

Regret Reduction through Prevention: Leadership Lessons

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In his 1967 *New York Review of Books*’ essay, “God’s Country,” James Baldwin cautioned: “Though we would like to live without regrets, and sometimes proudly insist that we have none, this is not really possible, if only because we are mortal.” As children, many of us were schooled with fables on how to prevent problems via *smart planning*—build your house out of bricks not straw; *diligence*—store up for the winter instead of fiddling; and *perseverance*—slow and steady wins the race. Yet because we are human, we are condemned to imperfect foresight, resigning ourselves to a remorseful, “If only I had...”

Most of us regret decisions we have made in relationships, education, finances, and careers. If only I knew then, what I have learned since. How might have I handled that conflict differently or spoken to someone in a different way? What if I had taken that position instead of this one? Why did I hire him? I never anticipated that! And so forth!

We may bemoan less serious choices, such as giving up a musical instrument, failing to learn a second language, or making a bad play on the field of athletic competition. Some of us dwell on these regrets; others are better at putting such disappointments behind them or to

good use. While regret is inescapable, it can provide opportunity from lessons learned, but only *when they are applied*. Pink (2022) describes the concept of “escalation of commitment to a failing course of action” when bad choices are compounded by continual investments of “time, money, and effort in losing causes instead of stanching losses and switching tactics” (p.41).

Having led schools and school districts, I recall having a sense of profound responsibility with difficult decisions, especially when so many would be affected, with some results being long-term. Bad decisions by school leaders often have a broader and more consequential impact because they can alter so many lives and futures. Of course, no one wants to make the wrong decision, but inevitably for most of us, there will be some regrettable ones.

Leaders with a sense of obligation use the lessons learned from regret as an advantage. For example, by using multiple measures of data or seeking diverse perspectives from diverse stakeholders before making a major decision that in the past may have been made by one or a few high-level administrators, the leader accesses new considerations of what may or may not work. Yet not all invest in such

a broad deliberation. Pink (2022) warns of a cognitive bias that pollutes our decision-making—an unwillingness to change course, despite what we have learned—that will often lead to failure, hence, regrets.

In an analysis of a defining moment during the Battle of Gettysburg, Gompert & Kugler (2006) contrast General Robert E. Lee's decision to order Pickett's charge with Union General George Meade's adaptive, analytical, and proactive approach to decision-making that relied on new information from multiple sources and input from his chief subordinates.

Lee's escalation to a commitment of a planned course of action relied on intuition and experience but was in direct conflict with information provided by his corps commander, Lieutenant-General James Longstreet, who warned that the attack would fail and lead to defeat. Some historians regard this battle as the turning point in the Civil War.

After the defeat, Lee took responsibility: "The fault is entirely my own." As was the case with Lee, oftentimes our regrets result from a failure to proactively process new and diverse information and listen to others, versus a sole reliance on intuition and perhaps a little ego.

Our multiple priorities as leaders of educational institutions include planning that is preventative in form: anticipating problems before they appear, predicting outcomes through ongoing reviews of data, and facilitating an organization that readily adapts to changing conditions. Learning is part of the work, which is likely why you are reading this now.

In the spring 2023 issue of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, our

practitioner-researchers examine areas that relate to preventative leadership through *understanding* that might assist in minimizing leadership regrets. Technologist Dr. Ryan Fisk provides an informative overview of the rise of ChatGPT and generative A.I., offering cautions along with opportunities for educators from current and future A.I. iterations: "Technology is evolving fast, and so too, educators must be prepared and ready to evolve as well."

In the piece, you will learn that within two months ChatGPT reached 100 million active users—the fastest growing consumer internet application in history.

Dr. Barbara Hickman, an assistant professor and program coordinator in the department of educational leadership at the University of Wyoming, in her legal analysis, "Fair Use or Fair Game: The (Distance) Educator's Dilemma," explores and explains the requirements for policy makers, site and district leadership, and classroom instructors regarding the use of digital, copyrighted materials in the ever-expanding growth of virtual learning environments.

Understanding the changes in the law and ensuring a systematic review to ensure that policies are not only current but are being applied is critical to prevent significant and regrettable liabilities. Dr. Hickman helps us to understand the consequences and what needs to be done.

Since the beginning of the accountability movement, many school administrators made the regrettable decision to respond to exogenous pressures to increase student standardized test scores by replacing access to Physical Education with more time in subjects that are tested. These decisions coincided with (perhaps exacerbated) a rise in

childhood obesity that has consequences for lifelong health risks.

In their study, "Evaluation of a Social Determinant of Health: Academic Achievement Through Physical Education Policy," Rodriguez, Gutmore, Reid, and Alfonso, explore national associations of PE policies and academic achievement on standardized tests through a fixed effects panel data analysis. Their findings enhance the limited literature on PE policy associations with academic achievement.

The issue concludes with a book review by Dr. Karen Salmon, the retired commissioner of education for the State of Maryland. She examines *From Conflict to Collaboration*, written by retired superintendents Rob Feirsen & Seth Weitzman, who offer a framework for preventing conflict in a way that can lead to more collaboration, a welcomed strategy during

these contentious times. The authors suggest principles and practices for conflict-agility to ultimately generate a critical mass that produces a more deeply committed, cohesive school, a place where collaborative work leads to greater engagement. Such leadership, if effected well, is the kind that can serve to shift the current climate and minimize leadership errors and regrets.

As Baldwin cautioned in 1967, regret is inevitable, but it does not have to be paralyzing. It can become the impetus for school leaders to make the changes that those who are being led require from their leaders. Philosopher and psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, a concentration camp survivor, provides us with some inspiration about applying such lessons as we move forward: "Live as if you were living already for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now!"

References

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