

Independent Schools: Labs of Innovation

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As progressive teachers, we love to hate Betsy DeVos. Most recently, she confirmed that public schools will be required to share emergency relief funds allocated in the CARES Act proportionally with private schools.¹ Over \$100 million, originally intended to support low-income students², will be redirected primarily to private religious schools. But many of these private schools do not need this assistance since they are also funded through a religious entity, such as a diocese. The widespread frustration with DeVos' love of private religious schools obscures a smaller category of private schools that are truly independent.

Although the terms “private school” and “independent school” are often used interchangeably, there is a key difference between them. Independent schools, representing only a quarter of all private schools³, occupy a unique position within the American educational landscape. They are governed by an independent board of trustees and aren't beholden to religious governing bodies or local school boards with the power to restrict curriculum or impose stifling accountability measures. Because their schools are self-supporting, independent school educators are accountable directly to students and their families, who have signed up for an agile, flexible education.

As a teacher who has taught in both public and independent schools, I understand why both are necessary for a healthy school ecosystem. To be sure, it's critical to have strong, well-funded public schools. At the same time, we need a small number of schools with the latitude to rapidly innovate and share what works with everyone else. This is one reason we have fifty states. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis remarked in 1932 how “a single courageous State may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country.”⁴ Independent schools, serving only around one percent of all students⁵, can serve as laboratories for educational innovation. As the coronavirus pandemic emerged in March, independent schools such as Chicago Jewish Day School were the leaders in the successful transition to remote learning.⁶ I expect independent schools will blaze a path to best practices as hybrid teaching becomes commonplace this fall.

As educators, no matter how long we've been teaching, we always work to get better. Even when I was a public school teacher, I often turned to independent schools for high-quality curriculum and proven teaching

strategies. For example, two independent schools have replaced the traditional “math sandwich” of Algebra 1, Geometry, and Algebra 2 with a much more effective approach. By funding summer curriculum grants, The Park School of Baltimore developed an original, non-traditional math curriculum grounded in developing mathematical habits of mind like tinkering, visualizing, or strategically changing the problem.⁷ Similarly, the faculty of Phillips Exeter Academy has written and regularly updates a comprehensive sequence of over 3,700 carefully selected math problems organized into problem sets. Exeter trains teachers from around the country on how to teach using Exeter Math. Both of these schools' materials are freely available to all teachers, and I've used them liberally in my own math classes! They empower students to see themselves as capable mathematicians in ways the traditional curriculum never could. These independent schools used their freedom from traditional accountability metrics to innovate and share their learning with all other schools, both public and private.

Did you know that spacing out learning leads to better memory than practicing one skill at a time? The Center for Transformative Teaching & Learning at St. Andrew's Episcopal School is an excellent example of how independent schools are using emerging mind, brain, and education research to improve teaching practices.⁸ Unfortunately, many teachers have very little background in cognitive science.⁹ The center publishes a magazine, podcast, and teaching tips in addition to training teachers from around the country through workshops and summer institutes on how to make learning stick. I will definitely be reading their materials on how brain science informs distance learning—such as their guide to educational technology for each step of the learning process¹⁰—before I start teaching again this fall! There's no doubt that plenty of public school teachers are able to innovate as well. But their creativity usually succeeds in spite of the constraints of public school bureaucracy rather than because of how they are structured.

Justice Brandeis wrote, “If we would guide by the light of reason, we must let our minds be bold.” Independent schools—a small subset of private schools—are able to be brave and visionary by design. I am proud that my colleagues and I can use the autonomy we're afforded in independent schools to explore new ways of teaching and learning to support students in a rapidly changing world. And with any luck, what works for our students just might work in other schools, too!

Bibliography

¹ *Providing Equitable Services to Students and Teachers in Non-Public Schools Under the CARES Act Programs*. 25 June 2020, oese.ed.gov/files/2020/06/Providing-Equitable-Services-under-the-CARES-Act-Programs-Update-6-25-2020.pdf.

² Turner, Cory. "DeVos Faces Pushback Over Plan To Reroute Aid To Private School Students." *NPR*, 21 May 2020, www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/21/860352150/devos-faces-pushback-over-plan-to-reroute-aid-to-private-school-students.

³ NCES, "School Choice in U.S.: 2019," www.nces.ed.gov.

⁴ *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann*, 285 U.S. 262 (1932).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Goldstein, Dana. "The Class Divide: Remote Learning at 2 Schools, Private and Public." *The New York Times*, 9 May 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/us/coronavirus-public-private-school.html.

⁷ The Park School of Baltimore. "Our Curriculum." *Park School Math*, 12 Oct. 2011, parkmath.wordpress.com/curriculum/.

⁸ St. Andrew's Episcopal School. *The Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning*, www.thectl.org/.

⁹ Cummings, Amy. "Why Don't We See More Cognitive Science in Education?" *Education Week - Rick Hess Straight Up*, 26 Mar. 2018, blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick_hess_straight_up/2018/03/why_dont_we_see_more_cognitive_science_in_education.html.

¹⁰ *A Science of Learning Guide to Education Technology*, www.thectl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Science-of-Learning-Guide-1.pdf.