

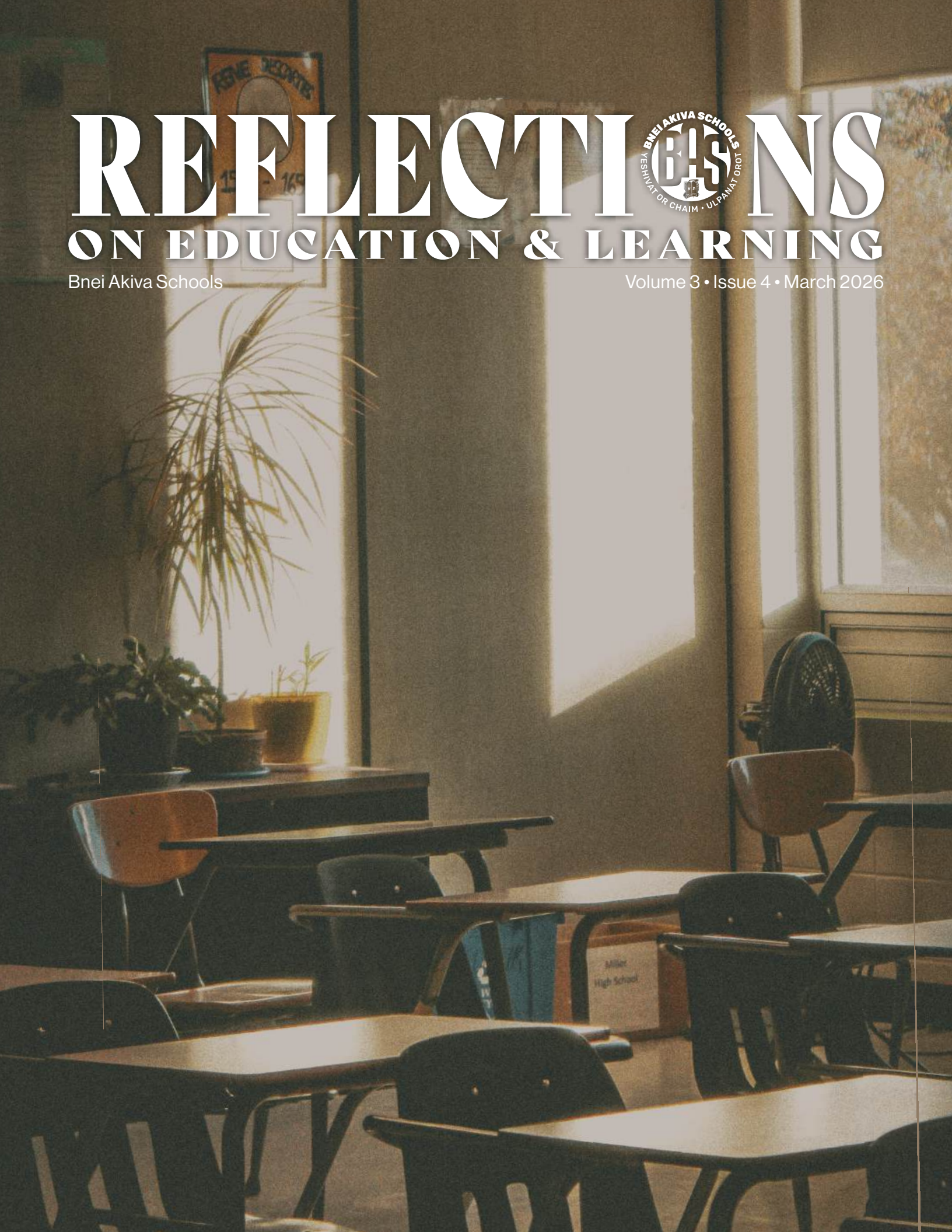
REFLECTIONS

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WHY I QUIT BEING PRINCIPAL TO BECOME A TEACHER AGAIN



Hillel Rapp

Judaic Studies and Humanities Teacher

After 12 years as an administrator in two Jewish day schools, I quit so I could focus entirely on being a teacher again. Just a teacher. No other title or job portfolio.

In the hierarchical structure of Modern Orthodox Jewish day schools, this might seem a puzzling choice. It often seems that most of the talented Jewish teachers eventually ascend the school status ladder of administration which grants them greater authority over a school's programs, better keys to the building, and influential positions of communal prestige. And, as I have argued elsewhere¹, there are often underlying economic reasons for teachers to become administrators as well. In my time climbing the administrative ladder, I held positions as Dean of Students, Director of Education, and Principal. But when I was given an opportunity to walk away, I didn't walk;

I ran. My goal as an educator has long been to enable as many of my students as possible to experience full success as learners, to make sure this was not an achievement reserved only for the strongest students. Over the last several years, I had become highly skeptical of my ability to meaningfully improve student learning outcomes as a principal focusing on the entire school. But, as a teacher, I saw a clearer opportunity to develop my practice in a way that would allow my students to fully master their learning, and in so doing, foster their spiritual growth and overall mental wellness.

In this essay I would like to explain why I became skeptical of what I could accomplish for student learning as a principal, the systemic and historical reasons behind my skepticism, and what I hope to accomplish as a teacher.

¹ See Rapp (2025, February 26) for more information.

The Limits of a Principal

I think most of my colleagues and students would consider my time as Principal to be a success. Nearly every student who completed Grade 12 earned an Ontario Secondary Schools diploma. The overwhelming majority of our students were accepted to their first choices for university, with a relatively large number attending elite programs. I guided innovations in curriculum development, progress reporting, teacher mentoring, and co-curricular enrichment. I saw it as an essential piece of my professional responsibility to be readily available and act in service to our teachers', students' and parents' needs—and I believe that positively impacted the professional culture of our school. These are all the key points I would have made on a job interview for a Head of School position, the next logical progression in my career. And yet, for all of these accomplishments, students in our school progressed in their learning at a pace and degree of efficacy no better than the average performance for our particular slice of the Jewish communal pie. We have data on this. All schools do. Our regular measures of student learning contained the same basic distribution of scores before I became principal as they did when I was principal, and I imagine they will likely continue to show those metrics now that I have left. In the statistical revolution within professional baseball over the last twenty years, one statistic that's always interested me measures a player's value above an average replacement at his position. If a principal's value was measured based on improving the formal learning outcomes of students, I don't think I was much better than the average principal sitting in the same chair. Yet there never seemed to be any desire to apply this type of metric to my job performance.

I felt like I was living in an alternate reality. I could do my job really well, it seemed, by the standards of everyone around me while our students were mostly not showing meaningful improvement from their baselines on the learning outcomes we were measuring. Since high school is a place where students spend roughly 80% of their day in formal learning settings, shouldn't improving those outcomes be at the center of any principal's job criteria? I think the answer to this question has to be one of two possibilities. Either almost all students and parents are satisfied with the learning outcomes currently provided or we don't see broad improvement as a realistic possibility. In the many conversations I have had with students and parents over the years, I believe the second answer to be most likely. We have collectively come to accept a limited vision of what school can do to improve student learning to the extent that a principal is really not expected to demonstrate that the non-A-level students in his school have improved to a point of mastering their learning.

I saw this reality clearly by the time students reach their senior year of high school, where they have typically sorted themselves into one of three categories we accept as part of the system.

- *Achievers*: About 25% are what we might call “strong” students who can master all the formal learning challenges presented to them in high school.
- *Travelers*: The larger group, say about 50% of students, have settled on a continuum of sub-mastery. Some have been forced and/or have opted out of classes that presented difficult learning challenges, some have accepted they

will earn report card marks that are better than failing but below mastery, and some have adopted the view that formal learning in school is “not really their thing” and are seeking to ride it out.

- *Strugglers*: The final 25% struggle more intensely to keep their performance in range of the second group, and often require significant additional investments in support outside the classroom to accomplish this.

While the exact percentages are broad and over generalized guesses, the groupings probably feel familiar as most of us share the same basic experience from our time in high school, even going back decades. And, as I mentioned, the categories are rooted in at least some hard data that's easy for any school leader to see when examining assessment construction, student performance, progress reporting, course selections and learning support participation. In other words, what should be the core responsibilities of a principal. None of these are perfect measures, to be sure, but they are telling us something about student learning. The distribution of scores on formal learning measures in equivalent settings is often reflected in what is called a bell curve, or worse, a “normal” distribution (Figure 1). This visual has been the staple of what counts for a “good education” for the last 150 years, albeit with a continuous creep of grade inflation (a related story for another time). We expect most students will not master their learning despite their learning being the primary purpose of school. The most frustrating conversations I had as principal were the ones where students were themselves frustrated by sub-mastery performance, and, for all the guidance I could

give them personally, I understood the system was designed for that to be the case.

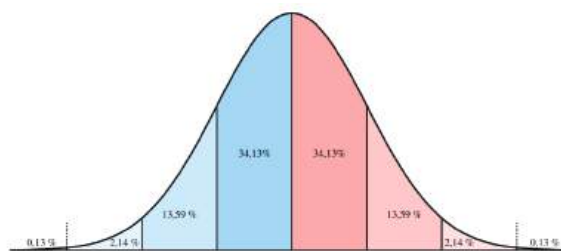


Figure 1: A graph showing a normal distribution. Photo by Wolfgang Kowarschick on Wikimedia Commons².

What I encountered as the educational leader of a traditional high school is not unique. In fact, a principal who purports to have a high school where all of the students earn A-level scores in all their courses would be eyed with understandable suspicion (although such schools do certainly exist³). The high school system is not designed to enable all students to master their learning. It is designed to measure student learning outcomes at fixed intervals and after a standardized amount of instruction, and then to call it a school year. If some manage to improve within that framework, lovely. But, more typically, the *Achievers* who leave high school with high scores are the ones who came into high school with high scores, pre-selected to master their learning in almost any school setting. I understand my frustrations as Principal in the context of this systemic failure that we have mostly come to accept as a given. In Jewish education especially, I have argued⁴, we have tacitly accepted poor formal learning outcomes (for example, in Hebrew language and textual decoding skills) as baked-in and unlikely to improve so we have shifted our focus and financial investments to other worthy goals, such as building better informal Jewish learning

² See Kowarschick (2012) for more information.

³ See Springpoint (2018) for more information

⁴ See Rapp (2023, August 2) for more information.

programs and increasing overall student happiness at school.

Systemic and Historical Roots

There has been a strand of critical reflection on the formal learning structures of traditional high school going back nearly to its inception, with the well-known educational reformer John Dewy being the most prominent of those early voices, and writing at the turn of the last century. His ideas are often paraphrased with the following line: *education is not preparation for life; education is life itself*. In other words, life can be seen as a series of learning challenges. As a professional, you might encounter a learning challenge when you need to wrap your head around a new innovation in your field. As a parent, you might encounter a learning challenge when you need to navigate a new wrinkle in your relationship with your child. As an individual, you might encounter a learning challenge as you try and improve your work habits. Secondary schools, in this vision, are not most valuable if they train you in any particular set of disciplines, as they are most often conceived, but they are valuable if they train you as a learner with the tools to navigate the novelty of life through a learning lens.

In the last half century, Ted Sizer was one of the most prolific education writers to take up the Dewian mantle, spending most of his career focusing specifically on the American high school experience:

Americans have burdened themselves, however unintentionally, with a high school design that is inefficient and runs counter to an abundance of solid research about how formal

learning in fact takes place... The happy burden represents a paradox. We admire our national commitment to mass inclusive secondary education, but at the same time we know that the current vehicles to deliver such an education do not function effectively. We persist with a head-in-the-sand attitude odd for a nation driven by a competitive economy. We are for the public schools (and nonpublic schools as well), but we appear to be against much of what they are doing. That is, we love the people in the schools and the idea of schooling, even as we know that the places we have do not work all that well. (The New American High School, 2013, p. 1)

The most recent work that brings this issue into stark relief is a comprehensive study by education researchers Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine whose 2019 book, *In Search of Deeper Learning*, chronicles their exploration into the world of alternative high schools in search of the schools that do the best job facilitating deep student learning. Their research takes them through a list of some of the most lauded learning methodologies of recent history, from schools focused on Project Based Learning to No-Excuses schools to International Baccalaureate schools.

To begin with, they astutely summarize three roots of the problem as follows:

[First, we have] the traditions that promote knowledge as certain and given, teachers as tellers, and students as passive recipients [that] are millennia old. These assumptions continue today, not only in American public schools, but also in public schools around the world, in many private schools, and in universities, all of which, despite their very different organizational

contexts, fundamentally subscribe to the notion of teaching as knowledge transmission. These assumptions emerged at a time when adult and religious authority was gospel; very few people had the resources, time, or opportunity to participate in the construction of knowledge; and children were expected to conform to the expectations of adults...

If the first part of the story is historical and epistemological, the second part is structural. In the United States, [this conception of learning] was reinforced by the creation of what David Tyack and Larry Cuban have called the “grammar of schooling.” This grammar was established by bureaucrats who built at the end of the nineteenth century the American school system that persists to this day. Key elements of that grammar are age-graded classrooms, division of the curriculum into discrete academic subjects, the creation of different academic tracks, and a teacher centered pedagogy that expects all students to absorb knowledge and skills in lockstep...

A third factor is the under-professionalization of American teaching... One of the fateful decisions made when creating the American school system was to place power in a small, mostly male, administrative class, rather than to develop the mostly female teaching force as a full-fledged profession. Professional fields like law, medicine, engineering, and many others, recognize that the work they are doing is complex and thus have developed professional value systems and structures appropriate to knowledge workers: they are selective in who they recruit, develop a knowledge base that undergirds their work, provide lengthy training in that knowledge, and then require

those who enter the field to demonstrate that knowledge and skill. By contrast, education [...] took a different path by placing the power in the administrative class and underdeveloping the needed professional mechanisms: Teaching is an unselective field, featuring short training and low entry requirements, which are frequently waived altogether when there is a teacher shortage. The results of this non-system is a wide variation across classrooms... Teaching in the United States also does not have a career ladder that includes opportunities for advancement and for the establishment of highly paid master teachers, which some other countries have. The consequence is that it is hard to draw a talented, capable, and diverse workforce into teaching, which, in turn, only exacerbates the desire for administrative control, perpetuating the downward spiral. (Mehta & Fine, 2019, p. 35)

This is a really good summary of the systemic problems, in my opinion. But what was most interesting to me about Mehta and Fine’s research is that they experienced the same frustration that I had. They set out to find the school that was doing it right, and the administrators that had figured out how to promote deep learning across an entire school. They wanted to find the model that really works. They didn’t find that. What they found instead were individual teachers who figured it out and who were able to develop practices where universal and highly effective learning was able to occur in their classrooms. Teachers who worked within the given challenges of a system to “create powerful learning experiences for their students” (Mehta & Fine, 2019, p. 370). They further noted that “the most compelling teachers in our sample

had a median experience level of fifteen years. In part, this is unavoidable because it takes time to accrue skill. But these teachers also described very long periods of trial and error, in which their transmission mode of teaching had to be gradually undone and replaced by a different mode of pedagogy.” (Mehta & Fine, 2019, p. 372)

What I Hope To Accomplish

Mehta and Fine’s book was referred to me by a colleague this summer after I had made my decision to leave my role as Principal and devote myself entirely to teaching, and it could not have come at a better time to capture the essence of the endeavor I am embarking on. As an administrator, I was essentially in charge of maintaining all the structures of a system designed to disappoint most learners. Changing that system from the top would require a complete commitment to overhauling the educational model and budget allocations of the school, and there wasn’t an appetite to consider change at that scale. So I began to consider a more pragmatic approach to improving student learning outcomes. As a teacher, I would have essentially a clear path to work with my students and, hopefully, build a practice that combines the science of learning with the art of teaching at the high school level. The system wouldn’t change, but I could certainly demand of myself what I was not able to demand of the system. After all, no administrator I know ever stopped a teacher from trying to help students improve their learning. I am fortunate that my school also saw the value in this endeavor and that other important pieces fell into place to make this opportunity possible.

Here is what I hope to accomplish with these efforts expressed in three initial steps:

First, all my students have the opportunity to master their learning⁵. This means my students are given as many opportunities as needed to work through their learning until they reach a point of mastery. Since traditional schools require we distill all learning to a single numerical value, let’s call mastery an 85–93 score range. This approach also means that students will need to put forth unequal levels of effort, as what may be relatively easy for one learner is a hard challenge for another. And it surely means that I will not be able to invest a standard amount of time as a teacher; rather, I will need to live in a dynamic relationship with my students as learners, allowing their needs to define my priorities and focus as my courses unfold. Stronger students will also have the opportunity to exceed mastery, earning scores in the 94–100 range so as to make sure there is a design for learning that appropriately challenges the strongest students to push themselves farther while enabling every student to meet the curricular standard for mastery.

Second, I am embracing a focus on developing cognitive skills over reiterating content. Or, you might say, I am focusing on depth over breadth. This is a necessary component in the shift to viewing high school as a distinct stage in adolescent development where students become aware of who they are as learners. In the first place, that means discovering what it takes for them to master the knowledge and skill challenges provided by the curriculum. Then it is using that information to make informed and autonomous

⁵ See Rapp (2024, June 6) for more information.

decisions about what areas of learning are most interesting to them and worth pursuing into adulthood given their learning styles. As it stands now, in traditional schools, most students don't actually make those decisions because they are forced to move through a curriculum in lockstep and at a pace that values covering material over deep understanding. If they don't master their learning before the bell rings and it's time to move on to the next topic, the decision of what to pursue has been made for them often without any time for reflection. Instead of learning being an internal process of increasing self-awareness, it is an external process of imposed limitations.

Finally, and most importantly, I expect this process of pursuing mastery through deeper learning will necessarily develop my students' self awareness as learners navigating their worlds. I believe this pursuit is at the core of their spiritual growth and overall mental wellness. In a spiritual sense, the task of learning successfully is a conscious and integrative process of going from chaos (that which is unknown) to order (that which is known). This is the same conscious process at play when it comes to spiritual growth, in my understanding: that is, to encounter the chaos of the world and develop a calm and ordered approach to living. Cortisol, the stress hormone, present in so many of our mental struggles, is the great vanquisher of successful learning⁶. Being able to quiet your mind, lower your cortisol level, reflect on a learning challenge in front of you, and see how to best apply your skills in service to conquering it is, in essence, a path to peaceful, grounded, and structured living.

Like my students attempting to master their learning, I know that this new endeavor of mine will also require reworks and revisions along the way. What I feel confident about is that, in returning to the classroom, I have cleared as many obstacles as I can from the field in pursuit of my overall goal. There is now a direct and dynamic relationship between my professional efforts and my students' learning, which seems exactly as it should be. If high school students spend the largest portion of their day in a classroom, then that is exactly the place I want to be as well. As part of this journey, I expect to write here regularly, and I hope you will continue to join me in reading, commenting on, and critiquing my work.

⁶ S. Vogel & L. Schwabe, "Learning and memory under stress: Implications for the classroom," *npj Science of Learning* 1 (2016): Article 16011, <https://doi.org/10.1038/npjscilearn.2016.11>

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