
LEADING TRENDS

What Would It Take To Emerge A Stronger School?



What would emerging stronger from the COVID-19 pandemic look like for your school? Many, maybe most, school leaders we speak with answer in terms of size; e.g., emerge with the same number of students as before COVID, or at worst lose only a small number. We call this a hunkering down strategy—get through the pandemic with as little damage as possible. Almost no one seems to be pursuing a growth strategy these days, unless they are eyeing a weakened competitor whose students may be ripe for capture.

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The thinking behind hunkering down seems to be just getting through until some semblance of normalcy circa January 2020 returns. In this light, tactics include increasing financial aid, usually via higher discount rates as the aid does not have a funding stream attached, and aggressive efforts to stay in close contact with families. All done in the name of riding out the crisis.

But, what if it is a very long time before anything seems normal again? More importantly, what if hunkering down, especially if it goes on and on, results in a weaker, diminished school? Might another strategy allow you to emerge stronger?

No, we don't mean a growth strategy. Growth was already a non-starter before COVID in many markets due to increasingly adverse demographics. We are thinking of an emerge stronger strategy, where, to borrow Google's turn of phrase, agility is the new growth. Strength may well sit in being a smaller school, especially if the students that remain better match your mission and financial capacity. A smaller school with less discounting is likely stronger than one twice as big with more net revenue per student.

Strength may also result from shedding programs or initiatives that are neither mission-critical nor highly valued by students and their families. Embedded in the crisis may be an opportunity to trim things that would otherwise be treated as sacred, so prioritize ruthlessly and often during the months to come.

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Strength could also come from a tighter focus on positioning: who you are as a school, who your target market is, and how you serve it better. This may seem counter-intuitive, and it is totally toxic if the goal is to be as big a school as possible; after all, why would you send a message that your school is not for everyone? Because only a tiny number of schools are vast enough to succeed with such an approach. Combining a smaller school, more smartly enrolled, with focused positioning yields strength.

Finally, strength can come from a shift in strategy from a typical “peanut butter” approach—slathering resources across every area of the school—to one with a smaller number of programs or disciplines where you go deep. Maybe the elementary grades are not worth a bigger investment; likewise the equestrian program. A go-deep strategic style fits the theme of emerging stronger better than one where every division, program and discipline gets something from the strategic plan.

The critical factor for leaders is to shift out of a hang on by your teeth mindset amid COVID into one that embraces emerging stronger. With this in mind, what would emerging stronger from the COVID-19 pandemic look like for your school? Now is the moment to answer this question.

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