

**Query:**

Dear CAIS colleagues,

Yesterday at my executive committee meeting a board colleague asked me, "How are you doing?" Like...she was really really asking. My query to you is a little odd, and alas so am I. Please answer the following questions and I will collect and redistribute anonymously. Please be crisp too.

- How are you doing? (On an okay to good day.)
- How are you doing? (On a very not good day.)

After having been asked this I am wondering about the broader context and am basically just curious, as I think about what it means to be a school leader one year into a global pandemic.

**How are you doing? (On an okay to good day.)**

Hopeful, intrigued, curious, a little muted

**How are you doing? (On a very not good day.)**

Fatigued, out of new ideas



**On a fine to good day:** I feel strong and steady. I am proud of the responsibility I am holding and I am proud of the collaboration I am facilitating at and for my school community. I am creating spaciousness for my FAMILY, anti-racism, my self-care and my colleagues' self care. I am practicing gratitude. I am *b r e a t h i n g*.

**On a very not good day:** I feel dread. I am intensely worried. (a.k.a. afraid?) I am aware of loss. I am aware of the unrelenting relentlessness. I am telling myself I am not enough. I wake up at 3 a.m. with owl eyes, unable to fall back asleep. I fantasize about working at Trader Joes because people look really happy at Trader Joes and I would look alright in Hawaiaan-print short sleeve button-up.



I'm tired from putting out fires and frustrated that what we heads do this year is day-to-day. Not much time for generative forward looking thinking - easy to lose the big picture

I'm worried about my staff- teachers are exhausted. Especially the elementary ones. they are used to having complete control of their classrooms and coronavirus takes that control away. Remote one day, in person with half of the kids the next week.... can't do collaborative stuff. spend time making the kids stay 6' apart...etc 2 am wake up - nightmare that all my teachers decide to leave the profession... That said, I love this school and am honored to be helping it thru this crisis.



On a fine to good day, I say, I can do this and I have confidence that with good counsel we will make the right decisions and do a decent job of listening, caring, do the best the school can do,

but just try to get through the day and at best it is, I think I can make it to Friday and only have to work half days on Sat and Sun.

On a not very good day, I say to myself, I am glad to be near the end of my career and even on a good day the job is not fun and there is no getting away from the issues that plague a school and school head.



I am new to this and maybe that puts me to an advantage as I am detached in a way. I do my best, I trust my team, I realize everything is in constant change and I can admit when I am wrong and pivot. On a good day, I am fulfilled and in a flow. Things unfold easily and I feel present and fulfilled in my role. On a not so good day, I recognize that I am in my head, the monkey mind is running amuck and I feel fear and anxiousness. On those days I try to pause and return to center. On not so good days, I question and ponder the value in what I am doing. Those aren't fun days but I rest in the ever changing nature of things and know it will pass. So far the good and bad balance in a way that keep me going.

Not sure if that answers what you are asking. I am blessed to have an incredible team and a solid community of support. I wouldn't be able to do this without them, not everyone has that. Lastly, I try to recognize that we are all fragile now, traumatized so when someone lashes out, I know that isn't their true self, that's their pain. I try not to take it personally.



I think generally my answer to both questions is okay but the really nuance is and I am in a pattern of frantic work, not enough time to pause and reflect. A bit of time on a good day and no time on a not so good/bad day. I go from one meeting to the next with maybe a bathroom break and the pressure to make big decisions constantly is intense. A colleague of mine said that she had a bit of down time last weekend and did not know what to do. I fear that I and maybe others have been in crisis mode for an unsustainable amount of time and the summer is not going to fix it. The crisis is going to continue as we look to a year where we may have some (good) transitions and will be supporting a population that is in recovery mode after a mental and physic level year in crisis.

Thanks for the reflection opportunity - I am hoping to have some vacation and time away this summer and pacing is going to be critical - the marathon we are running became an ultra.



On a good day I've never been more inspired to be an educator. In 20 years of being a school administrator, I'm not sure I've ever been so in touch with my purpose as a leader. Sounds strange, right? I feel like what I am doing matters to folks, I can see the impact of my efforts on large and small scales and I actually feel like I am making a quantifiable contribution to people's lives. Not that folks are hanging on every word, but especially with the last occupant of the White House folks around here were craving thoughtful, inspired leadership and I feel like I and we have filled that gap in ways that are even helping to remind our families what matters most and how we might think about this chapter we are in. Though I want this pandemic to end

tomorrow and go back to games and plays and evening events 6 days a week, I also really feel like I am making a difference that matters.

On a really not good day I actually feel most or all of the things above. It's kind of what's kept me going for twelve months. AND I also feel beleaguered, powerless and frustrated by priorities that are fundamentally in conflict with each other (keeping our larger community safe while delivering a great educational program while supporting our staff and faculty all at the same time turns out cannot be done). I am the receptacle for people's anxieties which, when I mistakenly personalize it and erroneously assume that it is about me (which turns out may be my superpower sadly), feels all kinds of shitty. And often a really lousy day includes some aspect of my effort to apply logic to a fundamentally illogical set of circumstances - the county health department standards are not meant to make sense 100% of the time in my context - one year in and I am still learning this lesson.



On a good to Ok day I am grateful to be alive and strong. I find that because of all the upending mess COVID has caused, the fact that I am new doesn't seem to hold much weight and I am able to make tough decisions, make necessary change, shed some challenging parents and ultimately find some light at the end of each week knowing it will soon be my school, my team and my program.

On a not very good day I feel achey, like I have something growing in my body- a cancer of worry that I'm not doing enough, my decisions are dangerous and the road ahead almost unnavigable. So I hike or swim, cry a little then drink Tequila and soda with lime. I usually find that an episode or two of a really good show, or a few chapters of a good work of fiction cure the aches and I fall asleep feeling grateful...

It's a crazy rollercoaster...and if not for a few grounding and appreciative colleagues and trustees...I'm not sure I'd be able to laugh at all.

Too much?



On a good day, I am encouraged by our students and the joyful interactions I observe on campus. I am incredibly proud of all we are doing to provide a "normal" school experience in person, 5 days each week.

On a bad day, I want to quit. The magnitude of the role is too much, with little positive feedback from stakeholders. What I'm doing today feels more like social work and pastoral care, which I am not trained for...so doing it well takes lots of learning and growth and curating of resources, which there is no time for. I'm just exhausted. And, as a first year head, not being able to connect with anyone in my community in person is just hard.



Good day: Present and grateful for the privilege of helping students be back on campus.

Bad day: Exhausted and drained by having had no break from the upheaval and uncertainty, from holding so many people's stress and anxiety.



On a good day—optimistic, grateful, tired to the point of struggling to get out of bed, and dealing with sluggish thoughts, weird memory lapses, reactivity, and almost daily migraines.

On a bad day—crying for no particular reason, eating junk food (mostly sugar), unable to sleep due to worry. Feeling like 16 hour days still fall short of getting the basic work done. Helpless and tremendously sad. Thank goodness the bad days are not too frequent, but they come in stretches.



On a good day: "Thanks, not too bad ... and that's more than good enough these days, right?"

On a very not good day I simply answer: "Next question, please! "



I find that my answers have not changed from pre-pandemic. On an okay-to-good day, I am optimistic and energetic. On a very bad day I am full of grief and exhaustion.

I think I would have very mixed feelings about being asked this during Exec, because I wouldn't necessarily want to share the downside in the format -- with my Board Chair 1:1 is different.



What I wish every board knew is that too many heads (nearly all I've talked with this year) are asking themselves, "At what cost am I doing this job?" Many are worried about the toll this year has taken on their long term health, on their relationships with spouses, partners, children, loved ones.

What I wish every board knew is that the work of this year has lacked any sense of fulfillment. Most of us are teachers first, executives second. We - even the introverts among us - thrive on interactions with students and teachers. We love the light bulb moments. We love observing the growth that comes from practice and the joy that comes from accomplishment. This year, we've not only lost that, but exchanged it for fast and furious arrows coming straight at us for situations out of our control and our need to make decisions that require trade offs.

How am I on an ok day?

Fine?? Hanging in?? Proud that I'm still standing. Tired, and tired knowing that there's very little benefit of the doubt offered to heads, and that there's much on our plates we cannot share outside of the board room, even with senior admin, especially with spouses (though they and our families bear the silent burden of whatever emotional wear and tear we bring home).

How am I on a not great day?

A pancake under an eighteen wheeler??

I'm sure one of our colleagues will have an even more interesting picture to paint. Take what I wrote above and just know it's amplified on those days.

What's a good day?

A senior jumping up and down like a kindergartener because he gets to come to school to zoom class to class from the library.

Lower school kids streaming by my window walking to the field for PE.

Teachers, in the company of children, smiling.



I'm doing great on both fronts. We have all of our students back on campus through 6th grade. The seventh and eighth grades are back twice a week and I see light at the end of the tunnel. We're getting vaccinated, Covid cases are going in the right direction so I have hope even though I don't want to get overly excited. Has this be difficult, heck yes, but as school leaders, we are asked to step up when there are challenges. That's what we do and I feel very blessed to serve with my team.



On a good day..... mix of exhaustion but with sense that I believe I'm accomplishing something that matters

On a not so good day.... mix of exhaustion with sense that I hope I'm accomplishing something that matters

Generally... good or bad day doesn't matter because it is still a mix of Groundhog Day and Sisyphus for me.





First off, I am so happy to hear that a Board member asked you how you are doing. None of us are getting enough of those queries!

1) On an ok-good day: Having students back on campus has definitely helped, but the isolation has been terrible. I feel overloaded with too much information and not enough black and white, clear direction. I am able to remind myself how blessed I am with my family and career.

2) On a not very good day: I have had more of these the last 11 months. I am only in my 2nd year at my school, so I was just getting to know the community and vice-versa when it all shut down. I get into very dark places not knowing who to trust, and I also constantly worry about how I am being judged. I've been in education for almost 35 years, and I've never thought about doing anything else. I have thought about other options over the last 11 months. The hardest part is that the normal stresses of a headship - student/family issues, faculty/staff issues, board issues, etc., are absolutely magnified by 1000, and I have very little emotional or psychological room. There is a light at the end of the tunnel, and I know we'll all be better once we get through this.



On a good day, I feel upbeat about the fact that kids are returning to school and feel hopeful that my husband and I can get away for the first real break in well over a year (this coming summer).

On a not very good day, it takes all my effort to not react to the seemingly constant concerns, judgments, and fears of others who seem to be looking to me for answers, reassurance, etc. That can be utterly exhausting and make me feel so stressed that I'm up in the middle of the night thinking about it (and, in my better moments, praying about it). I don't think I've had so much practice *listening* and trying to depersonalize in a long time.



Thanks for asking. I am also asked that question, but it seems rhetorical. I ask it a lot, and really want to know.

How are you doing? (On an okay to good day.) I'm fine. Resolved. Know what is at stake and feel the value of what we are doing. Kids can be in school safely if done correctly. Working in schools is a privilege and for 30 years has been exceptional. One really tough one should be expected.

How are you doing? (On a very not good day.) Feel like I need a break. Recognize that if I don't take care of myself, no one really will. The board asks, but doesn't act. Fortunately, I have a phenomenally supportive spouse.



On an okay to good day, I feel relatively balanced, confident and empowered.

On a very not good day, I feel out of control, like external circumstances create insurmountable goals, and that I am doomed to fail in balancing the competing needs/demands of students, parents, faculty, and lay leaders.



good day: Things are alright, school going smoothly, can't share how much turmoil this has been on my family life.

bad day: The workload of the past year is one I don't know that I will recover from, and it makes me seriously consider pursuing other professional options. I am just exhausted.



On an OK to good day, I am able to focus on the things that bring me joy in my work like being around kids and visiting classrooms, talking with teachers and having time to THINK!

On a very not good day, I wonder if I have the stamina to make it to the end of the year. I am exhausted!



How are you doing? (On an okay to good day.) - an absent mother and partner  
How are you doing? (On a very not good day.) - a bad mother and partner  
But, when asked by executive committee, which I haven't been, but I have been asked frequently by my board chair. answer is fine- and I find the things that are good and fine and working at school. Cause as a HOS, I'm doing fine.



On the best of days, I am exhausted and worrying about the future and what we are doing and what we can be doing better. There no longer seems to be a rhythm to my days or weeks and, more than ever before, keep waiting for "the other shoe to drop" and something happens that I have to deal with immediately.

On the more difficult days, I wonder how much longer I can endure the uncertainty, the parental anger/anguish/frustration/ resentment, the faculty angst, the student worries. The overwhelming sense of weight and stress on my shoulders is difficult to carry at times.

I didn't expect to be this raw when responding but... here it is.



I was in a session with other new heads last week where we discussed this very thing. While everyone is trying their best to find the good in their work right now, there have been quite a few breakdowns--outright crying, anxiety, etc. Also, many felt that their boards were oblivious to the strain and stress they were under.

While I don't have a parent and student community yet, I've certainly had some challenging moments. My bad days come when board members question my decisions, when I worry that I'm not doing the "right" thing, etc. Good days are when I connect with students, hear great stories about families, and collaborate with others inside and outside my school. But I'm still tired. :)



On a good day I am energized, resilient, solution-focused, and proud of the work we have done.



On a not very good day I want to move to our cabin and become a writer. Truly, just want to escape.



On an okay/good day - reasonably well; I wouldn't say "Great" as the exhaustion and constant vigilance of "what's next?" is ever-present. Having students and teachers back on campus makes it a little better, since it brings moments of joy, but still...

On a not-so-good day - super hard, just-get-through-it survivalist mode (which is hard to run in for months at a time), it's almost impossible to turn it all off because as Heads we know we are ALWAYS responsible and so there is actually no true "down time," just "less-up time." I have to have a good cry every few weeks. I both appreciate and resent trustees telling me "I hope you get some rest," since you know if anything happens, they will still have wanted you to be "on." The word of the year has been exhaustion.



How are you doing? (On an okay to good day.) OK, tough winter and I started talking to a mentor/professional counselor and that's helped a lot  
How are you doing? (On a very not good day.) frustrated, angry, anxious  
It helped tremendously for our employees to get their first dose of the vaccine recently - I did not know how much that was weighing on me.



The short response working for me these days is this: "In the realm of okay, all considered."



How are you doing? (On an okay to good day.) I'm geared up for a marathon. (I used to run half marathons, so the analogy isn't perfect.) Not exactly on an endorphin high, but I'm good.  
How are you doing? (On a very not good day) Just gutting it out, pushing to get to the top of the uphill, knowing that there's flat ground or maybe even a downhill coming soon. Fortunately, I don't have many very not good days.



How are you doing? (On an okay to good day.): Feeling a sense of pride, gratitude, and emotion that I have never before felt in all of my years in this work.  
How are you doing? (On a very not good day.) For the first time ever, I have armpit and back sweat. One of my team noticed it near the start of the pandemic, and noted that it was then that she knew COVID and the work related to it was going to be the real deal! I now, true story, bring an extra undershirt to work daily.  
O.k...how's that for crisp and perhaps TMI?



**On a good day -- like yesterday.**  
**Short version.**

I'm thrilled by the joy that I see reflected on the faces of my students. I get out of my office and interact with kids, faculty and the occasional parent in car line.

**Long version**



We had the 100th day-of-school kindergarten parade. Kids with capes and noisemakers circling a socially distanced campus. Faculty in all divisions, and high school students who were on campus that day joined in. We had a family touring for prospective PK, and I thought, "If they don't apply after this, they are not mission appropriate." I know the reason I do what I do.

### **On a very not good day:**

#### **Short version:**

I'm experiencing decision fatigue; I think about school and COVID 24 hours a day, make all manner of decisions large and small.

At any moment I'm having to make critical 30,000-foot staffing decisions about the fall while also handling a nuanced quarantine question about a teacher who wants to travel this weekend to adopt a puppy, having just returned from a family trip two weeks ago that required quarantine.

I'm having to make decisions about next month as the ranking Health Care Policy Maker for my school. I make a decision that is student centered. I know that a percentage of my faculty will feel I have thrown them to the wolves, and I will receive at least one or two difficult emails opposing the decision. The parents will largely support the decision, but a percentage will email that it's not doing enough to support their students, or them as working parents. Being asked to carry the emotional baggage of so many different people is exhausting.



I have not held back since March 2020. I have been very clear that this is hard and stressful and overwhelming. If they are still engaged, I share the confusing messages we were receiving at the beginning and the lack of access to vaccines currently. And then, as is my nature, I share something that happened on campus that gives me hope and reminds me of why I am working my butt off, excuse the blunt language. I have also started taking my one, sometimes two, day off on the weekend with no email, no text, no calls. it is the only way I can stay sane right now.



okay/good day -- I feel grateful, energized, and optimistic  
very not good day -- disillusioned, defeated, and exhausted (though after a good cry/glass of wine/lavender bath/hug from my family, I usually rebound)



On an okay to good day, I still have doubts about how effectively I'm doing my job. The metrics (e.g., philanthropy, retention of students and staff, admissions, etc.) all suggest that we're operating as well as can be, but I don't feel like my school is thriving as an organization, nor do I feel as if I'm thriving as a leader right now. We're just taking things one week at a time.

On a not very good day, I'm sleepless and easily agitated. Things that don't usually push my buttons aggravate me more than they should. I just wish people would always say "please" and "thank you." That would make a huge difference.



How are you doing? (On an okay to good day.) ***Great!! Love seeing students and teachers together on campus, pandemic and all... most days, great***

How are you doing? (On a very not good day.) ***Even on a harder day, I would not choose to be in any other line of work, so, hard days are hard, but still okay!!***



Since March 2020, and with all the pandemic challenges, I have been telling myself, be optimistic, tomorrow will be a better day. We are all in this together and we will overcome the bad moments or days.

I stopped to think about the word "better" and how I can expect to measure it during all these challenges.

But here we are in March 2021, surviving one year of challenges, whether it was educational, emotional moments, psychological problems, or financial. Nobody asked me all these days "How are you doing?" However, I am still hoping for better days as we are approaching our third trimester with vaccination in place and less stress among all constituents.

Now we come to your questions:

**How are you doing? (On an okay to good day.)**

I am doing well and feel accomplished whether I am attending a virtual class presentation or/and seeing teachers' creativity in using new methods to make learning happen. I am happy when I see parents more relaxed and understanding the dedication of our team in rising above the situations. The motto is "we can do it".

**How are you doing? (On a very not good day.)**

I feel horrible when I hear the COVID-19 rates and numbers of death are up, or when one of our school community members has faced challenges or lost her/his loved ones. When I am going crazy from one meeting to another and not having a down-time to breath and catch up on my work. When I feel alone and need pat on the back to help me remember that I am one person trying to help ALL.



I am writing this short note to honor your request for a response. I can't say that I have any bad days. My life at [my school] under COVID-19 conditions is fairly similar to life prior to COVID-19. All of my students have been on campus since October and they take all of their classes outside in the open air. I purchased 8 rather large "wedding tents" last year and they are now [our] new teaching spaces. My students (and parents) love the tents. My kids take a yoga class every morning at 8 AM and during December and January some morning temperatures were as low as 28 degrees F! The kids renamed the class - it is now called "Froga" - as in frozen yoga. I mention this because the students have adapted extremely well to our changed reality. Parents, too, have done a bit of a reset during the pandemic and now have different expectations - perhaps more genuine and sincere expectations for their kids and schools, in general.

It's funny - I was just about to start construction on a 10+ million dollar upgrade to our campus that would include 3 new beautiful buildings. Now, I think, "why would I want to do that? The students love the tents and they are paid for - \$15,000 and no permits required!" Consequently,

I will not be enduring the extreme stresses of capital campaign fundraising and construction during future days - it's not really necessary. I think that this will increase my lifespan!

In the domain of admissions, we are being overwhelmed with applications. Yes, more work for me and my faculty, but it's not a bad problem to have. So, to conclude - COVID-19 has superimposed a whole new set of challenges to me and my crew but we are succeeding. And our daily routines are quite different so life has been interesting. My students, parents and teachers are all happy. Yes, we are all working hard but we have always worked hard so not much has changed really.



**How are you doing? (On an okay to good day.)** On a good day, I am feeling like my leadership is moving my school forward and that I am reading the Department of Health/pandemic tea leaves in a way that makes my teachers, families, students and even administrators feel like, "we got this."

**How are you doing? (On a very not good day.)** On a very not good day, I am wondering how 32 years of experience in education, 25 of them in leadership could ever have prepared me for this task of leading in the dark. I am wondering if my decisions and initiatives, though well-meaning, are enough, or even healthy for students, teachers, and our entire community? While I have chosen to follow the recommendations to the smallest detail, there is always some level of interpretation involved in the implementation, and that can be frightening.



#1 I'm fine- one foot in front of the other- one day at a time

# 2 Ugh... I'm fine- one foot in front of the other- one day at a time



On an okay to good day, I am feeling exhausted and apprehensive at times. I worry that I have missed something, have not thought something through enough or I am not planning ahead. I am in a constant state of feeling I am not doing enough even though I know I cannot possibly do more.

On a very not good day, I question everything and wonder if I am cut out for this or if I can keep going. How much resilience do I actually have? And should I be thinking of my family more?

I am trying to stay positive but I am giving in to process ambiguous loss these days and in a strange way it is helping.