

DISRUPT, ADAPT, PRESERVE or DIE: **Designing Distinctive Strategies in a** **Disrupted World**

Independent Schools Association of the Central States

Head Conference 2025 | Keynote | Chicago

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"Skate to where the puck is going,
not where it has been."

— Wayne Gretzky

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It is good to be back in my home state. My wife and I met at **Illinois State University** in the mid 1980's.

Today's **short talk** is about:

- The future of our industry,
- The complex challenges we must navigate
- Why some schools are better at strategy than others - and others just don't get it.

In short, **skating to where the puck is going.**

We will go fast. Don't worry about taking notes.

You can download this preso and our Strategy Continuum at **iansymmonds.org**.





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**WE HELP SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND
NONPROFITS CREATE THE FUTURE.**

LET'S GET STARTED

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The Near-Term Future in a Nutshell...

- Declining birth rates and #'s of school-age children
- Growing cost of living
- Educator fatigue
- Talent shortages
- Divisive political environment
- Artificial intelligence
- Global trend away from democracy
- Environmental disruptions

How does an industry that broadly serves between 1% and 3% of school-age children respond when our core business is no longer knowledge.

No, the sky is not falling. Or, maybe it is?



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Three Goals for Today

1. **Go Backward (to Go Forward):**
Set Some Context for Innovation and Our Industry
2. **Strategy Continuum:**
A Framework To Understand Why Some Organizations Are Truly Strategic
3. **Look to the Future:**
Who Will Navigate and Lead in this New World?



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A Deep Concern

Independent schools once competed for the same full-pay families in crowded markets—a concern I shared five and ten years ago. Today, the challenge is more existential.

Without bold innovation, many independent schools and high-tuition, small-enrollment institutions risk becoming irrelevant. Their greatest strength—independence—grants them the freedom to redefine their mission, delivery, and market reach.

Can our industry shift from a narrow focus on selective admissions and full-pay families to a broader vision of true relevance in the decade ahead?



Feb 7, 2024

WHY THE PRIVATE EDUCATION SECTOR IS STRUGGLING



The private education sector is struggling. You might not experience it directly at your school or college, but there are signs all around us that private education is, yet again, at another inflection point. The writing is on the wall, from softening demand, college closures and school consolidations.

<https://iansymmonds.org/blog/why-the-private-education-sector-is-struggling/>

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A Few Concessions

We are in a risky business called the **future**. Predictions are challenging, but the headwinds of change are stronger than ever.

The greatest threats to the future of our industry are **not** inside the schoolhouse.

I don't have all of the answers, but I have seen a lot. I've closed a few independent schools – and colleges/universities – in my career. It is not fun and I've learned some basic lessons.

Technology, innovation and ed-futurism are all very different things.

ISACS enjoys a wide distribution of schools and maturity levels.



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Some Guiding Truths I've Learned

Change: Education is a mature industry. The church, government, and school are the three most mature industries in most democratized societies and, generally, are not adaptive to *revolutionary* - but instead - prefer *evolutionary* change.

Industry: Our industry has long chased quick fixes while navigating a precarious financial model—high cost, low volume, and selective admissions balanced with diversity and inclusion. We've avoided crises before, but sustainability remains a tightrope walk with no easy solutions.

Why We Exist: “The work of the school is determined by the needs of society.”
– Col Francis Parker

Strategic Asset: Independence



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A Few Informed Observations on AI

AI & AR are transformational tools for the education sector; they are bringing rapid change.

These are not new technologies, but will challenge the existing educational models and could – if not *navigated* – render some schools obsolete.

Schools can't sit on the fence - to delay is to choose.

Please don't say the “*i*” word. It is akin to saying “*academic excellence*”. Just do it. And, BTW, it is not innovative to stay relevant with current or emerging trends or best practices.

Ultimately, this is **not** about technology but, instead, another a major step-change in educational evolution and adaptation of tools.



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Three Ages of Education

1. **Knowledge Age:** 1950s-90s, defined by pre-digital, print era, traditional assessments that remain the foundation of current accreditation and credentialing.
2. **Skills Age:** 1990s - early 2000's, defined by MIT iTunes era, digital democratization of knowledge, large focus on skills & competencies.
3. **Adaptive/Assisted Learning Age:** Current age and next decade defined by access to, synthesis of, and creation of new understanding through AI and assisted, adaptive, immersive learning.

Houston, we have a problem. We have some catching up to do.



Current and Historic Education Industry Challenges

1. **Faddish:** Education is prone to fads and lacks effective change mechanisms.
2. **Changing Role of Education:** Societal shifts around the role and value of education.
3. **Assessment Tipping Point:** Existing systems and structures of measurement and accreditation are outdated.
4. **Talent Shortages:** There is a shortage of skilled educators due to exhaustion from the pandemic, retirement demographic shifts, COL, and a host of other factors.
5. **Financial Model:** The combo of high price, low volume, and selective admissions is often not sustainable in the marketplace.
6. **Silver Bullet Panaceas:** We tend to rest our industry future on the next big idea. AI is not *it*, but will be part of the water, and a great ally or opponent.



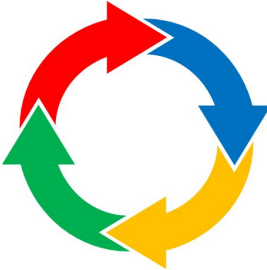
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The Innovation Cycle



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The Innovation Cycle:

Innovation is the creation of a **new** paradigm, invention, or a new way of doing something. Innovation often brings new tools to bear on a task.

Integration is the bringing **together** of new innovations and advances into existing systems. It allows the new innovation to be blended or woven into some meaningful system or structure.

Convergence is the point of **convergence** where several systems or platforms, not just one, become integrated into a functional suite of accessible programs or tools.

Adoption is the final stage, marked by the widespread **adoption** of the new systems, creating a new normal.



THE STRATEGY CONTINUUM

Four Camps of Schools & Colleges

Why Some Schools & Colleges Thrive While Others Decline

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THE STRATEGY CONTINUUM | Four Camps of Schools & Colleges

1. Fatalities

“Never Had It”

2. Preservationists

“Don’t Get it or Somehow Lost It”

3. Adaptors

“Get It, Sort Of”

4. Disruptors/Innovators

“Get it, and Then Some”

Lo



Hi

What We’ve Learned 1600 Times Over:
Capacity for Enacting Strategy

THE STRATEGY CONTINUUM | Four Camps of Schools & Colleges

Lo ————— Strategic Readiness or Capacity to Advance Strategy —————> Hi

Fatalities

“Never Had It”

- Operate in crowded markets
- Middle tier with duplication
- Not singular in offerings
- No leading position
- Short financial runway
- Lack of bench depth
- Leadership turnover

Achilles Heel:
Lack of Market Leadership

Preservationists

“Don’t Get It”

- Tied to old models
- Faculty-centric
- Internally minded
- Marketing will save them
- Operate in crowded markets
- Live in Glory Days lore
- Cash reserves declining
- Budget deficits
- Long-term leadership
- Mission over market

Achilles Heel:
Cultural Change

Adaptors

“Get It - Sort Of”

- Understand changing times
- Tied to old models
- Exploring new models
- Practicing integrated marketing
- Practicing SEM
- Deeper bench
- Managing fear of change
- Healthy cash reserves
- Mission pursuing market

Achilles Heel:
Incrementalism

Disruptors

“Get It - and Then Some”

- Seek opportunities
- Read the tea leaves
- Early adopters
- Don’t waste crises
- Externally focused
- Student-centric
- Hi-performing, stealth team
- Finds + of mission and market
- Cash reserves may be low
- Urgency is high
- Often lack money/status

Achilles Heel:
No Fear

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My Forecast of the Future: Skating to Where the Puck is Going

1. **Scale & Tailor:** Schools are increasingly moving away from a "one-size-fits-all" approach and target distinct audiences with flexible, scaled programs and pricing.
2. **Be the Best in Something That Matters:** Focus on being unique in areas that matter most to the world, rather than being the largest, most expensive, selective, elite.
3. **Integrate of AI and AR:** Schools must decide how to integrate these technologies to stay relevant and avoid obsolescence.
4. **Sunset Irrelevant Programs:** Eliminate outdated programs to free resources for future innovations, and incubate them to manage change.
5. **Grow Strategic and Generative Governance:** Governors/Directors should be solely focused on "what" and "what if" and using external expertise to guide the school.
6. **Interrogate and Define Your Core Business:** Know and exploit your core business.
My guess – it's not what you think it is.



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Three School Leader Categories of the Future

1. **Established and Well-Resourced Brands:** These are the few highly selective, well-endowed institutions with historical dominance. They can continue to lead by maintaining traditional business models of high price and selectivity with low volume. But, if they don't integrate emerging technologies, market share, influence and industry leadership will be narrowed.
2. **Innovative Brands Embracing Emerging Technology:** Smaller, nimble, tuition-driven institutions that adopt technology-based innovation. They focus on reducing costs while expanding access to education through digital means. These schools, colleges and universities will disrupt the status quo.
3. **Experientially-Rich, Immersive Place-Based Brands:** Schools and colleges with unique, location-driven experiences, offering distinctive environments and educational philosophies that capitalize on their surroundings.



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