

# The Myth of Our Separateness: Reflections on the Pandemic

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What elements are essential to provide a child with a meaningful, multi-dimensional, and robust education, one that creates a joyful daily life and lays a foundation for work and relationships in the future, an education that flexes and adapts as children grow? I've spent twenty-five years thinking about this question. Before March of 2020, I would have felt fairly confident that my answers were complete; I see now, as the newly minted head of a virtual school, that my response needs adjusting.

The process of moving school online forced all of us at Dedham Country Day (DCD) to consider, again and again, what is essential that we are trying to create and preserve. What matters most about the content we are teaching students? What aspects of our relationships with students do the most to help understand themselves, feel motivated, and see themselves reflected in the world? How do families support and amplify our work with students? And how do peers – perhaps the most important part of school from a student perspective – play a role to support learning?

**Our task was not a matter of simply moving old content to new platforms. Our task was to re-envision and re-articulate why we are doing what we are doing, and find how to best translate these goals to a new platform.**

So what is even more obvious now, held up in starker relief? The intricacy and interconnectivity of our school as a whole system, and the innumerable elements that contribute to the whole. Understanding school as a system in this time makes me think of early forest researchers who discovered that the forests were far more complex than initially understood. The visible system of separate trees, soil, animals, and water had more nuance than they could have imagined.



How so? Fungal networks under the soil serve as a type of internet for tree communication. Separate trees signal to each other from miles away, warning of danger or protecting each other by exchanging carbon and nutrients. All of this is invisible when looking at a forest. Every piece of the system matters. Every element plays a role. The intricacy, interconnectivity, subtlety, and nuance of a forest system have a depth and beauty beyond what we once understood, and the same is true of our school.

So what does this new vantage point show us about each element of our DCD “forest,” and how can this new learning help us be a stronger school in the future? By keeping our focus on a few key areas, ones that have always distinguished DCD as a school and community, we can help our DCD grow and thrive. What is essential to remember?

**We’re not just a collection of trees.**

Just as a forest is not just a collection of trees, school is not just a collection of students. Much has been written in this time about the way the pandemic will shift us to a greater focus on the individual and more individualized forms of education. This analysis misses the point. Of course, we need to meet the needs of individual students, and some of the digital resources we are utilizing will help us better achieve this goal. This is good news for student learning and autonomy.

**But the key takeaway from this moment is that each tree—or student— only thrives when it is part of an intricate system, and the focus on the system as a whole is vital to the strength of the individual.**

Schools that fuel a connection to the whole, that help students look outward and appreciate that other people matter, will be like the most resilient forest systems that help trees grow individually while working together as a collective. Left on their own, students struggle to see themselves and their own learning as clearly without having it constantly reflected back to them in a larger system. We are social beings and we need to be in a context to learn well.



Whether we return to brick and mortar school in the fall or continue some weeks of distance learning, we must continue to find ways to keep learning social, to keep students connected to the energy, belonging, and feedback they experience when they are part of a whole.

**Nothing is extraneous in a connected system; every piece matters.**

Every moment of the school day plays a role in a child's education: the serendipitous walk down the hall with a student from another grade; the moment at recess that mixes new peers together for a game; the bulletin board that sparks a new interest; the smell of a favorite food cooking that offers comfort; the physical feeling of being in a room with laughter and the reverberation in a room full of drummers. Nothing is superfluous and it all adds up to a student's experience.

How do we create richness and serendipity using the platforms and systems that are available to us? Many schools have prioritized simplifying the experience of learning, reverting to math and reading skill development in a way that suggests this alone will suffice. But a child's education needs to be so much more than simple skill acquisition, and each piece of the school day they experience, in all of its variety and richness, contributes to this whole. While of course we need to continue a child's skill development, we also need to hang on to these larger goals so we don't devolve education into the imparting of a few narrow skills. That's why we've strived to create as many opportunities as possible to enrich our students' distance learning experience -- from including arts and athletics in our remote curriculum, to hosting 8th Grade-Kindergarten online "buddy" visits, to holding the annual DCD Fair with a combination of at-home and online celebrations, to the bright spot of a ThinkGive experience.

If you imagine an individual leaf, with all of its color, shape, and texture, I'm sure you are moved by the beauty of such a perfect singular creation. Now imagine an entire tree filled with such leaves, each one as beautiful and intricate as the one you envisioned. Go on to picture that one tree's worth of leaves multiplied over a forest of trees. Finally, see that forest as a connected system, each piece critical to the success of the whole.



Such is the awe-inspiring beauty of our school. I can see each face of our DCD students, and know the unique experiences, thoughts, and passions that make each child special.

But when you imagine them, like you imagined the leaves and trees, each unit a small piece of a whole and connected system of children and adults, the awe-inspiring beauty of our school – and the power of it as a whole – comes into clearer focus.

**In this time of social distancing and separation, remembering the myth of our separateness and the power of our system as a collective will help us move forward to meet the needs of all of our children, together.**

