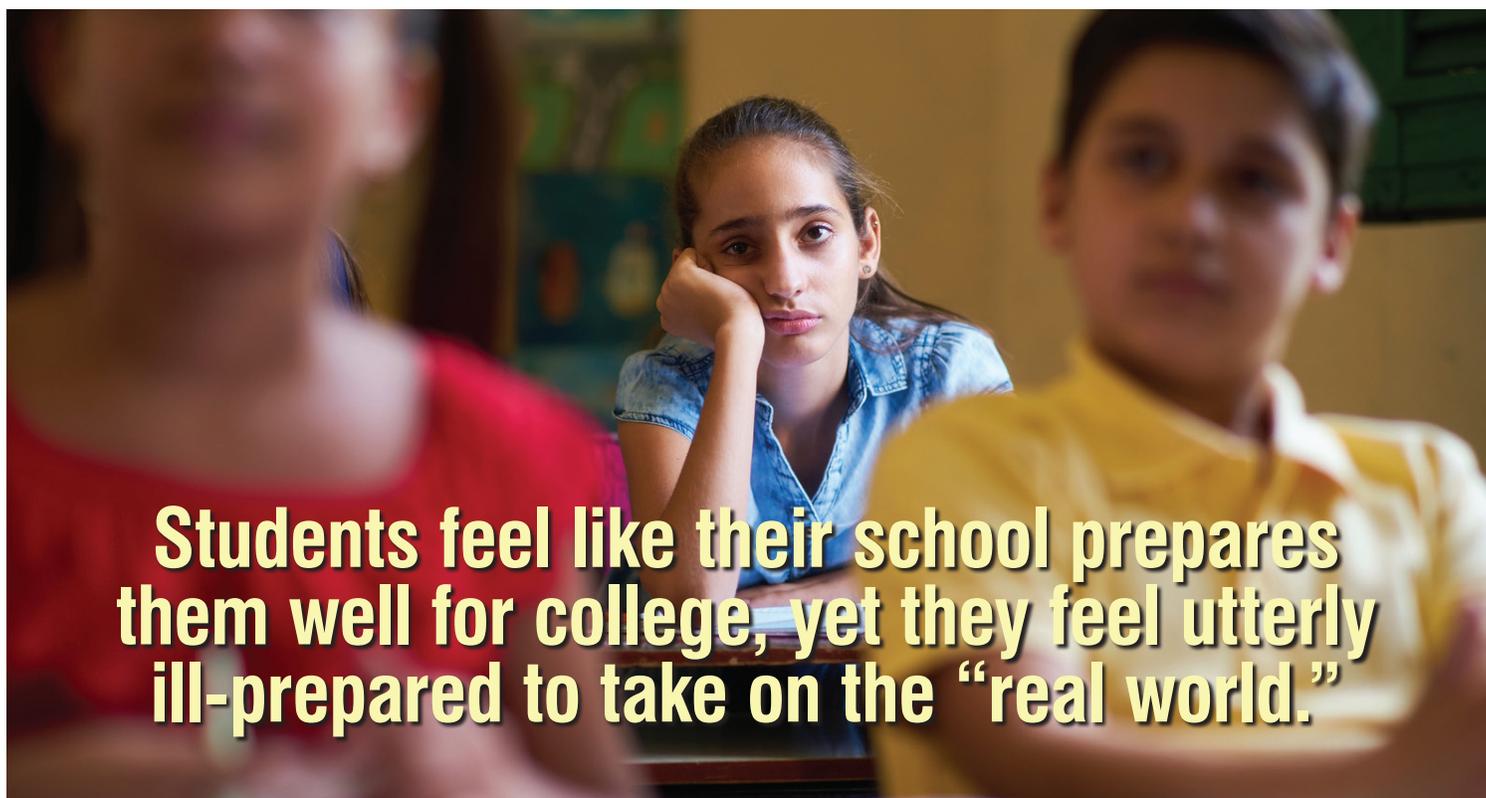
By contrast, the superintendent could scarcely hide his pain. At the end of the presentation, he passionately addressed the dismal results: “This is a wake-up call,” he said, choking back tears. “We don’t take these results lightly. We will do better.”

I felt his pain and admired his passion. A few weeks before that meeting, I was similarly brought to tears as I sat with a group of 15 of his students. The personal stories of their journey through life and school compelled me to promise to deliver their message in unvarnished words to the powers that be. It was my obligation.

When I first discussed the findings at a school board workshop a week before the televised meeting, I began with a simple question: “How do you think your schools are doing?” Some were quick to respond that the schools were doing well, only to punctuate their idealistic view by saying: “Well, that’s what our superintendent tells us anyway.”

I proceeded to disabuse them of any notion that things were going well even as some members fought me at every turn, even expressing anger at some of the findings. Though they put up a fight they knew in their hearts that what I was saying was true. Facing the stark truth was just too much to bear. Like any change process – personal or institutional – nothing can be accomplished without a sense of urgency. The student survey results sparked that urgency for everyone in the room even in the face of skepticism, hurt and anger. They all had a sense that the findings were valid, albeit incredibly disappointing, good research will always have a ring of truth – even when we have heretofore refused to face reality. What I admire about that school board is that they gave us permission to ask the big and tough questions in the first place. As painful as the answers were, they asked to hear them, notwithstanding their defensive response.

Many school leaders will never ask the tough questions thus they will never know. As a planner, I always advise, “Don’t ask a question if you don’t want to hear the response.” Some leaders gladly take the advice because they live by that mantra. They would rather not know. Truth-telling is painful. And once the truth has been told, it changes everything. They know that. CONT/11



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A few years ago, I stumbled on a book entitled: *"A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Break-through Ideas."* To be honest, it caught my attention because the author borrowed the title from an E.E. Cummings' poem: "Always the beautiful answer / who asks a more beautiful question." Cummings was always a personal favorite of mine.

The book extolls the power of questions as being at the very core of personal and institutional change. Business consultant, Keith Yamashita, is quoted in the book as saying: " 'Company leaders are realizing that if they're only asking the small questions, it's not going to advance their agenda, their position, or their brands. In order to innovate now, they have to ask more expansive questions.' He urges clients to work on whom must we fearlessly become? That can be a difficult challenge, he says, because it requires 'envisioning a version of the company that does not exist yet.' "

This advice is in line with what I've been telling school leaders for many years as I work with them on strategic planning initiatives, superintendent searches, school building projects and any process that involves change. I urge them to rethink their definition of "vision," helping them to see that a vision is more about who we need to become than it is about who we are. That brings us to the big beautiful question we all must ask about our schools: "Whom must we fearlessly become?"

This profound question is at the very heart of any truly powerful planning process. Grappling with it – wrapping your collective heart and soul around it – can be soup to an organization's soul, elevating practice on every level.

No matter where I work with schools around the country, I have discovered that many teachers, parents, and students have a universal belief about the state of teaching and learning. They seem to agree that there is little or no time for deep and inspiring learning – the type of learning that becomes a part of you and can lead to mastery. The by-product of this has been two-fold.

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This has led to nearly half of all students – even at some of the best high schools we work with – to feel disengaged and disinterested in their education. They view high school as a tool to get on to the learning that will make the most difference in their lives. And it isn't high school. This is in line with national research.

Students in some of the high schools I work with take this to the extremes. They are so focused on the next level – so disengaged in the high school experience – that they load up on easy courses in 11th and 12th grades just so they don't hurt their GPA. For some, high school only matters because it is a necessary step to college. In their eyes, high school lacks intrinsic value for them personally.

These views are not new to our generation. The problem is that they are far more consequential than ever. The days have passed when college conferred upon its graduates an automatic job and a ticket to a meaningful life. We know all the stories of post-graduate haplessness coupled with insurmountable debt. But what worries me and many others is not today's challenge, but the natural progression of this reality in the future. What about in 10 or 20 years – how much worse will it get? How meaningful will your high school be to students in a milieu of Artificial Intelligence (AI) assistants, driverless cars, and implantable devices that will augment anyone's ability to access content with their mind?

As school leaders, it is our obligation to be asking these bigger questions today, because it will take the next decade for our schools to make the changes needed to serve the children of tomorrow.

Ergo, our opening question: "Whom must we fearlessly become?" This might be the most important question you ask and answer during your tenure as a school leader. When your community discovers its unique answer to this powerful question, it will be as E.E. Cummings wrote: "Always the beautiful answer / who asks a more beautiful question."

If you are interested in exploring this topic more in depth, attend THE COUNCIL'S 2018 Fall Leadership Summit and attend the session titled: "Whom Must We Fearlessly Become?"



The Legacy Planning Group is a Signature Partner of The Council and helps school leaders build a legacy for children and their communities. For more information go to www.educationallegacyplanning.com or contact Robert Hendriks at robert@educationallegacyplanning.com or 631.553.7010.