

# Meeting the Future:

Trends and Challenges in Independent School Education



A presentation by James W. Wickenden at Rutgers Preparatory School, February 22, 2013

**The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify,\* for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds.**

–John Maynard Keynes

\*Ramify: spread or branch out

Based on my experience in consulting with more than 600 independent schools and having completed 330 Head of School searches, I am comfortable in saying that schools today are in a state of flux. Powerful forces for change are already disrupting the status quo, and the best independent schools in the nation are scrambling to keep up.

The economist John Maynard Keynes captures well the challenge of implementing truly new approaches when most of us are so invested in the old ways – which we believe have served us well. Or, as Mark Twain put it, “I’m all for progress. It’s change I object to.”

If I accomplish nothing else here this evening, I hope I will have at least convinced you to challenge your own thinking about the education you want for your children.

What does an exemplary college prep education look like today?

How is technology transforming learning and teaching in independent schools?

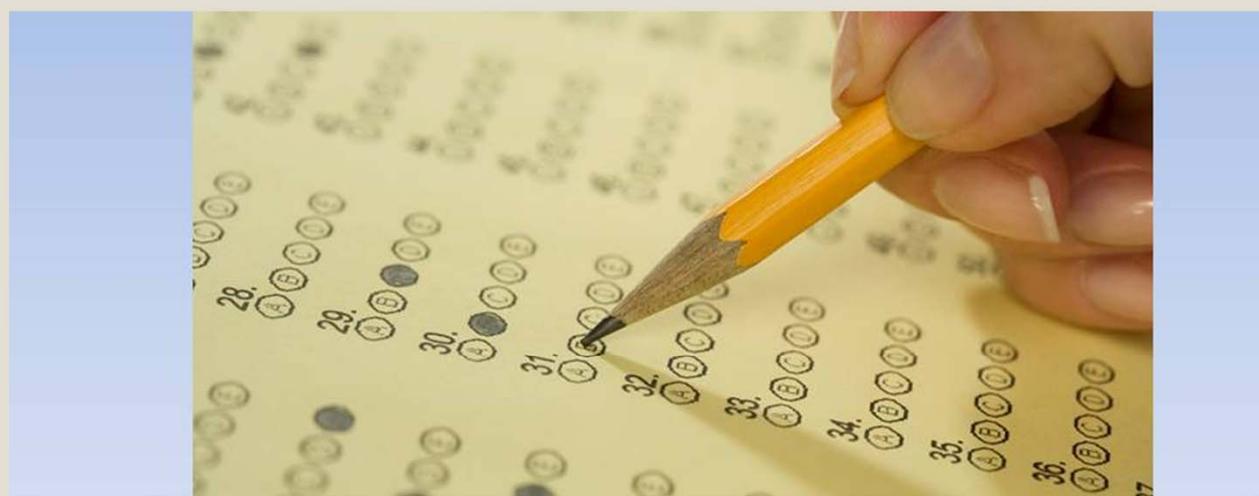
How are independent schools responding to worrying trends in the social and emotional health of young people?

## Three Topics for Tonight

Committed to the preparation of children and young adults for success in college and beyond, both parents and independent school leaders all over the country are grappling with fundamental questions about what we need to do differently in response to the economic, demographic, technological, and social changes that will shape the future prospects of today's K-12 students.

Tonight, I'd like to talk briefly about the changes and trends I have seen in three broad areas:

1. What does an exemplary college preparatory education look like today? How is it different from the education you may have experienced?
2. How is technology transforming learning and teaching in independent schools?
3. How are independent schools responding to worrying trends in the social and emotional health of young people?



## The Advanced Placement Program

A Case Study in the Changing Landscape of Independent Education

Thirty years ago, when I was the Dean of Admission at Princeton, the AP program was the gold standard in assessing the performance of applicants and the rigor of the secondary schools they attended. If a school offered a full AP program (though there were many fewer AP offerings then) and could demonstrate that their students routinely performed well on the exams, then we could be confident that their strongest students were well prepared. The picture today is considerably murkier:

- With 33 AP exams now being offered in 22 subject areas, independent schools are struggling to decide how many of these courses they should offer and how much emphasis they should place on the importance of the APs relative to other educational experiences available to their students.
- Because they are content-driven, prescriptive, and test-oriented, the APs are now viewed by many educators as out of step with the 21<sup>st</sup> century focus on developing the skills of critical thinking, collaborative learning, real-world application of knowledge, and creativity. Although the AP program is responding by revamping some of the AP tests to better assess some of these skills, I think it is safe to say that the APs have lost some of their luster.
- Some independent schools have dropped the program altogether, replacing it

with advanced courses of their own design. Interestingly, many students at these schools still take the AP exams – and do very well – despite the lack of access to an AP-branded curriculum.

- Some independent schools are maintaining the program, but limiting the number of AP courses they offer so that there is room in the curriculum for other challenging courses more geared to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.
- And some smaller independent schools are making provisions for their students to pursue some AP courses via distance learning rather than the financially unsustainable path of offering so many courses to such small groups of students.
- At the same time, colleges have become less generous in awarding credit or advanced placement for top grades in the AP exams – either for their own financial reasons or because they do not regard the AP class as equivalent to their introductory courses. As a result, some of the incentive for pursuing an AP course to save some money on college tuition has been eroded.

Yet, despite these mixed reviews, we often hear from independent schools that parents still view the AP program as a proxy for excellence and an essential part of their child's college admissions resume. You may be interested to know that, a few years ago, we were asked by a prominent independent school that had eliminated the AP program to survey college admissions officers about their views on the subject.

I was not surprised to hear what I already knew from my own days in the admissions office: Top colleges know a great deal about top independent schools like Rutgers Prep. They know the quality of the school's faculty, the caliber of their students, and the breadth and depth of their teaching – including the particulars of their signature courses. They did not view the absence of the AP designation on applicants' transcripts as a detriment, and many applauded the school's willingness to innovate in response to changing times.

The bottom line? Top colleges are still seeking evidence that applicants have challenged themselves – and excelled – in the most rigorous program available at their high school. While the APs remain one excellent way to offer that level of rigor, they are no longer the only way to do so.

I know that Rutgers Prep offers a full array of AP courses and has amassed a longstanding record of excellent performance by your students on the exam. I don't know how the faculty here feels about the AP program, and I'm certainly not

suggesting that it should be abandoned. I do think, however, that all independent schools can benefit from a fresh look at what they teach and why they teach it.

**Don't just add**



**Rethink!**



## **Zero-Based Curriculum Design**

For at least the past several decades, independent schools have excelled at addition but failed miserably at subtraction. That is the reason that first-rate schools like Rutgers Prep, for example, offer more than 20 AP classes and five languages at multiple levels – all in an Upper School of 350 students.

It's not surprising – given the combination of bright students, demanding parents, and creative faculty members – that academics, arts, and athletic offerings all tend to expand with every passing year in independent schools. Each of these new offerings typically has a vocal constituency. There is no constituency for eliminating any of them.

Fundamentally, though, I believe this educational model is unsustainable – certainly financially and perhaps educationally as well. The days of the individual independent school as sole provider of a vast array of educational programs are coming to an end. Schools like Lakeside in Seattle are stepping back, taking a deep breath, and asking themselves:

If we were designing a curriculum from scratch (like a zero-based budget), which of our current offerings would make the cut? How would our areas of emphasis change? Do second-graders still need to learn cursive writing? Should we alter the amount of time we spend on memorization and computational skills? What is the core academic program that every one of our students, should experience and how can we best tailor instruction to meet the needs of a broad range of students?



Of course, most schools don't have the luxury of designing a 21<sup>st</sup> century high school from the ground up, but it is instructive to look at one school that is doing just that. I had the pleasure of working last year with The Nueva School in California, a well-established and progressive K-8 school for high-achieving students in Silicon Valley that has been planning for the launch of their new high school program next fall. They approached this exciting project with great care, consulting experts and visiting schools all across the country to learn about best practices. They even convened a roundtable of prominent college presidents, deans, and admissions officers to seek information about the qualities colleges would like to see in incoming students and reassurance that these top colleges would be open to accepting students from a non-traditional secondary school program.

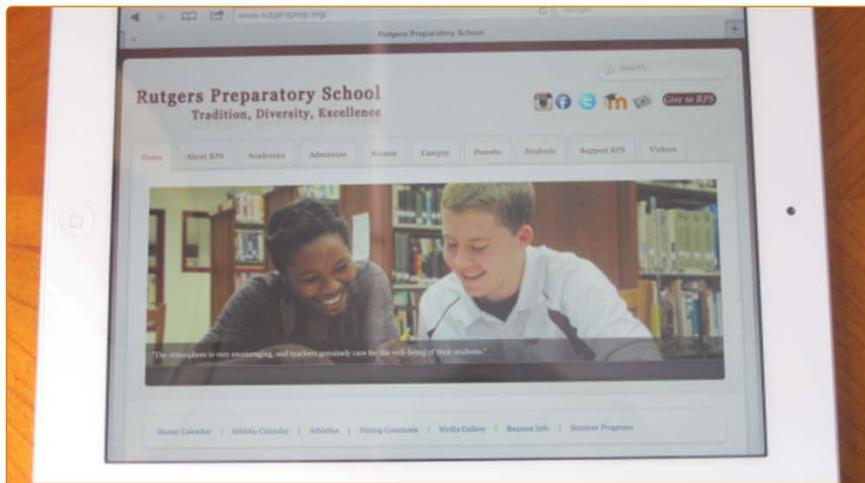
Based upon all of this investigation, Nueva has developed an innovative approach that will be fascinating to watch as it unfolds. Here are a few of the hallmarks of Nueva's new high school:

1. Real-world problem-solving focused on the application of knowledge through mentorships, apprenticeships, and internships
2. Design thinking and hands-on engineering as a way to frame problems and develop solutions
3. A focus on entrepreneurship

4. Social-emotional learning focused on developing resiliency, empathy, and life skills for emerging independence and personal success
5. In-depth exploration of questions and problems, including the opportunity to develop mastery in individual areas of interest and long-term projects that develop critical thinking
6. Four years of multidisciplinary, theme-based core courses
7. International studies with world languages, history, travel
8. Skill building and performance in the arts and communications.

Central to the Nueva program is the belief that students learn best when they are engaged in real-world problem solving and direct engagement with the community beyond the school. These themes are key to 21<sup>st</sup> century education, and they are also reflected in some of the innovative programs offered here at Rutgers Prep:

- The Middle School Farm Trip, which takes students out of their familiar comfort zones and gives them the opportunity to learn what they can do for themselves.
- The Seventh-Grade Bottle Rocket Project, which integrates physics and math with marketing, teamwork, and plain old fun.
- The opportunity for advanced student research in molecular biology through the affiliation with Waksman Institute at Rutgers and GE Healthcare, coupled with a presentation to scientists at the end of the year.
- Senior Explorations, the capstone experience to your students' Rutgers Prep career, in which they explore in depth an area of interest outside the school.



1:1 iPad programs are catching fire in K-12 schools – in a way that desktops never did.

## Technology (finally!) Makes Its Mark

I have been hearing for nearly three decades about the ways in which educational technology was poised to transform education. Mostly, what I observed in independent schools was an expensive investment in cycle after cycle of computers and SmartBoards that did not fundamentally change the way students learn or teachers teach.

In the past year or two, however, we have truly begun to see the potential of technology to enliven and extend learning. Portable, powerful, engaging, and kid-friendly, tablet computers are being smoothly integrated into classrooms in a way that clunky desktops never were. As you probably know, iPads and Apple TVs have invaded your Lower School here at Rutgers Prep, and the rollout of your 1:1 iPad program in the Upper School is well under way. I was particularly impressed to learn about your advanced software elective in which students are developing iPhones apps for your own school community – a great example of engaging students in real-world work with measurable benefits.

And do you recall a time – not so long ago – when online learning was regarded as a decidedly inferior educational option, if not a vaguely fraudulent one?

Those days are over.

According to The Economist: "In 2011 about 6 million American students took at least one online course in the autumn term. Around 30% of all college students are learning online; up from 10% in 2002." And according to the NY Times, 70,000 new students a week are signing up for the more than 200 free college courses offered by the start-up Coursera, in partnership with 33 elite universities.

And if you think that online courses won't affect the independent school world, think again.



Top independent schools are embracing the potential of online learning to expand and enrich their students' educational experience

## Online Learning Breaks Through

- The Global Online Academy is a not-for-profit consortium of first-rate independent schools from around the world dedicated to developing 21st century skills. The mission of the Global Online Academy is threefold:
  - to replicate in online classrooms the intellectually rigorous programs and excellent teaching that are hallmarks of its member schools
  - to foster new and effective ways, through best practices in online education, for students to learn
  - and to promote students' global awareness and understanding by creating truly diverse, worldwide, online schoolroom communities.
- The Online School for Girls, a consortium of leading independent girls schools, connects girls worldwide through relevant and engaging coursework in a dynamic online learning community. Katherine Windsor, Head of Miss Porter's School, notes that "the very delivery mechanism of OSG coursework provides a compounding effect of the curriculum by teaching a skill set vital to girls today: technology, communication, analysis, and access to global concepts."
- If you haven't yet visited the website of Khan Academy, please do – particularly if you are ever stumped in helping your child with his or her math homework! With an ever-growing library of more than 3,900 tutorial and skills practice videos on everything from arithmetic to physics and history, this free site is an invaluable resource.

Of course, online learning will never be an acceptable substitute for the daily student-teacher interactions that define the culture of independent schools. But today, students more than ever need to learn how to be self-directed and to accept lifelong responsibility for seeking out the skills and knowledge they need.

In fact, blended learning initiatives – the combination of online and face-to-face education – are among the most promising innovations in independent schools today. In a new pilot program, Khan Academy is now partnering with schools – including two independent schools on the West Coast – to explore ways in which its offerings can be seamlessly blended into the school day to benefit both students and teachers.

In the so-called “flipped classroom,” students watch recorded lectures (often created by the teacher) on their own time at their own pace, while precious class time is reserved for deeper engagement between students and teachers. Some schools are now experimenting with teaching AP courses this way – proof that the old and new can peacefully co-exist!



## The Health and Wellness Imperative

### Independent Schools as Caring Communities

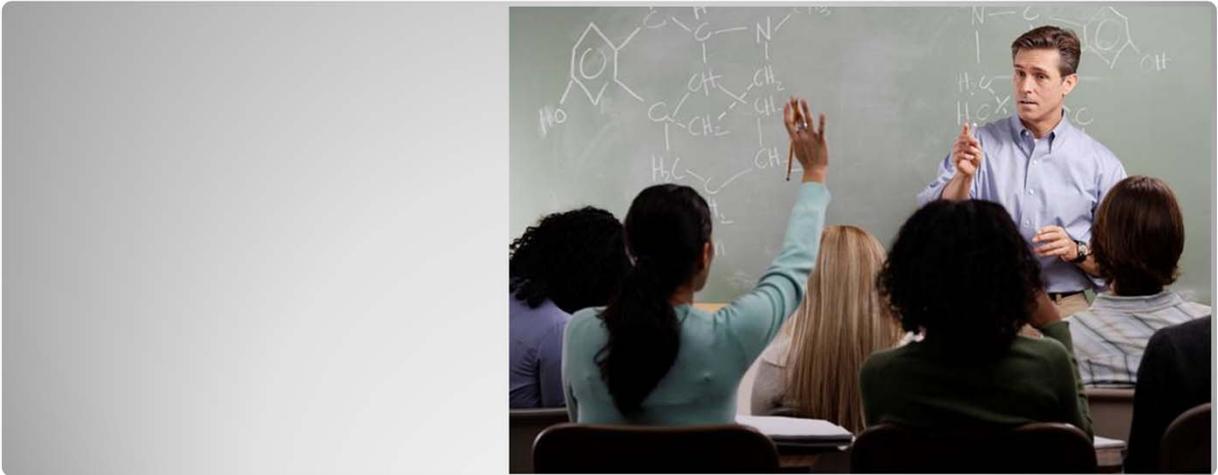
Time and again when we visit independent schools, we ask members of the school family what they value most about their experience. Almost invariably, we hear that students, parents, and teachers all cherish the sense of community, the camaraderie, and the genuine care for each student that is part and parcel of the school culture. If we don't hear that, in fact, we know that something is seriously amiss.

Yet we also know that independent school students are not immune from the social and emotional ills that plague young people in our society today. In fact, the high expectations we associate positively with the independent school experience also can serve to ratchet up the pressure students feel as they strive to meet the many demands on their time. Independent schools are called to respond to societal trends that have tipped the balance of students' lives in unhealthy ways — intense, early pressure to perform in every domain; competitive helicopter parenting; the constant stimulation and Darwinian aspects of social media; homework subsuming sleep; the influence of medication use and abuse — and the list goes on. Articles abound in the professional literature and popular press about the challenges to wellness that are inherent in the schools and in the air that today's students and parents are breathing.

I am pleased to report that independent schools are becoming increasingly

proactive about creating environments for their students that support emotional health and wellness. This year, for the first time ever, we were asked to assist a school in their search for a senior administrator to fill a newly created position: Director of All-School Wellness. Most interesting, from my point of view, is that the school in question was St. John's in Houston, one of the most academically demanding and achievement-oriented independent schools in the nation. Without sacrificing standards, diluting the mission, or diminishing tradition, St. John's was simply—boldly, but simply—expressing the will to add a chair at the school leadership table, placing considerations of wellness not as add-ons or extras, but squarely alongside those of curriculum, college preparation, athletic aspiration, and community life. The new Director will have a broad mandate to advocate for wellness initiatives among all constituencies of the school, but her overriding charge is this: To oversee a multifaceted effort to engage students, faculty, families, and community agencies in the goal of balancing the academic intensity of the St. John's experience with opportunities for innovation, risk-taking, creativity, and joy.

Also noteworthy is increased attention to the physical health of students in ways that extend well beyond the standard athletic program. For example, as part of an innovative fitness requirement at Ensworth School in Nashville, every Upper School student pursues an individual fitness program year round, monitored by trained faculty members. The programs are tailored to each student's lifestyle and activities; athletes can work on specific conditioning for their sport while other students might pursue lifetime fitness and general health goals. The program requires three hours a week, and has resulted in measurable gains in students' strength and flexibility.



## Final Thoughts

This is an exciting time in the evolution of education. It is also a challenging time for Steve, for the Rutgers Prep Board, for the faculty, and for you as parents. By defining the knowledge, skills, and competencies your students will need when they enter the job market a decade or so from now and then structuring a total educational experience designed to impart those skills, Rutgers Prep will not only serve the students well, it will also serve as a much needed model for curricular change.

Ultimately the job of the modern independent school and your job as parents are remarkably similar:

- To prepare children to be the architects of their own lives, navigating an increasingly complex world with skill, confidence, and an entrepreneurial spirit.
- To nurture and support them – encouraging healthy risk taking and resilience when they fall short of your expectations or their own.

I encourage you all to view your relationship with Rutgers Prep as a true partnership – one that will benefit your children for a lifetime.