

Michael Peller
Educational Philosophy Statement

I work in schools because I believe in students. Schools, and the students they serve, are the nexus of the present and the future. While I love students for their playfulness, curiosity and ever-questioning minds, I work with kids because I believe in their capacity to participate and lead in the many necessary and urgent issues we will face today and in the future. As a realist, I know our students are growing up in a world that needs healing. From entrenched institutional racism at a national level to climate change at a global level, it is too easy to lose hope. As a strategic optimist, however, I know that education, if done well, will be the mechanism for positive change.

Upon walking onto a school campus, students should immediately know that they can and will have an enormous impact on their local and global communities. As a teacher and school leader, I have learned that when schools step out of the way of young people and empower them, students are capable of extraordinary things. We need educators to create the right conditions and curricula to activate students' passion and efficacy as leaders. As an educator, I want to see students investigating, playing, exploring and laughing. Learning is doing. I want to see self-directed students who have clear agency in their learning. Students, called to action by the work they are doing, will find their learning relevant and purposeful. They will seek meaning and become confident and capable to pursue areas that inspire them. When schools focus on activating the learner and the doer, students see themselves as the dynamic problem solvers that they are.

Authentic *doing*, however, requires school leaders, faculty and students to embrace reflection as the key to becoming lifelong learners. John Dewey wrote that we do not learn from experiences; we learn from reflecting on them. We must reflect on our mistakes so as to adjust and pivot. Failing fast, when followed by careful reflection, leads to rapid learning, which ultimately leads to innovation. This is not easy, nor should it be. Learning should be hard; students should not become, nor expect to become, experts without effective effort. Yet, working alongside them, teachers will build in students the capacity to see challenges as opportunities for growth. At the same time, and in absolutely no way contradictory, the crafted experiences must be joyful. Too often schools incorrectly believe that challenging and joyful learning are at odds. What a farce! For the true learner, it should be both, where the two feed into one. Real learning stretches and challenges us, both intellectually and emotionally, while at the same time bringing us joy.

As an educator, I look for ways to say *yes*. Having focused deeply on design thinking over the last five years, I understand the importance of inculcating and embracing a culture that has a bias toward action. When a teacher wants to, for example, launch an international internships program, or a student wants to run a multi-school Feminism Conference, two recent proposals from this fall, I work with them

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to find ways to articulate needs and strategies so as to get a pilot program up and running. We look for ways to evaluate its success, get feedback in order to make appropriate changes, and then examine ways to scale the program. I want both faculty and students to believe that they have the capacity to initiate and implement change. I want everyone in the community to feel that it is (a) their community and (b) they can help improve it.

In terms of school leadership, one must build and nurture relationships, understand and shape culture, help set a vision for the school's future, and engage and lead teams in mission-driven organizational change. School leaders must be master listeners and storytellers, knowing the school's history, present, and future better than anyone else, and effectively using the culture to create both security and implement change. Visionary leaders always look for ways to do things better and help others see the risk of inaction. After working strategically to get key-stakeholders onboard committed to a proposed change, school leaders must find simple ways to solve daring goals. This is done best through distributive leadership models that empower teachers, parents and students. Leading with confidence and humility, a school leader should create a culture of both joy and innovation, of curiosity and excellence. At the same time, one must do what is best for the school and be ready to make hard decisions. Not to be forgotten, school leaders must always bring a sense of humor.

In short, leaders are strategic optimists. Iterative and learners at heart, leaders live the mission, symbolically modeling curiosity and continual learning. They build and strengthen relationships, and they nurture and support a committed and diverse community. Leaders empower everyone in the organization. Happy but never satisfied, transformational leaders set ambitious visions, and then work alongside students, faculty and parents to push and pull the school forward, making decisions that set the school up for intergenerational success.

In terms of reflecting on my own experience in education, I know that as a school leader I am drawn to both innovation and community. Having helped launch two start-up schools in the greater Bay Area, I enjoy vacillating between the 30,000 foot vision and the 0 foot implementation. Moving from conversations such as –*“How can competency-based assessment radically shift teaching pedagogy?”* to *“How do we get the lunch line to move faster?”* has helped me learn both how to manage and how to lead. The two questions I am always asking are: *“How do we make this better?”* and *“How do we make people feel supported and valued?”*