John Palfrey
Head of School, Phillips Academy (MA)

Before a provocative and insightful keynote address at the SSATB Annual Meeting early this fall, The Yield sat down with John Palfrey to glean his perspectives as someone new to the independent school community.

As someone new to independent school community leadership, what were your expectations of your leadership/administrative team? Other heads! Industry associations! How have they delivered on your expectations? How can they help more?

I had incredibly high expectations. In a job as complex as being a head of one of our schools, it is clear that you can't do it all yourself. The success of any administration rests almost entirely on the ability of the senior leadership team to work well together. I had extremely high standards for the team, both individually and collectively. The good news was an extraordinary team was already in place.

I came into this job having no experience in secondary schools. I had knowledge in a related field but nothing related specifically to school administration. I’ve been fortunate that other heads who are more experienced and willing to share experiences, jumped in to provide positive and constructive feedback for me. This has been crucial, and I’ve needed a lot of support in finding my way.

My former college counselor at Exeter, who is now the school’s principal, Tom Hassan, has been a wonderful resource and mentor. Kendra Sterns O’Donnell, who had been the head of Exeter when I was there as a student, is someone else to whom I have turned as a guide. When I’m dealing with situations on campus, I find myself asking, “What would Kendra do?”

Many heads of schools have reached out, even people I hadn’t known prior to taking this position, and they have been incredibly generous with their time and advice.

NAIS’s Institute for New Heads was a welcome experience and opportunity to meet new heads at the beginning of their tenure. While the content taught and the connection to the deeply accomplished faculty has been invaluable to me personally, I refer to diversity in our faculty and students as both extraordinarily sophisticated and strangely narrow. How have your views been justified, confirmed, or changed as you are now intimately involved in this generation’s education?

Your book, Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives, covers the first generation of digital natives, and explores how older generations view these digital natives as both extraordinarily sophisticated and strangely narrow. How do you view the digital landscape develops is still extremely relevant. This will be hard to remove. Unfortunately, it’s very hard to teach this lesson other than in context. When it comes to digital literacy, we’ve found that the Exeter seniors have such an incredible influence. Providing a forum for them to share their lessons on privacy helps our younger students find their way around privacy issues with a little less pain.

As a new head, please tell us the educational and institutional challenges you faced on your first day?

Andover shares, with many other schools, hard questions regarding financial sustainability. I think as you consider the full tuition we charge, it’s a relatively small group of people who can afford $47,000 per year for high school. We are kidding ourselves when we think our business model is sustainable over the long term. It needs to be addressed swiftly but with care. Any of our schools that don’t look hard at sustainability, whether they have a large endowment or no endowment, will face trouble down the road.

A long-term issue facing all of our schools is recruiting and retaining a diverse community of students, faculty, and staff. I refer to diversity in the broadest sense—socioeconomic, geographic, cultural, religious, and so forth. As an institution, we cannot get to a place of diversity and stop; it is something we have to work at continually. Families, like my own, whose children have historically gone to boarding schools, are continually attracted to our schools; yet we must actively court and recruit a diverse population to expand the experience for everyone, and to reflect better the world our children will enter as adults. We grapple with this issue each day, and it’s clear to me that as Andover, and at other schools, there is work to be done.

We had parents’ weekend not too long ago, and we had hundreds of parents, who were already sold on the partnership. While there were plenty of questions to be answered, parents have been our advocates for the Khan Academy partnership with the Andover community. One thing we have done is focus on institutional research, and we will publicly report on the results of the program, whether they are successes or failures. We will be reporting consistently the results of the program, and more broadly, the effects of the partnership.

The tension between our 235-year history and how best to plan for the future has been a major challenge in thinking about introducing new ways of teaching, and we were eager to figure out how to manage that tension—not but at the expense of our students’ experience today. One of the hallmarks of independent schools is that of independent schools has been the ability to face-to-face relationships between faculty and students that have resulted in a very high-quality education. I don’t think integration of these new teaching media will change these relationships; they will continue to be the core of what we do. But I would love to find ways to improve what happens in that face-to-face interaction, and to find ways to extend what we can do by virtue of new technology.

What’s so surprising and so helpful to see with our Khan Academy partnership is not only what’s happening in terms of the expanded experience for our residential students, but how it’s turned into incredible professional development for our faculty. Fundamentally, the kind of change we are pursuing is not a two-way street. Students can have effective home work, and more. This can change how we view the classroom and flip the classroom to engage our students better or to become more interactive. Ultimately, we will discover the most effective methods of learning for kids in a digital age. There are so many aspects of this project that will bear fruit, not just for kids that are currently enrolled at Andover, but for our future students as well.

How are you communicating about this program to the tuition-paying parent, who might question the change in teaching methodology?

Andover just embarked on a partnership with Khan Academy. What is your view of the future of education and how will these new elements be integrated into the classroom?

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