

# The Next Normal: How K–12 Independent Schools Can Survive and Thrive in a New Landscape

While there is an immense need to focus on our current response to the COVID-19 crisis, our K–12 leaders must pivot to focus on an uncertain future.

## **By The Enrollment Management Association**

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# COVID-19 Has Changed Everything — An Introduction from Heather Hoerle

Dear colleagues,

I'm perplexed by conversations that are NOT happening inside the independent school community. While I've heard the "new normal" mentioned by school leaders, I'd like to make a case for a different term for these times, one that suggests ongoing adaptation in the face of dramatic change. I first encountered the term "Next Normal" in McKinsey & Company's *Beyond Coronavirus* report.<sup>1</sup> The term invites leaders to conceive of a near future with few markers of normality. Indeed, the authors suggest that most businesses won't return to normal, or even a "new normal" as we did after the economic downturn of 2008. Instead, the authors make the case that leaders must prepare for unprecedented, ongoing change brought on by this pandemic, which has destabilized our global economy and will continue to have ripple effects for years to come.

In her 2018 book, "Leadership in Turbulent Times," historian and author Doris Kearns Goodwin describes our future society — what we'd now call our "Next Normal" — as something more like that of war times than economic recessions. In the book, she put a spotlight on leaders, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who united this country during the Great Depression and the World Wars and built alliances to shape long term success. Roosevelt was both forthright and empathetic to the citizens of our country — offering a united rallying cry to give up certain comforts and to work together to fight a shared enemy. These messages built resilience in citizens and an understanding that the pathway to success would require sacrifice and hard work.

So how do these lessons translate to independent school leaders?

It seems clear that we must plan for multiple scenarios (near term, next year, and several years from now) simultaneously. National organizations like EMA can offer insights (like this special report), but it will be up to you individually to uncover the right answers to your school's unique challenges and explain your "Next Normal" to stakeholders so that your institution will have support within any number of operational modes. From EMA's vantage point, it's clear that those school leaders who build a rallying cry to come together and who are committed to agile, creative solutions for their future operations will be the winners in the wider industry. Keep in mind, some solutions may require new alliances and connections; we look forward to helping you uncover new ideas on pricing, messaging, and educational programs as the independent school community moves from short term action to longer term innovation.

Our team at EMA has produced this special report to help build a framework for conversation on key perplexing business issues inside of the Next Normal phase, with the knowledge that you may be asked to change your thinking again and again and again, as the lessons from this pandemic are uncovered. Watch for a second special report this summer — this time it will be a joint report entitled *Toward Enrollment and Financial Sustainability: Strategies for a Disrupted Landscape* with our partner the National Business Officers Association (NBOA).

Tech pioneer and innovator Bill Gates offered some guidance in his blog post on April 23, 2020. He agrees with Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, *"This is like a world war, except in this case, we're all on the same side."* He further writes *"World War II was the defining moment of my parents' generation. Similarly, the coronavirus pandemic — the first in a century — will define this era. But there is one big difference between a world war and a pandemic: All of humanity can work together to learn about the disease and develop the capacity to fight it. With the right tools in hand, and smart implementation, we will eventually be able to declare an end to this pandemic — and turn our attention to how to prevent and contain the next one."*<sup>2</sup>

Here's to our ongoing conversation and many shared innovations that will be brought to independent education due to COVID-19. These times call for new connections and rethinking what independence means in the midst of this global challenge. While it is natural to psychologically double down and move inward to fix issues, some of the best ideas I've heard to date involve multiple organizations working together to deliver something better than any single contributor had before this time. Let's commit to being #StrongerByAssociation.

Here's to our shared success!



Heather Hoerle  
Executive Director and CEO  
The Enrollment Management Association



1. Sneader, K & Singhal, S. (2020, March). "Beyond coronavirus: The path to the next normal." *McKinsey & Company*. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/beyond-coronavirus-the-path-to-the-next-normal>

2. Gates, B. (2020, April), "The first modern pandemic." *GatesNotes: The Blog of Bill Gates*. Retrieved from <https://www.gatesnotes.com/Health/Pandemic-Innovation>





## How to Use This Report

McKinsey & Company produced a groundbreaking report, "[How Should US Higher Education Plan for an Uncertain Future](#)," categorizing our uncertain COVID-19 future into three major scenarios. This report has proved incredibly helpful for colleges and universities around the world planning out strategy for the future. From the perspective of K–12 independent schools, we are choosing to frame our report with the same three scenarios that could play out in education.

### Depending on the scenario, normal operations may not resume for US higher-education institutions until summer 2021

#### Rapid and effective control: virus contained



Online learning predominates through spring and summer 2020; face-to-face instruction resumes in fall 2020

Programs are disrupted through summer, hurting major auxiliary revenue streams; 2020–21 school year operates almost normal, but new health controls stay in place; there is some disruption to international-student enrollment

#### Effective response but (regional) virus resurgence: virus recurrence



Online learning occurs through fall 2020; face-to-face instruction resumes by January 2021

Programs start 2020–21 school year online, resulting in major decline in auxiliary revenues; programs with strong brands and online capabilities stand to gain enrollment amid spike in attrition and switching

#### Broad failure of public health interventions: pandemic escalation



Online learning occurs through 2020; face-to-face instruction resumes as late as fall 2021

Programs operate online only for at least first full semester of 2020–21 school year; there is continued switching to schools with strong online capabilities; there is significant disruption to international-student enrollment

Exhibit from "Coronavirus: How should US higher education plan for an uncertain future?", April 2020, McKinsey & Company, [www.mckinsey.com](http://www.mckinsey.com). Copyright © 2020 McKinsey & Company. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

McKinsey  
& Company

These three scenarios present several different implications for our schools. We are all working with a moving target and must adapt to the given circumstances of each and every day. That said, we see there being specific strategies to think through for each major arm of our institutions. Within each of these sections, we will frame the challenge as we see it and lay out actionable strategies schools of any kind can begin to implement immediately. The end of the report includes an executive summary and key takeaways.

## Implications for Tuition, Pricing & Business Model

Chad Tew, LearnCollab

### *What is happening?*

It may seem too painful to mention it now, but we must. As Churchill said, never let a good crisis go to waste. It is paramount that independent schools take this opportunity to innovate and solve the problems that may have been worrying them for years.

Amidst this crisis, the traditional business model of a K–12 independent school is under attack. Schools of all sizes and types are going to have to figure out how to right-size their program to match their resources and embrace the opportunity to shift, if needed. Schools have more in common than they realize. While independent schools offer value unique to their institutions, they also share great characteristics and programmatic elements, which gives them lots of space to collaborate. It is that remaining percentage that is ripe for differentiation and innovation.

Higher education amidst COVID-19 can provide a great lens for our schools. The late Clayton Christensen famously predicted the 2020 demise of many traditional colleges, and here we are. Years ago, Paul LeBlanc deconstructed his Southern New Hampshire University model aligned with Christensen's thinking, and in doing so, he created the first large nonprofit to compete with the for-profit online colleges. His focus? Access and opportunity. Recently, he announced the on-campus experience at SNHU will cost only \$10,000 per year, and while education will largely happen online, the social side of college life will continue on his campus. This was not a COVID-19 solution. This was a part of his overall strategy, and is only amplified due to this crisis. An innovative mindset is what needs to trickle down into our independent schools. Flipping the business model is LeBlanc's trade, and he's dedicated to perfecting it.

### *What should schools do?*

In general, business model innovation can be incredibly challenging. Schools have been working to reinvent themselves in recent years, but the necessity of doing so NOW, has become essential. That said, the McKinsey framework analyzes possible timelines around this crisis that must be reflected in your business model and price point plans.

Schools must be open to multiple price points, but without abandoning their current product and market share. What happens if schools lockdown mid-year, with a new emergence of COVID-19? Is your school able to re-price your programming mid-year? Do you offer two tracks, on campus and online, each with their own price? These are big questions to answer now. Online education is inevitably going to emerge from this crisis as the big winner. We will see schools reimagine their programming to go online and, with that, offer the digital version of their current in-person programming.

We've seen micro schools and online programs trickle into our industry, but with COVID-19, there will be complete disruption. We will likely see very long-standing "traditional" schools launching a complete virtual experience and offering it at a discount to a larger pool of students around the world, like MIT is doing.

In conclusion, expansion is happening, mergers and acquisitions are happening, collaboration and co-venturing programs are happening, differentiation is happening, innovation is happening. Have a design thinking meeting to reimagine how your school could emerge from this crisis with a more dynamic business model.



## Implications for Enrollment

Colby Morgan, The Enrollment Management Association

### *What is happening?*

Enrollment leaders are working at a rapid pace moving their spring enrollment processes forward with some sense of normalcy. Simply put, the job of an enrollment manager today is to balance the pressures of the moment with strategies for an uncertain future. It is possible that our community will see school closures at rate no one ever imagined? Who is inheriting a majority of that risk and pressure? Our revenue generators, the enrollment director and team, which in many of our schools, is a team of one.

Considering any one of the three scenarios from McKinsey, enrollment leaders will need to deal with uncertainty in their recruitment and sales work. Even with the most optimistic outlook, there will be many families who would normally feel financially burdened in paying for an independent school education, who are now completely crunched and likely unwilling to pay. Two factors to consider will be *re-enrollment* and *future recruitment strategy, including summer melt*. Re-enrollment this spring and summer will include a complete reassessment of financial resources for families, with limited evidence and data. Future recruitment will focus on adjusting your value proposition to align a school's price tag with its mission and program, online, blended, or in person. Further challenging this new normal is those of our schools who rely on international students as a large piece of their recruitment pool. International families may leave this process as the risk remains high and uncertainty around visas increases. Regardless of which scenario becomes our reality, every school will see a shift from normal.

### *What should schools do?*

Enrollment managers need to be agile in the face of this crisis. They should be spending 50% of their energy responding to the present issues at hand. These include bringing admission events, interviews, etc., virtual, recruiting students, and responding to day-to-day requests coming from families re-enrolling, and those who are in process. Enrollment managers need to develop a clear and articulate value proposition around their schools **today**. In simple terms, they need



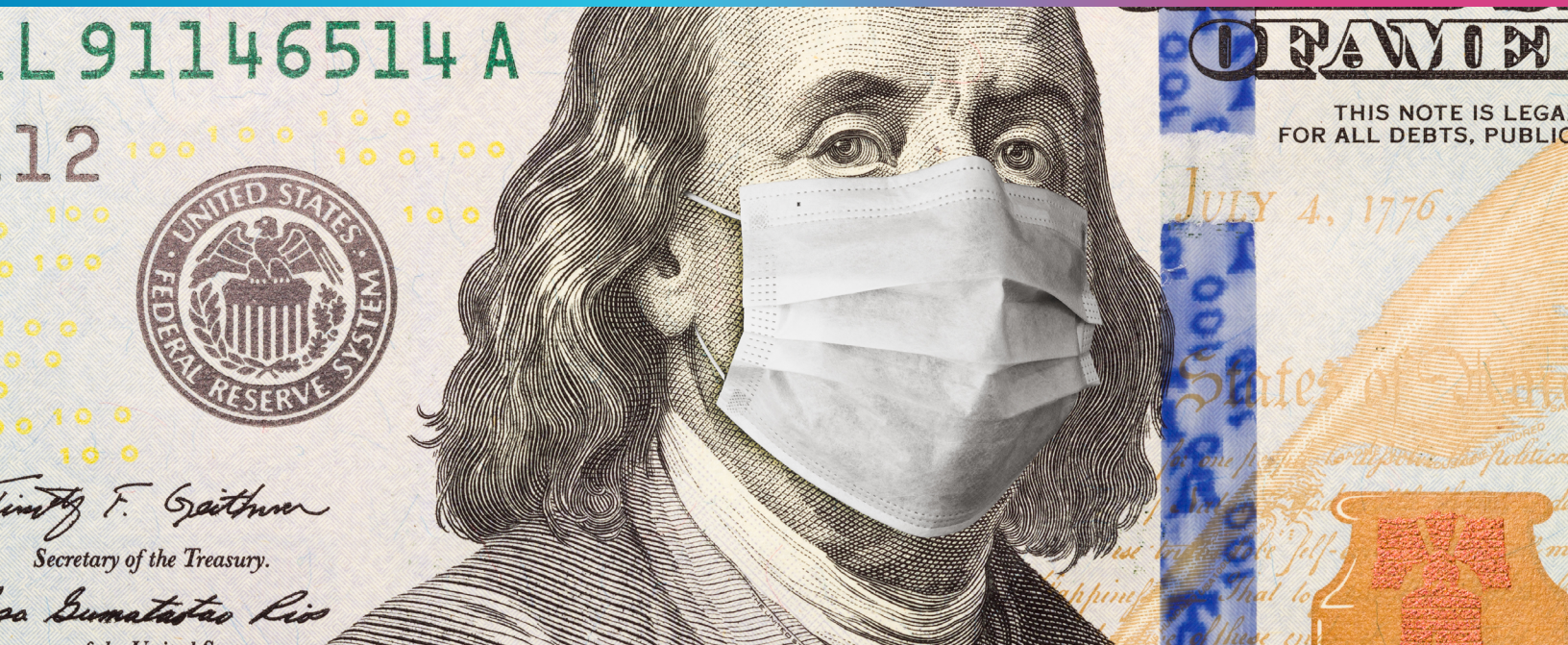
to aggressively market their virtual learning program and celebrate all that the school has done in order to put that program into play. This shift in strategy will shine a light on the new programming, inviting families to take part, or observe, a virtual class, etc. The many schools who have already invited prospective students to take part in their virtual learning programs this spring are ahead of the curve.

The remaining 50% of their energy and time? Utilizing the McKinsey scenarios, enrollment leaders need to be projecting their future outlook. This outlook is necessary to answer the many questions coming from trustees and heads ([help them ask the right questions](#)). For schools, the likelihood of opening normally in the fall, considering how often we gather in large groups, is uncertain. Our enrollment leaders need to plan on a quick shift to selling a virtual learning program for the fall, and even further into the 2020–2021 school year. Utilizing the **model of threes**, enrollment managers, in tandem with their CFOs, need to create three sets of projections for their school, considering 1) market position, 2) current attrition outlook, and 3) prospects for new students. Considering all three scenarios above, set projections for each major data point on a spectrum of conservatism.

*For example: project an attrition rate at 0%, -10%, or -20% of what would be normal, depending on your market position.*

Utilizing the model of threes will paint a clear picture for your head of school and board of trustees regarding the future enrollment potential for your school. These would be your data points for 2020–2021. Also recommended is projecting those same data points for 2021–2022 and beyond. Enrollment leaders using this strategic approach and mindset in their work will be set up for high-level success in the future.





## Implications for Financial Aid

Kristen Carey Power, The Enrollment Management Association

### **What is happening?**

As of May 1, 18% of the pre-crisis American labor force is out of work.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted independent school families, both nationally and internationally. Whether or not they have lost their job as of today, families are becoming increasingly insecure about tomorrow.

Independent schools are receiving new financial aid requests. The requests are coming from every constituency: families who've always been full pay, families currently on financial aid but who need additional help now, and newly enrolled families. The requests come at a time when independent schools have already granted their financial aid awards for the 2020–21 academic year. Schools are desperately trying to find additional funds to help meet the needs of families who've been impacted by the current pandemic. In an EMA survey conducted in April of 2020, 83% of schools reported they had received requests from current families for more aid for this year. Looking ahead to the fall, 91.2% of schools reported some or many families have asked for additional aid over and above what had already been awarded.

Our schools never completely rebounded after the Great Recession, which was truly a warm-up for the current state we find ourselves in. Up until 2008, a majority of independent schools were awarding their financial aid dollars to families who demonstrated financial need. However, post recession, we saw that trend shift. While many schools continued to utilize their financial aid dollars for families in need, we also saw independent schools utilize financial aid dollars as an affordability tool to meet the needs of families unable to afford the full cost of attendance but who may have been able to pay a majority of the cost. In addition, after 2008, independent schools began supplementing the lack of domestic full-pay families with full-pay international families. This tactic may no longer be viable as we continue to face international travel restrictions during this pandemic. Once the travel restrictions ease, will international families want to send their children back to the US for their education?

The need for independent schools to realign their mission and purpose is more relevant now than ever before.

1. <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/millions-of-lost-jobs-may-push-unemployment-rate-to-highest-since-great-depression-2020-05-02>



## What should schools do?

First and foremost, make your current families a priority. It's a lot easier to retain a current family than it is to find a new one. Consider adjusting current financial aid policies and procedures in order to demonstrate understanding and compassion. Independent schools need to consider creating an emergency fund if one doesn't currently exist. Also, if your school has not created a reserve fund, create it now. Consider tagging COVID-19 specific financial aid requests as separate from traditional financial aid requests, fund them separately, and create new financial aid contracts to support any changes to financial circumstances. A few additional suggestions:

- Extend enrollment contract deadlines.
- Offer to refund parent deposits if a parent is unable to keep their child enrolled by the time school reopens, due to financial constraints.
- If a parent is on a payment plan and they now find themselves unemployed, offer to defer tuition payments for a period of time.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be felt for a long time. Chances are, independent schools may not see the largest increase in financial aid requests until one or two years from now. In fact, the requests for financial aid during the Great Recession didn't spike in 2008 — the increase came in 2010, which correlates to the peak of the unemployment rate. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate in the US reached its peak of 10% in October of 2009. Economists are predicting a 20% unemployment rate by the end of this quarter. Therefore, financial aid budgets will have to be reconsidered.

## As a starting point, examine your data from the last recession (2008–2013) and look for trends:

- When did you see a spike in increased aid requests and by what percentage did you see the increase?
- With an increase in aid requests, by how much did the percentage of families receiving financial aid increase?
- What was your average financial aid award each year?
- Were you awarding more current families or prospective families?

## In addition, create financial aid policies for future fiscal cycles. A few questions to help you get started:

- Will schools be requiring families to complete their standard financial aid needs assessment form?
- What documentation will you collect? Historically, schools require W2s and 1040s, but a recent job loss will not appear on the tax information.
- Many schools are asking families to include a statement of the situation they find themselves in currently.
- What will a school's policy be when a parent does return to work full-time?

Those of us who have been in the independent school industry for a long time often hear: "At what point will independent schools price themselves out of the market, and at what point will parents be unable to afford tuition?" Perhaps this is the disruption that will allow independent school leaders to reimagine and reinvent our schools as we know it. Perhaps the time is now.



## Implications for Access and Inclusion

Derrick Gay, Educational Consultant

### *What is happening?*

Many in our communities and families have been directly impacted by COVID-19, and we share these thoughts with those people in our hearts. The priority for all independent schools should be supporting the social and emotional well-being of all students — in addition to advancing learning goals. In the time of a global pandemic, these two goals are not mutually exclusive. However, leaders must also address long-standing independent school inclusion, access, and equity challenges, which COVID-19 has amplified, particularly from socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic perspectives. For instance, COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted Blacks and Latinos, due to structural reasons that inform more acute dynamics (overrepresentation in service industry and lower paying jobs).

Layer this on top of existing disproportionate health care, digital, and job market divides in the United States, and one gains a deeper understanding of the diversity of challenges that many are facing. That said, there is a major opportunity for our schools to provide support and care for families during this time, turning the tide for many in our communities. During recent conversations with independent schools, the following access and inclusion themes have emerged: prioritizing socioemotional well-being of students, families, and employees during COVID-19 crisis management; addressing access and the digital divide as schools transition to remote learning; streamlining COVID-19 resources in an effort to avoid overwhelming families; intentional inclusion of directors of diversity, counselors, and others in COVID-19 decision-making strategy; and addressing the increase of racial hate speech and acts against Asians and Asian Americans.

Technology has proven a significant challenge in our communities as we transition to remote learning. Although not seemingly apparent, there are many families in independent schools who don't have home access to the internet, computers, etc. Do our schools have the capacity and resources to support all families? Some do, yes. And we are very pleased with those who

proactively surveyed families on their technological capabilities at home and set this up long ahead of the crisis peak. Fortunately, many service providers are providing free or discounted internet access to level the playing field so that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds are able to sustain learning.

Ironically, if this crisis had happened 15 years ago, there would have been few resources widely available. Today, there are numerous resources, including how-to guides and curriculum instructions for home schooling, self-care, internet security, etc. While well-meaning, quality and accessibility across materials vary significantly and the time required to sort and process the considerable volume of resources may feel overwhelmingly stressful for families, as they are rightfully focusing their energies on survival. Schools can provide much-needed support by taking responsibility for discerning and streamlining resources.

The most frequently cited concern of those charged with supporting student engagement and well-being, including diversity practitioners, counselors, deans of students, and advisers, is that school leaders will not include them in COVID-19 strategy and decisions. Many diversity practitioners have already reported not being included in COVID-19 response conversations and expressed concern around the impact on students and families. Many diversity leaders have vivid recollections of the last economic downturn, where they were excluded from critical conversations, and work was sidelined. School leaders should not forget that these colleagues bring deep insights and a critical voice to COVID-19 crisis management strategy, and they are not only important but essential to conversations around inclusion and access for all students.

Finally, incidents of racism and xenophobia have spiked in the current climate, with a particular focus on Asians and Asian Americans. This is not a hypothetical. This is happening. Many independent school faculty, staff, and families, including those with young children, have experienced incidents of verbal harassment and even physical altercations because individuals are blaming Asians and Asian Americans for the current pandemic.



As a result, many of our students and families are experiencing higher levels of anxiety and stress, and feel afraid to go out in public, even to secure necessities such as food or go to the hospital.

### *What should schools do?*

While families appreciate acknowledgment and compassion from schools, they also desperately need support around simple delivery of curriculum. We need to provide education, both proactively now and long-term. In addition to “how-to” resources, families also require clear instructions on managing these new home schools. Those families who are struggling financially, and this number will certainly increase in light of the current economy, will be deeply challenged by maintaining consistency in their homes, and our schools can support that.

As Laura Tierney speaks a bit more about below, we need to support social and emotional learning, with a focus on resilience, emotional well-being, community routines, and rituals. Some simple practical suggestions for schools include setting up informal and formal time with counselors and diversity practitioners. Also, find moments when this time can be authentically confidential time. Many schools are creating “office

hours” for students, where there is open conversation. However, the counselors and practitioners need to provide confidential time when students can reflect on how they are feeling in this new environment and the implications COVID-19 has had on their home experience.

Schools also need to understand their capacity to support the technological divide and, if possible, prioritize streamlining resources into families’ homes. Does every student have a device? Are schools able to support alternative access to WiFi, e.g., MiFi devices being delivered to homes? Overarching questions around resource access need to be addressed by schools now and allocated into future budgets.

Finally, provide spaces for students, employees, and families to acknowledge, process, and address xenophobia and racism against Asians and Asian Americans. Align these efforts with your school’s mission and vision, in addition to 21st-century goals around cultural competency, global citizenship, character, respect, and inclusion. NAIS and other organizations provide evidence-based and developmentally curated resources to support schools to this end.



# Implications for Financial Sustainability

Ari Betof, Organizational Sustainability Consulting

## *What is happening?*

The Great Recession was painful for just about everyone and every educational institution. How this pain manifested depended on the particulars. The health of the school heading into the crisis and the manner in which leaders and boards responded led some educational institutions to nosedive and others to emerge in an upward spiral. These leaders, or in most cases, their successors, built on this momentum and then continued to accelerate progress through arguably the strongest ten-year economic period in our country's history.

The COVID-19 pandemic is different. That is both better and worse from a financial sustainability perspective. Many of us will focus on the negative aspect of that comparison — and for good reason, since most predictions are far more severe. There is also a positive scenario in play. Schools who can survive have the opportunity to solve problems that have been plaguing institutions for years and emerge prepared to take advantage of a dynamically changing education landscape.

McKinsey & Company's three timeline scenarios tell us that we don't know how long the pandemic will force systemic changes to the core operations of colleges and independent schools. There will be a new "new normal" in our future. That landscape almost certainly involves the ability to deliver remote education in a way that is better than "not awful," but beyond that the picture remains unclear.

Schools need to rewrite their value propositions to respond to any one of the potential timeline scenarios of COVID-19. If remote learning must continue into the fall, will families tolerate paying \$30,000 to \$70,000 a year for an online education? Probably not. Can independent schools survive in their current form at a drastically reduced net tuition per student figure? For many, probably not.

## *What should schools do?*

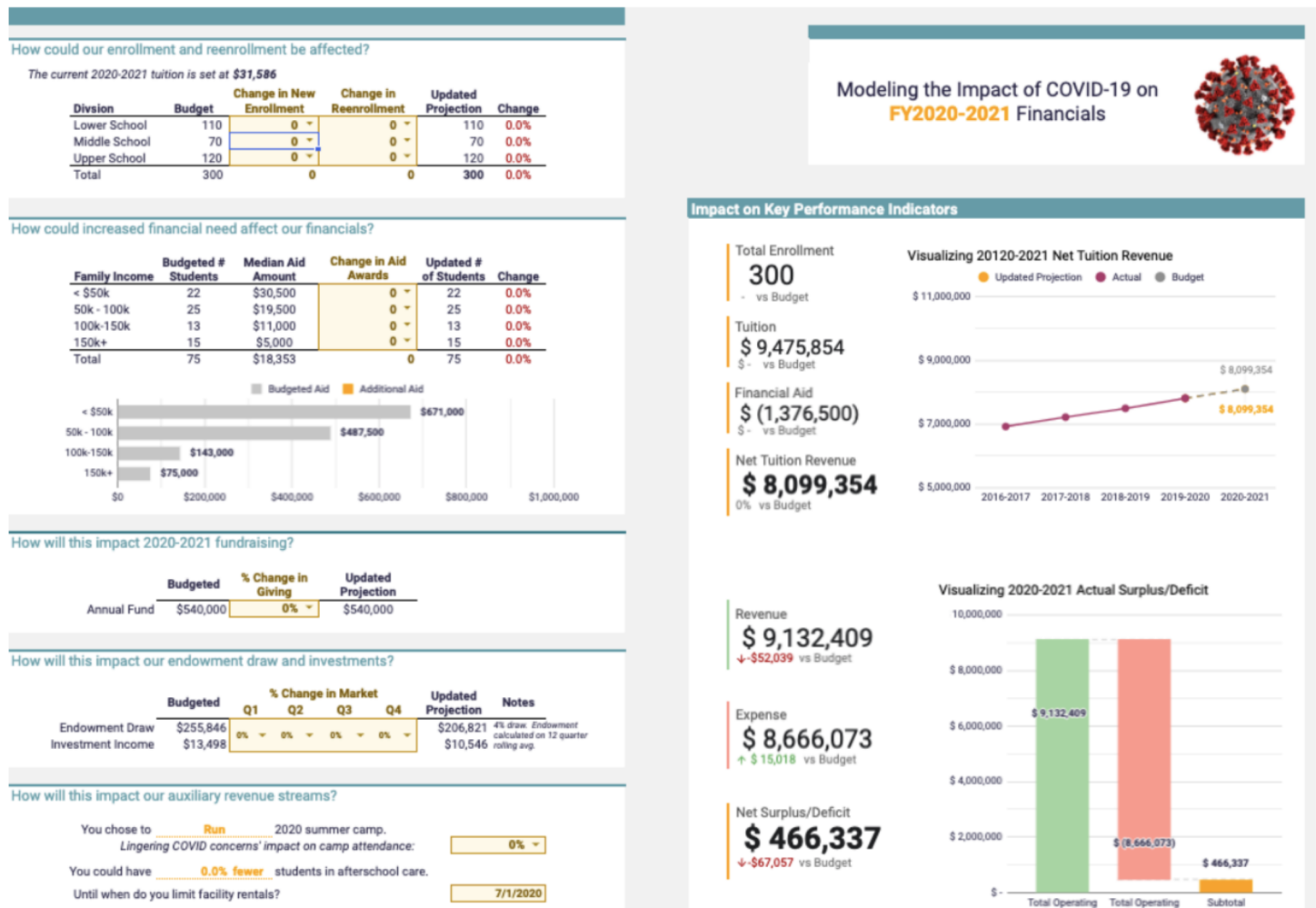
Consider these six steps to traverse the bumpy road ahead:

- 1** Leaders and trustees must begin by being honest with themselves about where the school falls on the viability-stability-sustainability spectrum. On one side, the fiscal focus is on questions such as, "Do we have adequate cash flow to make payroll next year." At the other extreme, questions include considering the implications on intergenerational equity of spending endowment at a depressed value to create additional emergency financial aid for families today.
- 2** Determine how the school's location on the viability-stability-sustainability spectrum informs what key performance indicators (KPIs) are most critical. Three broad KPI categories to consider are net surplus/deficit, net tuition revenue, and liquidity position.
- 3** Build a financial model to visualize the ways KPIs are impacted in a universe of different possible scenarios (there's an example of this below).
- 4** Discern the best, or least bad, path forward remembering that the school is a community and nonprofit organization rather than just a spreadsheet. We advocate using a mission-driven, community-centered, and data-informed lens to weigh potential decisions.
- 5** Stress test your hypotheses and tentative decisions by refining the financial model as new information becomes available.
- 6** Execute, remain agile, and remember that organizational stewardship requires a good plan, effective implementation, and exceptional communication.

The weeks and months ahead will be the painful end for a significant number of independent schools. Others will emerge from physical distancing on life support. Still other independent schools will have entered the pandemic healthy enough and navigate it well enough to seize this moment as an opportunity to innovate and strengthen the core of what makes that educational community valuable and valued.

Independent schools need to get creative to survive, and creativity is messy. Creativity also benefits from structure. Using McKinsey & Company's projections in a financial model to inform decisions made through a mission-driven, community-centered, and data-informed lens is precisely that kind of structure. Now is the time to get creative.

For additional insights and expansion on these financial sustainability concepts, check out Ari's recent [article](#).



Independent school financial model and visualization co-created using hypothetical data for illustration purposes only by Organizational Sustainability Consulting and Actionable Institutional Research & Data.

# Implications for Social and Emotional Health

Laura Tierney, The Social Institute

## *What is happening?*

As schools work tirelessly to grasp the new realities facing them from a teaching, administrative, and growth perspective, students are at home trying to navigate a great wave of social, emotional, and physical changes. Over the past few weeks, our team at The Social Institute has been brainstorming with students across the country about their greatest needs and concerns right now. At this very moment, many of them feel sad and lonely—and grief is most certainly on the horizon. Taking a teenager away from their friends, or a fifth grader away from their normal routine, is a major blow. On top of it being a big social and emotional transition, students may not have the executive functioning skills required to support virtual learning.

Compounding this challenge is an entirely new element for virtual schools: helping families engage while at home. Families are looking for simple, practical, and inspirational guidance around helping them and their children move through this pandemic. Schools are being looked at to care and support our students, and also to provide programming outside of teaching and learning that in turn supports the families' life balance.

Oftentimes, students in our schools rely on in-person school time to realize, practice, and eventually employ better soft skills in their everyday life. Amidst a pandemic, it is clear that these soft skills will be tested whether students like it or not. It is likely that schools will see students moodier, listening less in class, and acting out at home more than ever before. It's more important than ever that we address these social-emotional challenges proactively.

## *What should schools be doing?*

Many schools, more than a month into virtual learning, are spinning up virtual advisories, all-school meetings, and other group meetings to connect, energize, and inspire students. Schools should double down on this social-emotional programming and consider locking in

these strategies not just for the remainder of the year but potentially for this fall and beyond. What tweaks can you make to your schedule, advisory conversations, and meetings that could further the student experience and lessen the anxiety and stress that students are facing? This is a question to be asked regardless of which COVID-19 scenario we face.

A mentor once told me how "one key element of happiness is having something to look forward to." Students are unsure of the future and are therefore having a hard time looking forward to the next school year. This includes current students at your school and those students you have just admitted to join you for the next year. Schools must design-think a strategy to build excitement for both now and for the future. Don't wait until fall 2020 to plan out your orientation program for new students. What regular programming could you employ for the entirety of the summer? These efforts could proactively support incoming students regardless of which scenario we face regarding COVID-19. In essence, proactively plan multiple program models to sustain high-level engagement and support for your students and families.

While we can't give students back everything they've lost this semester, we can support them from both an academic and social-emotional standpoint. This both/and strategy should include opportunities for formal and informal engagement, old traditions and new community-building traditions, adult-led virtual assemblies, and student-led virtual assemblies. When our team at The Social Institute spoke with school leaders across the country, we learned about schools innovating and launching casual advisory lunch periods, parent webinars featuring special guest alumni, and office hours with classroom teachers. This meaningful combination of informal and formal social and emotional programming — programming that engages and energizes students, educators, and families — will set up schools for success both now and in the future.





## Implications for Advancement

Ann Snyder, Council for Advancement and Support of Education

### *What is happening?*

At CASE, we are seeing incredible generosity in the advancement space. Our member schools are reporting that donors are interested in the sustainability and health of the school and its families, often giving above what they did in previous years. Personal communication with donors has been met with appreciation and deep interest. Many donors and alumni are reaching out to advancement offices saying, “How can I help?”

As we can all see when we scroll through our social media accounts, there is immense good will throughout this crisis. The same is true for supporters of our schools. Many schools have reported record-breaking numbers from virtual galas and events, days of giving, and other initiatives.

### *What should schools do?*

Continue to engage in deep and meaningful stewardship, staying in touch with your donors and alumni in a personal way. Make phone calls; send fewer emails. Continue to ask for the valuable support that your school needs to succeed, whether that is for annual giving, the completion of a campaign, or an emergency fund. Regardless of your school’s size and financial profile, continue to ask, raise funds, and make connections. These resources are necessary, both for the fiscal health of the school and for the populations you serve. Whether you put those gifts toward budget relief or more specific, restricted short-term projects (e.g., an emergency fund for family financial aid), they will ensure that your school can continue to fulfill its mission.

Do not presume that because markets are down, donors are unwilling to give. The experience of our members has largely been the opposite. If you have delayed your fundraising efforts in the past weeks, I would suggest resuming those as soon as possible, doing so with compassionate messaging and content that conveys your deep concern for and commitment to your audience and your school as an institution.

Additionally, if a donor does decline to make a gift, continue to engage with that donor over the next few months and years. A “no” now does not mean a “no” forever, and if you stop engaging with that donor, you risk sending the message that your relationship is transactional and not genuine.

In consultation with your head and board, make your top donors aware of the planning you are doing as a school. Depending on which of the three potential scenarios unfold, their support may be invaluable and could make the difference moving forward. If your plans are framed correctly, donors will appreciate the care and thoughtful approach you are taking as an institution.

Teacher Appreciation Month (May) presents an obvious opportunity for your team to start conversations with mid and lower-level donors about the quality of instruction at your school, the agility of your faculty in an online learning world, and their commitment to the school’s mission. Choose your words carefully, but continue to reach out to your constituents, making bold (and well-researched) asks that will make a difference to the school.

## Executive Summary and Key Takeaways

There will be fewer independent schools opening their on-campus or virtual doors in September 2020 than opened in 2019. That's a trend that the COVID-19 crisis is only accelerating. For independent schools to survive and thrive, they may need to give up long-held practices in favor of new solutions. This will require new leadership, new practices, and even new hires. Schools banking on a "return to normal" next fall and who fail to bridge the gaps between the traditional silos of academics, admission, finance, and development will be at a significant disadvantage.

What is the roadmap toward ensuring viability and sustainability? Let's focus on key takeaways from the report.



Take these steps immediately:

**1**

### Support the social-emotional health of students and staff



This situation is impacting our community members in a variety of ways. For many, it is a deeply emotional and challenging time. Develop informal and formal programming to support the health and well-being of your entire community. Strategic opportunity: Add your school counselor and human resources team to your COVID-19 response taskforce. Engage in regular check-in moments with all students and staff. Example: weekly flash surveys.

**2**

### Engage counselors and diversity leadership in decision making



Adults and children in your community are experiencing this moment differently. From technology access to parent support to possible incidents of bullying, different families have different experiences. You can't coordinate an effective response if you aren't representing all the voices and experiences of the adults and children in your community. As you form a COVID-19 response team, include your diversity leaders and counselors. Strategic opportunity: A more inclusive community can appeal to a wider group of families and students. A wider pool of candidates can mean a healthier enrollment picture.

**3**

### Approach financial aid with transparency and compassion



If you have a reserve fund, it's time to activate it and plan for an increase in dollars awarded as well as the number of families requesting aid. Begin every financial conversation with families with an open heart and a clear message of what you can and can't do. Families are much more likely to respond in kind with this approach. Strategic opportunity: Become a master at helping families understand the value of what you offer and engage your board and donors in a conversation about the role tuition discounting plays in your long-term viability.







Take these steps in the next month:

## 4 Develop two price points



Will you be able to be on campus in the fall? Will you stay on campus the entire year? As the McKinsey model points out, this is uncertain. The solution? Develop two price points: one for an on-campus experience and another for an online program. If you need to shift delivery, you'll be ready. Strategic opportunity: Enroll students in your online or hybrid program to boost enrollment and tuition revenue.

## 5 Create three budgets



Prepare for disruption by creating alternative business models accounting for tuition not only at normal levels but also at reduced levels. Strategic opportunity: Implement changes your school needs but you haven't been able to push through before. Does it make sense to contain cost, equalize workload, change remission, or simplify fees? Now is a great time for action.

## 6 Understand if you need to focus on viability, stability, or sustainability



Not every school will emerge whole from this crisis. Now is the time to have frank conversations about your financial health. Reach out to a neighboring school about forming a partnership. There are many ways to collaborate, including sharing a bus route, staff, or even a building. Strategic opportunity: If you are in a stable financial position, you may be able to merge with or acquire a competitor to become more sustainable.

We are deeply grateful to our contributors, all highly regarded thought leaders in this industry, and to you, our school leaders, whose courage and entrepreneurship will set a course for high-level innovation and future, long-term stability in our schools.

**Onward we go!**