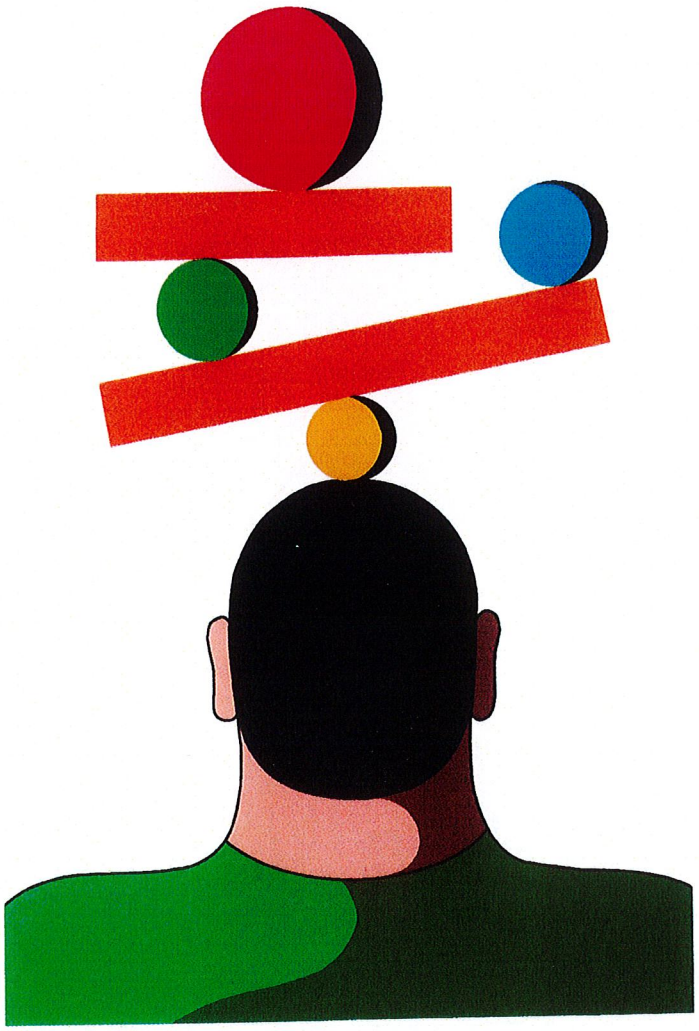
Finding Harmony

Rethinking the triple-threat model to increase retention and engagement—and help faculty thrive

BY MICHAEL SPENCER



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They say that absence makes the heart grow fonder. During the pandemic, the absence of a fully connected community left some educators longing for a return to the classroom. Others, however, made the decision to step away from the education profession entirely. While the pandemic was the catalyst for the Great Resignation that occurred across many sectors, the reasons for the exodus in education precede COVID-19.

A confluence of factors is creating a tipping point for the teaching profession: The number of teachers leaving their jobs is increasing, though the numbers are lower in public education; the number of college students pursuing teaching continues to decrease; and burnout continues to be significant for educators. According to a January 2022 National Education Association member survey, 90% of those surveyed identified burnout as a serious problem, and 55% indicated plans for an early departure.

Increasing teacher retention efforts in the face of an unclear and deeply concerning education landscape will take more than competitive salaries and robust fringe benefits. It also requires a deeper understanding of why so many have considered leaving their jobs, including disengagement levels and emerging generational trends. With baby boomers retiring, Generation X moving into their later careers, millennials advancing through the ranks, and Gen Z entering the workforce, there's been a noticeable shift in priorities regarding work and life, assumptions about upward mobility, and expectations regarding the worth and value of work as well as a dissonance between personal values and employer priorities.

In my work with faculty in independent schools, I have observed this dissatisfaction and dissonance occurring in relation to the "triple-threat" model, in which educators are expected to be skilled generalists who successfully fulfill multiple roles of teacher, coach, and adviser. This faculty model, informed by its use in athletics, was the norm in the earliest independent boarding schools of England and America, embodied mostly by single men in all-male institutions seeking

to fulfill the ideal of the master teacher. This model misses the mark in today's education landscape. Times have changed, and yet the vast majority of boarding, and even many day schools, employ some form of this triple-threat model to maximize the efficiency and channel the talents of faculty.

In the Fall 2016 issue of *Independent School* magazine, Greg Martin wrote about the sustainability of the triple-threat, noting that while 82% of independent schools still used the model, 92% indicated that it is under pressure from increased specialization of faculty in particular academic disciplines, parental demands for highly qualified teachers and professional-level coaches, and significant shifts in faculty views regarding work-life balance. As Martin noted, many schools acknowledge the necessity of this model while also demonstrating creativity and flexibility, remaining true to mission, and responding to financial realities by adapting what one head called "a more humane version of the triple-threat."

Expectations have only increased. Teachers are asked to understand social-emotional learning, expand cultural competency, and meet the needs of neurodiverse learners. This, combined with increasing levels of burnout and disconnection and the misalignment between generational needs and institutional realities, points to the need for a different faculty model—one that requires reclaiming, reasserting, and recommitting to a most critical component of education: a thriving faculty.

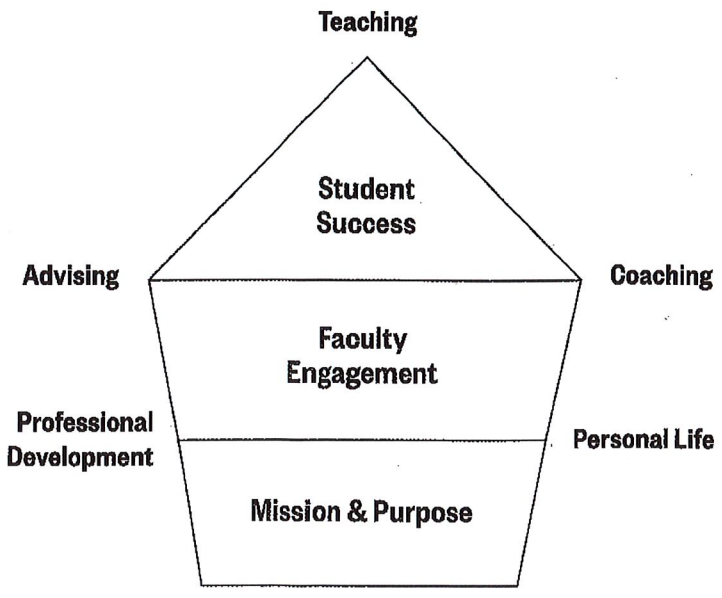
From Threat to Engagement

Rather than remaining tied to the patriarchal overtones of the triple-threat, schools should focus on a *triad of engagement*, which centers educators' work on creating relational connections with students. We should also consider that this triad of engagement is the seen and experienced aspect of the work, which requires a strong and often unseen foundation. Equipping teachers with tools to thrive requires nurturing this foundation for student engagement and faculty thriving.

During his tenure in the 1970s as head of school at Phillips Academy (MA), Ted Sizer, the educational visionary and reformer and founder of the Essential Schools Movement, suggested that personal life and professional development were also necessary complements to the triple-threat. From this perspective, we might reconsider the shape and function of the model. I suggest a *pentagon of the professional educator* in which the three areas of engagement (teaching, advising, coaching) are supported by a commitment to professional growth and time for personal life (see graphic below). Whereas the triple-threat model defines the triad of engagement with students, the pentagon highlights a school's commitment to faculty development while also supporting appropriate harmony between work and life. This also underscores the interrelatedness of student and faculty thriving.

A 2021 Gallup poll highlights how faculty engagement is highly predictive of student

The Pentagon of the Professional Educator



SOURCE: MICHAEL SPENCER

success. "When faculty have the materials and equipment they need, feel cared for at work, and feel connected to their leaders and colleagues, they are able to invest discretionary effort that improves the student experience." Not only does this impact student thriving, but this "engagement is also critical for ensuring schools remain financially stable and even grow amid declining student enrollment nationally."

A school's commitment to professional educators creates a solid base for this thriving, a foundation on which the multiple relational connections for student engagement might be built; from which faculty are nurtured, educated, and sustained; and through which schools might grow and thrive into the next generation. Nurture the self so that the self might nurture others in an engaged school community.

Finding Meaning Within

The pandemic pushed many educators to reconsider the alignment between the mission of their institution and their own personal values. In this existential moment, there is a stronger push to live, as the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre often said, with authenticity. This desire for authentic living speaks to the needs of the current generation of educators who value meaningful connection between their personal goals and the organizational mission. In a world where the environmental crisis poses a deep existential threat and the challenges to civil discourse have created fractured communities, many educators crave the opportunity to work in schools where they can lean into hope as they teach the next generation how to be resilient and creative. Cultivating authentic and connected learning communities is one way schools can slow the effects of the Great Resignation and its underlying disillusionment, disconnection, dissonance, and disengagement.

This is also expressed in the Japanese concept of *ikigai*, which is described in the 2016 book *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life* as "the reason for living, the place where passion, mission, vocation, and profession intersect." Articulating one's *ikigai* requires a level of introspection that few could afford before the forced pause of the pandemic. To live with *ikigai* is to live authentically with meaning and purpose.

Similarly, in the recent book *How to Navigate Life: The New Science of Finding Your Way in School, Career, and Beyond*, Belle Liang and Timothy Klein argue that the key to personal fulfillment is found through connecting with purpose, doing what Simon Sinek called "finding your why." Educators can refocus on purpose as their foundation, the *terra firma* on which the house for faculty thriving and student engagement might be built—one that can withstand the earthquakes of a culture shaken by disruption and disconnection. Schools, educators, and students have the unique opportunity to lead with purpose through culture—living a life that's personally meaningful with an intention to contribute to the world beyond the self.

In fully knowing ourselves, humans realize the deepest level of our interconnection. This is the pathway to reclaiming the best of community and our schools. Educators can embrace a more authentic life, and schools can help them strengthen the foundation that supports healthy student engagement. In this pentagon of the professional educator, faculty thriving and student success are built on purpose, mission, and meaning. This is the dynamic center through which community might be reclaimed now and for the future; it is the space that the poet Robert Frost envisioned:

My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
as my two eyes make one in sight...
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For heaven and the future's sakes.

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