Chapter 1

How We're Wired Now

The beauty and tragedy of the modern world is that it eliminates many situations that require people to demonstrate a commitment to collective good.

—Sebastian Junger

In the introduction, we laid out three major challenges facing our students and schools: our need for belonging in an age of individualism, the smart-phone induced mental health crisis, and a broader lack of trust in institutions. Those arguments will inform the solutions we outline in the rest of this book. In this chapter, we'll explain the challenges they pose in greater depth and begin to explore some ways schools can use an understanding of them to rewire the ways they design interactions with students and even with their families.

ARGUMENT ONE: THE IMPERATIVE OF BELONGING

One of the most important things to understand about human beings is that we have evolved to form ourselves into groups with mutual

responsibility and shared purpose, and to crave the feelings of belonging, meaning, and community such group membership creates. This profoundly shapes our motivations and desires—even when, as is often the case, we don't realize it.

The desire for belonging comes to us via a million or so years of evolution—both human and, before that, hominid. When we glance backwards at that process, we tend to see it through the lens of our contemporary individualism. That is, we explain the processes of becoming "us" by focusing on the critical role of *individual* traits and characteristics. In the simplest possible terms, we believe that we prospered thanks to our big brains, bipedal posture, and opposable thumbs. And while that's undoubtedly true, it's only part of the story. Just as crucial to the success of our ancestors was the building of purposeful, cooperative, and mutually responsible groups.

Through eons of prehistory, to be a hominid standing alone on the grassland with a big brain and a host of exceptional attributes was nonetheless to starve to death or become something else's meal, probably very quickly. Humans alone are weak and slow and far outclassed by a host of rivals in the tools of hunting and defense. But to be standing on the grassland as part of a small group of humans capable of sustained coordination, loyalty, and cooperation—a group that could successfully pursue prey in a coordinated manner for hours at a stretch; a group that would stick together when something with claws and teeth attacked—to form such a group was to become, suddenly, an apex predator. *The* apex predator.

For the overwhelming majority of our existence, only humans who were able to form productive groups and facilitate their successful inclusion in them survived. Those who failed to join, those who made groups that splintered, those who were kicked out of groups, did not survive. We are individualists now, all of us—particularly those of us in the United States and the United Kingdom—but for most of our evolution, too much individualism was a death sentence.

Across thousands of generations of selection, the imperative of group formation was wired into us as strongly and profoundly as the instincts to mate and nurture our young. That's the way evolution

works. We must be drawn to the survival imperatives without knowing it. It has to be bred in the bone.

The importance of rock throwing, described by William von Hippel in his remarkable study of evolutionary group dynamics, *The Social Leap,* is a case study. Rock throwing, or more precisely *group* rock throwing, is "the most important military invention of all time," von Hippel argues, and one of the most critical breakthroughs in the cognitive development of humankind.

We no longer think of rocks as deadly weapons, but well into the 19th century, von Hippel points out, professional soldiers bearing firearms were frequently forced to retreat with casualties in the face of indigenous peoples armed with nothing other than rocks. Even a rifle column was occasionally no match for a score of individuals who had cleverly surrounded it and were pelting away with brutal accuracy from carefully coordinated positions.

In the context of evolutionary history, von Hippel writes, cooperative rock throwing allowed a weaker species to defend itself from, and even to hunt, bigger, faster, or stronger adversaries for the first time. Suddenly humans could attack or defend from a distance—a position that allows for far greater safety. Fifteen humans might prevail over a lion in close combat but only at the likely cost of several members of the group, but fifteen humans throwing rocks at the lion offers a potential triumph at defense or even conquest, with far better odds of survival for each individual and therefore more reliably, more effectively, and more aggressively. It turns prey into predator. At last humans were not among the weakest species—if *and only if* they could achieve mutual cooperation.[1]

Individuals who learned to work cooperatively in this manner were at an enormous advantage, and, von Hippel notes, "evolution would have favored any subsequent psychological changes that supported the quality of the group's collective response. Our ancestors who could be counted on by others to be cooperative reaped a great reward as a result." Soon enough the competition was among groups within the species, and once again selection would have rewarded those groups that were most successful at cooperation and reciprocity.

The individuals who survived and thrived were those who were able to form groups that stuck together even under duress, but this only worked if the overwhelming majority of group members could be relied upon to embrace mutualism. We evolved to constantly seek groups where we feel the pull of mutual responsibility, where we see evidence that complex tasks can be achieved reliably, where trust and cooperation are understood. Once we find such a group, we continually look for confirmation that we are members in good standing or, on the other hand, signs that we may be pushed out. To our evolutionary selves, being cast out is a death sentence. To a slightly lesser degree, so is being in a group not capable of mutual defense, coordination, and loyalty. Groupishness was (and is) of the highest importance to us because it was so utterly central to our survival.

Only in the plural form were humans the winners of natural selection, in other words, and even if the importance of the group to our success now seems far less relevant to us, we are wired still to attend powerfully to group norms and to fear isolation, separation, and the possibility that we might be ostracized. "Individuals aren't really individuals," observes Sandy Pentland, director of Connection Science at MIT,[2] or at least not exclusively so. Of course, throughout evolution we also competed as individuals within groups at the same time as we competed among groups: we competed for status within the group, for the right to choose mates.[3] But better from a selection perspective to be a mid-status member of a close-knit group than the alpha in a group that could not marshal unity and cooperation.

Evidence that the social nature of evolution is wired into us isn't far beneath the surface. Social isolation is stressful to us, and people who experience sustained loneliness and social disconnection suffer in both physical and mental health. BYU psychologist Julianne Holt-Lunstad studied the relationship of social connections to mortality rates and found that having a lack of social connections was equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.[4] Similarly, UCLA professor of medicine Steven Cole found that the immune systems of socially isolated individuals were less robust and less able to fight pathogens effectively.

Our anger is often another example of our groupishness. Humans are quickly angered by "free-riders"—those who break the code of mutualism and seek to reap the benefits of group membership without doing their part to contribute. Far more cultures are permissive of theft, for example—or fail to conceive of it as a problem—than are tolerant of free riding. Its censure is nearly universal, says von Hippel. When we sense that mutualism is breaking down, our instincts tell us that the group could come apart. That's among the biggest threats we can imagine.

We feel far safer when we constantly receive signals of reciprocity and belonging and—perhaps more interesting—when we send them. Generosity—especially generosity within close-knit groups—also exists in every culture on earth. It is almost always accompanied by feelings of satisfaction and happiness. We are happy and feel safe when we reconfirm our own connection to the group. After a few thousand generations, the psychological and emotional well-being that accompanies such behaviors has become deeply encoded.

Small Moments and the Gestures of Belonging

Belonging is among the most powerful human emotions, and Daniel Coyle discusses its role in modern group formation in his book *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups*. Belonging, he notes, is often built via small moments and seemingly insignificant gestures. In fact, it is *mostly* built that way. Cohesion and trust occur when group members send and receive small, frequently occurring signals of belonging. The accrual of these signals is almost assuredly more influential than grand statements of togetherness or dramatic gestures. "Our social brains light up when we receive a steady accumulation of almost invisible cues: we are close, we are safe, we share a future," Coyle writes. But it's not a one-time thing. Belonging is "a flame that needs to be continually fed by signals of connection."

A colleague of ours described a simple example of this when we visited her school in the days after the mask mandate was lifted in her area. "I'm trying to make sure I focus on eye contact and smiling,"

she said. "That *we* focus on rebuilding that habit as a staff, so kids see someone smiling at them when they walk down the hall and they know: this is my place."[5]

Smiling and making eye contact are two of the most important belonging cues. They are also indicative of the nature of belonging cues more broadly; they tend to be subtle and even fleeting in nature so they are easily overlooked. Saying "thank you" and engaging in ritual forms of civility—holding a door, letting someone else go first, shaking hands—are other examples. Holding the door or letting someone go first as you enter provides little if any practical benefit; like most acts of courtesy, it's really a signal: "I am looking out for you." It reaffirms connectedness. And it affects more than just the individual to whom you show courtesy. Coyle notes that in one study,[6] "a small thank you caused people to behave far more generously to a completely different person. This is because thank yous are not only expressions of gratitude. They're crucial belonging cues that generate a contagious sense of safety, connection and motivation."

When we respond to a belonging signal not just by signaling back to the person who sent it but by sending additional signals to other people, it is an example of what the political scholar Robert Keohane calls "diffuse reciprocity." "Specific reciprocity" is the idea that if I help you, you will help me to a roughly equal degree. It is often the first step in commercial or political exchange, but it tends to engender only limited levels of trust and connection. Diffuse (or generalized) reciprocity, however, is the idea that if I help you, someone else in the group will likely help me at some future point. "Diffuse reciprocity refers to situations in which equivalence is less strictly defined and one's partners in exchanges may be viewed as a group," Keohane writes.[7] Norms are important. When participating in or initiating diffuse reciprocity, I go out of my way to show I am not keeping score and don't require equal value in every transaction. I am trying to show that I think we are part of a group, that what goes around will come around.

This is why in many cultures and settings, nothing is more insulting than insisting on paying for what was freely given. It is responding

to an offer of welcome or help—diffuse reciprocity—with a signal of specific reciprocity. It suggests "transaction" rather than "connection" and downgrades the other person's gesture.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about signals of gratitude and belonging, however, is that the true beneficiary is the sender. It makes us happy to be generous and welcoming in part because it makes us feel like good members of the community and, perhaps, like more secure members of the community as a result. As the French philosopher la Rochefoucauld observed, "We are better pleased to see those on whom we confer benefits than those from whom we receive them." Summarizing his research, von Hippel writes, "Life satisfaction is achieved by being embedded in your community and by supporting community members who are in need." Note the centrality of mutuality; there's equal emphasis on the psychological benefits of giving to the group as well as receiving from it.

Gratitude too is one of the most powerful human emotions. As Shawn Achor explains in his book *The Happiness Advantage,* expressing gratitude regularly has the effect of calling your (or your students') attention to its root causes. Done regularly this results in a "cognitive afterimage": you are more likely to see the thing you look for. If you expect to be thinking about and sharing examples of things you are grateful for, you start looking for them, scanning the world for examples of good things to appreciate. And so you notice more of them.

The psychologist Martin Seligman asked participants in a study to write down three things they were grateful for each day. They were less likely to experience depression and loneliness one, three, and six months later. "The better they got at scanning the world for good things to write down, the more good things they saw, without even trying, wherever they looked," Achor writes of the study. The world became a better place for them, one that valued them and stood ready to embrace them because they made a habit of noticing the signals it was sending. "Few things in life are as integral to our well-being [as gratitude]," Achor writes. "Consistently grateful people are more energetic, emotionally intelligent, forgiving, and less likely to be depressed, anxious, or lonely."

The fact that what we look for so profoundly alters our sense of the world is just one way that the eyes are, perhaps, the most critical tool for establishing belonging. Even their physiological structure shows how critical they are. Humans are the only primate with white sclera—the part of our eyes that surrounds our pupils. This is the case, von Hippel writes, because advertising our gaze allows for cooperation and coordination, and because it communicates our status within the group—all of which are far more important to a human than to a primate that is less absolutely reliant on cooperation and mutualism for survival (as all other primates are, even those that live in groups). "If I'm competing with other members of my group, I don't want them to know what I'm thinking, which means I don't want them to know where I am looking," von Hippel says. "Whether I'm eyeing a potential mate or a tasty fig, I'll keep it a secret so others don't get there first. But if I'm cooperating with other members of my group then I will want them to know where I am directing my attention. If a tasty prey animal comes along and I spot it first I want others to notice it too so we can work together to capture it."

Humans also compete *within* their groups, we've noted, and eye gaze, advertised to others via the whites of our eyes, also communicates stature and status within the group. Anyone who has ever given or received a flirtatious glance or participated in a locked-eye challenge can attest to this. "Our scleras . . . allow us to monitor the gazes of others with considerable precision," Bill Bryson notes in *The Body: A Guide for Occupants*. "You only have to move your eyeballs slightly to get a companion to look at, let's say, someone at a neighboring table in a restaurant." More potently, glances between and among fellow group members tell us whether we are respected and safe or resented, marginalized, or scorned. "Affirming eye contact is one of the most profound signals of belonging a human can send. Conversely, the lack of it could suggest that our inclusion is at risk."[8]

How valuable is the information carried within our gazes? A "genetic sweep" is the name for a physical change that confers such immense benefit on recipients that over time only people having the change prevail. Having white sclera—in other words, being able to communicate more with a look—is an example. There is no human

group in any corner of the planet where the benefits of enhanced gaze information were not evolutionarily decisive.

Consider, in light of that, this photograph, which comes from a video of one of Denarius's lessons when he was a math teacher (and which Doug wrote about in *Teach Like a Champion 3.0*).

The student Vanessa has just been speaking authoritatively about what she thinks is the explanation of a given solution to a math problem, but suddenly, midway through, she realizes that her explanation is not correct. She has confused reciprocal and inverse. She's been speaking confidently in front of 25 or 30 classmates—advising them "if you check your notes"—and now, with all eyes on her, she realizes she is dead wrong. She pauses and glances at her notes. "Um, I'd like to change my answer," she says playfully, without a trace of self-consciousness.

She laughs. Her classmates laugh. Laughter too communicates belonging (or exclusion) by the way, and here it clearly communicates: "We are with you." The moment is almost beautiful—it's lit by the warm glow of belonging. Students feel safe and supported in one another's company. The level of trust is profound.

Now look at the girls in the front row. Their affirming gazes—eyes turned to Vanessa encouragingly—communicate support, safety, and belonging. In fact, it's hard to put it into words just how much their

glances are communicating—each one is a little different—but they are as critical to shaping the moment as Vanessa's own character and persona. They foster and protect a space in which her bravery, humor, and humility can emerge.

Moments that are the converse of this one send equally potent signals, and almost assuredly occur more often in classrooms. The lack of eye contact (or the wrong kind of it) is a signal that something is amiss even if you are told you are a member of a group, and even if someone's words tell you that you belong. When something feels amiss in the information we receive from the gaze of our peers, we become self-conscious and anxious.

Let's say you're at dinner with a handful of colleagues, all sitting around a table. An eye-roll after you speak is a devastating signal. Or if, after you've said something, no one looks at you, you start to wonder: Was what I said awkward? Tactless? Clueless? Not-so-funny or even so-not-funny? Without a confirming glance you are suddenly on edge. Even if you have not been speaking, an ambiguous eye-roll you notice out of the corner of your eye is a source of anxiety. Was that about you? Have you done something to put your belonging at risk?

Or suppose you arrive late and saunter over to the table to find that no one looks up; your mind suddenly scrolls through an anxious calculus of what that might mean. Your peers might merely be absorbed in their phones and thus not look up to greet you but your subconscious mind may not distinguish much among potential explanations. No matter the reason for the behavior, it sends a worrying signal of nonbelonging.

In too many classrooms, students often speak and no one among their peers shows they heard or cared; they struggle and no one shows support. They seek to connect and there is no one signaling a similar willingness. Think here of the loneliest and most disconnected students most of all. How many of them look up to see only disinterest or blank expressions from their classmates? This is the nonverbal environment in which we ask young people to pursue their dreams. Imagine Vanessa in a room full of averted, disinterested gazes. If she was smart—and if she was like most young people—she'd have known better than to have raised her hand in the first place.

Flow and Its Role in Belonging

It's worth observing something else Vanessa is feeling in the moment when she reads signals of belonging and support and so decides to engage in productive and positive learning behavior. A sense of efficacy and productivity pervades the room. Vanessa doesn't just feel like part of a group; she feels like part of a *successful* group, one that is moving forward and accomplishing things, one that, through an evolutionary lens, is likely to survive and thrive. The sense of belonging we get from being a part of a group is especially strong when combined with feelings of sustained dynamic progress. The psychological state of "flow" describes what happens when humans engage in a task with uninterrupted focus and engagement for a sustained period of time. To lose track of time and lose ourselves in a task is one of the most pleasurable and gratifying mental states we can experience.

Hunting is probably the classic example of a task that induced a flow state for our ancestors. Many scientists think early humans were primarily persistence hunters. That is, a group would collaborate to chase a creature, most likely one that was faster over the short run. The quarry might successfully dash away when first chased, but the hunters would track it and find it and then chase it again. Imagine an antelope. Again and again the hunters would find and chase the antelope as it rested after its initial escape. This required teamwork, persistence, absolute focus—remaining highly attuned to the tiniest clues as to the antelope's location, for example—for hours and hours until finally the prey would drop dead of exhaustion or give up and allow itself to be captured. Those who could lose themselves in a task like that and sustain focus for significant periods of time would have had a significant selection advantage over those who could not, so perhaps our preference for flow state began there. Regardless, the groups in which we achieve flow are not only the most productive but often the ones within which we are most likely to feel belonging. Ultimately, we are happiest when we belong within groups that remind us they are productive and efficient.

This is reflected in Seligman's definition of happiness, a term many people define as being roughly synonymous with "pleasure." True that

happiness often includes pleasure, Seligman argues. But it also consists equally of engagement—becoming absorbed in a task, living almost entirely in the moment—and meaning—being a part of something important and valuable, often something that feels larger than yourself.

Perhaps this is why so many students' stated sense of identity comes from extracurricular activities like music, drama, and sports that are more likely to involve a state of sustained dynamic engagement for participants. A math class, say, is far too likely to be subject to constant low-level disruptions in many schools—breaks in the flow of forward movement. Momentum, the feeling of full engagement, like one is "losing oneself" in a task, is difficult or impossible to sustain under such circumstances. When a young person says, "I'm a musician" or "I'm a soccer player," it suggests that these activities have established for him or her a sense of belonging that has shaped their identity. This perhaps should tell us something. Yes, we should make sure that belonging-intensive activities are readily available to young people across a variety of interests outside the classroom. Yes, we should make sure that these are well-designed and well-taught to maximize belonging and connection. But we should also recognize that what young people love about those activities could also happen more in classrooms. Students might feel the same sense of identity about history or science as they do about drama or basketball if classrooms helped them to lose themselves in the pursuit of the former as much as other settings do the latter.

We've journeyed far and wide in our effort to look more deeply at the roots of human motivation, so let us pause to summarize the argument that we are making: human beings are profoundly social and group oriented—far more so than we often realize—and our well-being is profoundly influenced by whether we feel we are part of purposeful groups. If we want young people to thrive, be fulfilled, and maintain psychological health, schools must ensure that activities they offer—including the core activity of classroom instruction—make students feel like they belong, especially when the group to which they belong is characterized by shared purpose, meaning, and mutual responsibility.

Notably, much of what enables feelings of connection and belonging is embedded in tiny moments of interaction that are frequently overlooked. Mutual responsibility and commitment are at the core of group formation, so what you give is as important as what you get. Being ready to support other group members, demonstrating your willingness to support shared aims, even and especially when it involves small sacrifices for the greater good, is as important as what we receive from others. At a time when students have been profoundly isolated and cut off from the groups in their lives, it's critical that we engineer schools carefully to maximize these characteristics of daily interaction.[9]

Could you take this too far? Of course. There is an important balance to be struck. Belonging only works if each student feels valued and appreciated as an individual, as opposed to merely one more member of the class. But given that we are the most individualist society in history, most of us are keenly aware of our desire for individual freedom and autonomy. "Liberation from ossified community bonds is a frequent and honored theme in our culture," Robert Putnam writes in *Bowling Alone*. "Our national myths often exaggerate the role of individual heroes and understate the importance of collective effort." We are far less likely to recognize the need for more group connection, more reciprocity, more groupishness. To succeed—and to succeed now in particular—schools will have to harness the power of the group.

ARGUMENT TWO: SCHOOLS AND THE SMARTPHONE EPIDEMIC

In the introduction, we presented data on just how devastating smartphones have been to student (and probably adult) connectedness, happiness, and well-being. Here, we'll reexamine those phenomena in light of what we now know about human belonging to better understand what happens when students pay increasingly more attention to their phones than to those around them.

A Generation Both Connected and Isolated

It's especially important for the people who run places where youth gather and interact to understand that the mass adoption of smartphones has radically changed the social fabric of young people's lives, even when they are not actively using them.

As we discussed in the introduction, chronic phone usage has changed the patterns of social interactions everywhere. "I've seen my friends with their families," one student told psychologist Jean Twenge. "They don't talk to them. They're just like yeah, whatever, and then they're on their phones." Times of informal interaction, where once connection and communication between young people and their parents, extended family, or friends were built—family dinners, driving to practice in the car, just hanging out after school—are now often marked by precious little eye contact and other belonging signals. They instead involve far more swiping and scrolling. The messageis: that's what people do in each other's company. "It's non-screen activities that help teens feel less alone," writes Twenge, but such interactions and the antidote they potentially offer are degraded. You're in the room with your friends but they are just as likely looking down at their phones and only half there, smirking at something (maybe about you!) that flashed across their screen.

Even the awkward moments when we are new to a group—when, arriving, we stand for a moment and scan the room until someone realizes they might say hello (perhaps a bit of eye contact cues this)—even that is altered. Now you glance around, but everyone's eyes are down. So you take out your phone as well. Rather than connecting, you remain apart.

This affects the life and culture of institutions, too. "Sometimes I'll get to school so excited to see everyone, but then in homeroom or in the hall when I get there, my friends are all on their technology," one teenager told us. "All the way to school I was so psyched to see them and then I'm like, why am I even here? I could just remote [i.e. attend via remote classes] if you don't even want to talk." The phrase *if you don't even want to talk* is most likely a description of the feeling people get

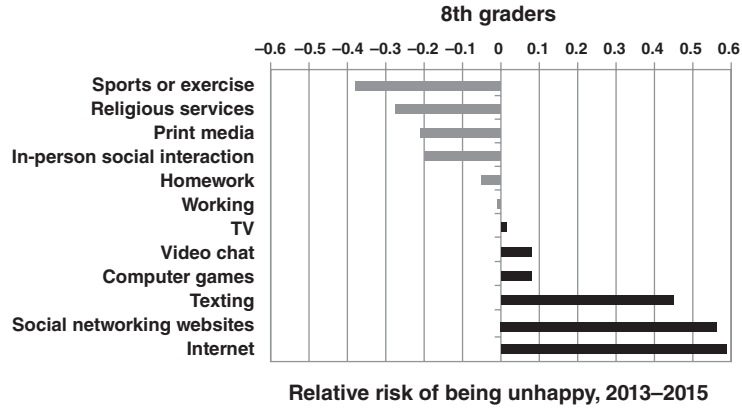
when they don't receive the acknowledgment, eye-contact, and confirmation humans expect (and hope for!) from one another. We don't say we don't want to talk; we signal it. To walk into a room and receive no discernable response is disconcerting and anxiety-inducing to anyone, whether we are fully conscious of it or not. But to adolescents, who are especially sensitive to their place in the world, it is doubly so.

"Often I'll arrive early to a lecture to find a room of 30-plus students sitting together in complete silence, absorbed in their smartphones, afraid to speak and be heard by their peers," a college student told Twenge. Does anyone think this social isolation even among peers is not also common in K–12 schools that allow phone use during the school day?

Combating the Smartphone Epidemic

Establishing limits on the amount of time young people spend on their phones is important but it is also important to note that some uses of time when away from devices appear to be more beneficial to young people's well-being than others. Ensuring experiences that are fully engaging and "connecting" when students are away from their phones is also critical to reconnecting them.

The chart here shows Twenge's data on how involvement in certain activities has a strong negative correlative to the spiraling rates of unhappiness among eighth graders.



The two activities Twenge found with the strongest negative correlation to unhappiness—participation in sports and participation in religious services—have several things in common: they involve engaged interaction with fellow participants; they involve shared purpose; they require cooperation and interaction. Spending 90 minutes at volleyball practice means 90 minutes of attending to facial signals and subtle interpersonal cues—relearning the foundational grammar of human interaction. It means 90 minutes of group cooperation and coordination in pursuit of a goal. And it means 90 minutes when you can't be on your phone. Such interactions, Twenge's research suggests, could serve as "antidotes," in that they appear to counteract some of the adverse consequences of social media use.

This distinction between "off phones" and "off phones and in a setting that is psychologically beneficial" is important. Schools along with parents and other youth-based organizations—should consider three separate types of action to address the smartphone/social media epidemic: restriction, antidote, and intervention.

Restriction: It's unrealistic to think we'll ever go back to the time before smartphones. It's doubly unrealistic to think that schools can make a lot of headway reshaping broad societal norms.[10] That's not really our job. But it is our job, we believe, to set up environments within our institutions that ensure the learning and well-being of students. Screens degrade attention, learning, community, and mental health. Ensuring extended spans of time when students are reliably screen free—not merely not using them but with the screen actually not present—is necessary to rebuilding attention, optimizing learning, and maximizing social well-being, especially in the aftermath of a crisis that left students drastically behind academically and disconnected socially.

It's really hard work to do this. One of us has a child in a high school that set a "no phones during class" rule to great fanfare. A fraction of the teachers followed through on the rules diligently and successfully. Some lacked the will or skill to handle students who tested the rules. Others chose to ignore or scoff at them. Classrooms that adhered to

the policy were soon outliers and within two weeks it became clear that the initiative would be quickly forgotten. (It's worth reflecting as well on what such a failure to follow through on an announced policy communicates to parents and students about the efficacy of the institution in an era of increasing skepticism.)

But, of course, some schools do implement restrictions successfully. In Chapter 2 we will share details of how, but we note here the importance of getting buy-in from staff and parents as the first step.

We believe that with diligence and focus, schools can create sustained space and time for students to engage each other and their learning tasks without distraction: face-to-face and pencil-to-paper—"high text, low tech" we like to say. Importantly, schools are one of the last institutions that can reasonably hope to implement the kinds of moderating effects on the universality of phones. We are just possibly the last redoubt.

Antidote: In addition to restricting smartphone access, schools can encourage antidote activities. In fact, the best antidote may just be a well-run classroom with a strong dynamic lesson that engages everyone, where students feel a strong sense of belonging because they are constantly receiving cues from their peers that their presence and efforts are valued. Schools can add to that an intentional array of activities that engage students outside the classroom, as well. These activities—clubs and sports and events—must be well-run and carefully designed, just like the classroom. It's not enough just to offer a martial arts team or a science club if no one shows up, or if people show up but half of them are on their phones, so that students are just as likely to feel alone in the room as out of it.

Ironically, fewer options can sometimes be better. A common narrative in schools is that choice motivates—if we let young people choose their activities and their books and their learning, they'll like it more. But in fact what motivates people far more is their reading of social norms. We do what we do in part because we want to connect and engage in shared endeavor with people around us. Choice might motivate sometimes but connection motivates a lot more. A hastily added debate club that's sporadically attended, run by an indifferent

staff member, and where a smattering of students file in and glance at their phones—or look out at their peers swiping through their phones while they are practicing—doesn't create much value. It's often similar in the classroom, we believe, where book choice is often valorized and the result can be each child reading their own book in some corner of the room without the opportunity to discuss it or, better, benefit from the emotional connection that the shared experience of reading a story together. Far better to read the book together—maybe even aloud—and hear one another laugh and gasp as the story unfolds. Far better to ensure students spend their school days in constructive and intentionally designed environments where the culture is vibrant and supportive. If in doubt, it's far better to do fewer, highly connected things better.

Intervention: Young people today experience a slower version of adolescence than young people did even a decade or two ago. A tenth grader in 2017 has in some ways had the life experiences of an eighth grader a few decades ago. Even before the pandemic, they were less likely to have held a job, less likely to have their driver's license, and typically spent less time out in the world interacting with new people in the thousands of unexpected interactions that build mastery of social cues. The pandemic cut them off even further from this range of experiences.

A stop for an ice cream on the way home from church, mosque, or temple—the type of thing that didn't occur for most young people during lockdown—teaches the rituals and patterns of civic and communal life, such as the norms for greeting and socializing with a wide range of people. How you greet your pastor is similar to but also different from how you greet the scooper in the ice cream shop. Those experiences teach you about how to make your way in a complex world.

The young people returning to schools had been isolated from normal doses of such interactions, not just because of the two pandemic years but quite possibly because of newly risen technological norms that cause them to glance down at their phone and walk by their pastor without making eye contact or ignore the ice cream scooper because they have neglected to remove their headphones—and more likely

neglected to even consider whether it would be odd not to remove their headphones while speaking to someone. When these activities did return for young people after a long hiatus, they were distorted by masks and social distancing. How do you learn to read facial expressions when you can't see faces, or to greet someone when you cannot hug or shake hands?

Some students will fill in the gaps left by this diminished experience if we present more opportunities for them to connect during the day, via the antidotes discussed above. But in some cases (for some students, and perhaps for some of the norms we want to set) mere opportunity won't be enough. We will have to be prepared to teach social norms and expectations in a deliberate way.

In many ways, the best schools we know already did this. They were keenly aware that only the most positive and productive classroom climates could encourage and foster the sort of intellectual culture that students require if excellence is truly a goal. They were used to setting and teaching social norms.

That work can take two primary forms. First, schools can set and instill broad ongoing social norms outside the classroom. Perhaps unexpectedly, a soccer club Doug works with provides an interesting model. The club is the "academy" for a professional team. The athletes there (ages 12–18) play at an elite level and train daily. Each of them has grown up as the best player from their town or neighborhood. A few will become professionals. Most will not, however. They will go on to play in college, most likely, and then move on to some other life. They can't see that clearly now because they are young and chasing their dreams. But this can also lead to counterproductive mindsets. In the world of teenagers, they are high-status individuals. It would be easy for them develop a bit too much ego. The academy spent a lot of time thinking about this. They (and the athletes' parents!) wanted to develop people of character and humility. The organization wanted them to take pride in and feel belonging within the club but also remain grounded.

As a result, whenever you show up on their campus, *every athlete who passes you,* whether they are 12 or 18, greets you with a handshake

or a fist bump and a bit of eye contact. Most tell you their name and say "Welcome" or "I'm Domari." It's lovely for visitors—they feel relevant—but even better for the athletes themselves, who have practiced greeting everyone as important and an equal, who have practiced making the first step to connect, and who are skilled at being confident and welcoming.

There's no reason schools couldn't think about similar routines or rituals. In fact, in Chapter 5 we'll show you video of staff, students, and parents greeting each other on arrival at North Star Academy Downtown Middle School in Newark, New Jersey. It's a ritual that establishes belonging, builds social skills, and sets cultural norms.

The second form of intervention schools may have to plan is specific to young people who struggle with social cues, who are a little less observant about how to engage peers or make friends or say something appropriate at any of a dozen moments of their life in school. School is hard on young people like this and it's a safe bet that there will be more of them in the wake of pandemic and there will be fewer other social settings in which to learn to read cues and signals.

At one school we know, the dean of students routinely invites students to family-style lunch with him. There's a box of cookies for dessert and a basket with real salt and pepper shakers and a few bottles of hot sauce, so eating with the dean feels pretty special to middle schoolers (roughly like getting bumped up to first class in an airplane). The lunch also features grown-up-style conversations about school, family, music, or what's in the news. Among the crowd are always a few kids who are there for a reason. They need the practice. Afterwards or perhaps beforehand, they might get a bit of feedback. "Asking people questions is a great way to connect. Try to ask them what music they like instead of just telling them what you're into." This is a small but lovely example of what we'd call an intervention: a deliberate effort by the school to build social skills and understanding among a smaller group of students who require a bit of extra help.

Denarius was struck recently when interviewing his students about their experience at his school this year by how much they valued community meeting, a time when the whole school gathers for

announcements, culture building, and inspiration. It's a time when Denarius deliberately teaches and reinforces norms of positive culture within the school. It's schoolwide teaching of social norms. The students, it turns out, wanted more community meetings. They valued that time even more than he knew. They liked that it meant they got to see peers across grade levels at the meetings. They liked being in large groups. They sometimes rolled their eyes just a little at some of the things the adults said or taught them there—about greeting people with eye contact, about showing gratitude, about keeping one's school uniform up to standard—but they were listening nonetheless and, as it turned out, they valued it. They appreciated the things he and his staff taught there and understood that they might be important—now or later, here or somewhere else. They wanted to be ready for all the places their life might take them. And each of them was perfectly capable of deciding what to do with that knowledge once they left the building.

To some readers the behaviors they instill might sound "paternalistic." Is socializing students to greet one another in a specific way culturally intrusive? Does it trample on students' own culture?

We don't think so, mostly because we think students are smart. We think it's beneficial for them to learn the norms of the schools they attend, especially when those norms help them connect and learn while there, but they remain perfectly capable of deciding when and whether to adopt or adapt those norms outside of school. Students are perfectly capable of deciding for themselves how far they want to buy in. They will always have the skills. There will almost assuredly be times when they are glad to have them. And they will be able to turn them on and turn off as they wish. We all knew kids growing up who went to schools where ties were required of the boys; many of them would have their ties off within seconds after exiting the door. Some wouldn't go near a tie in the hours outside school; some found they occasionally liked to look a little bit sharper; they liked knowing how to knot a tie or match it to their outfit. Everyone understood that they wore ties in school and got to choose how to adapt that tradition on their own time.

In our experience, students usually understand and value elevated expectations in the organizations they are a part of. They like being

held to high standards when it's clear those standards are driven by belief in their potential. Even the students who don't always seem to appreciate it at the time or in the moment usually come to see the value in the end. Everyone loves to tell the story of the coach or teacher who pushed them to their full potential. They often like to exaggerate how challenging it was (how many sprints they had to run, for example). But they tell the story with pride because it represents a time when someone thought they were worth investing in.

Students don't mind being held to high standards when they understand they are there out of respect for their capacity and potential (and when the standards are consistently upheld). This fact is especially relevant in a discussion of technology. Will students at first be happy about restrictions on phones in school? Of course not. Will they argue against it? Gripe about it? Absolutely! Might they sign a petition? Sure, and if so, all the better!

They are young. They don't in fact know everything about the world at age 16. Among other things, they haven't yet experienced what it will be like in school without their phones or how their learning will benefit.

So we should expect some pushback and be happy if students organize a petition drive or a protest. It means they care and have stood up for what they believe in. This is a good thing, even if we think they are wrong.

If there is a petition drive in response to a cell phone ban, we'd meet with students and say, "Tell us all your concerns about the restrictions." We'd try to ask follow-up questions to learn more and show that we think seriously about students' perspective: "So you're worried your mom won't be able to reach you during the day?" We'd present them with some data (perhaps some of the data from this book!) to think about. We'd look for at least one small compromise or adjustment that could be made in response. We might even give them the opportunity to gain or lose more flexibility based on their follow-through on the basic rules. "Okay," we might say, "We hear you. We'll find a place where you can go to check your phone twice a day. But know that students whose phones are out at other times stand to lose that privilege."

Yet in the end, despite impassioned arguments by engaged young people, we think you should decide based on what is in the long-term

interest of the group. And that answer is clear. It's not the one the majority of students will want to hear at first. The job of running schools is not to do what's popular, but to do what's right. After that, the job is to go out and make sure students feel the difference in a positive way. "Buy-in," our colleague Paul Bambrick reminds us, "is an outcome, not a prerequisite." If the culture makes students feel whole, supported, and important, they will embrace it. There's no reason to think they'd know it would do that beforehand. If we focus on making school and school culture excellent, students will come to believe in it.

Doing that will require focus, follow-through, and buy-in from all staff members, and that is not always easy to accomplish. For any school, operational follow-through—its ability to ensure that chosen policies and decisions are implemented with fidelity across the organization—is the key driver of effectiveness. The challenge of reliably being able to get important things done well is especially significant now. One major reason for that is that faith in institutions has never been lower. At exactly the time we need them most, we, as a public, are more skeptical of them than we have ever been.

ARGUMENT THREE: SCHOOLS MUST REBUILD FAITH IN INSTITUTIONAL VIABILITY AND RELIABILITY

This brings us to our third argument in this chapter: that we have to be prepared to work to rekindle faith in our institutions, to let students experience schools that model how institutions can be responsive, caring, and effective, that respect their time and their worth, even when they cannot have everything they want. This is doubly important because, as education writer Robert Pondiscio has pointed out, school is often a young person's first sustained interaction with the idea of institutions. It's where they develop—or fail to develop—a belief that the things we build when we work together are worthy and beneficial, that working together to create things is what one does in life. When you don't trust an institution or believe that institutions can serve people well, it is hard to benefit from what they have to

offer. If that's not challenging enough, we have to rekindle not just students' faith in our institutions, but that of parents and sometimes teachers as well.

One key step in the path forward is revealed by the Edelman Trust Barometer, a long-standing yearly international survey of trust in institutions. In describing data on the ebb and flow of trust in countries across the world—mostly ebb, honestly, as we noted in the introduction—the authors note that "the greatest trust gains to any institution come from information quality." When you share good information, people understand why you do the things you do. Even the act of sharing full information is an act of trust that shows openness and transparency.

There is a fairly wide body of research that supports a related idea: openness can help people determine how fair they believe an institution is, which matters greatly in their estimation of and trust in that institution. Furthermore, when people perceive an institution to be fair in how it makes decisions, they are more likely to accept its decisions, even if they do not agree.

Fairness can be divided into two types: process fairness and outcome fairness. Outcome fairness is whether people think a decision is right and fair on its merits. Process fairness is whether people think the decision-makers went about deciding in a way that was open, fair, and honest. Democracy offers an array of examples. The great majority of us understand and accept its decisions even when we don't agree with them because we believe the process to be fair. For this reason, aspiring office holders of integrity often respond to an outcome in which they didn't win by affirming the process: "The people have spoken." In the long run, the process is bigger than any single decision.

In fact, research suggests that people value process fairness as much as, if not more than, outcome fairness. What's more, writes David Chan, professor of psychology at Singapore Management University, "process fairness is a stronger predictor than outcome fairness in people's evaluation**…**of their leaders."

In other words, if schools must ask a diverse group of potentially skeptical families of wide-ranging opinions to support policies that

allow the schools to maximize student academic progress and well-being, they should focus on process fairness because universal agreement on outcomes is unlikely. If people disagree but think you decided fairly, you are better off than if they all agree but aren't sure they understand or trust how you decided.

Chan suggests several key principles of process fairness to focus on. The first, he notes, is what he calls "accuracy." Are decisions made based on legitimate data and information? Are stakeholders aware of that? We might call that being fact- or research-based. If you're going to propose restrictions on cell phones in your school, it's going to be critical that you share not only the reasons why but the research behind it so that parents, students, and teachers know you've done your homework and the decision is based on more than just your own personal perspective.

Another principle of process fairness is consistency. People want to know that rules and policies are "consistently applied across people and time in similar situations." "Voice" is also critical. The decision-making process has to offer people an opportunity to speak and influence the outcome, Chan says, but having an opportunity to influence the outcome doesn't mean you do determine it. It means you get the chance to be heard with sincerity and openness before the decision is made.

Finally, Chan notes, "procedures are more likely to be seen as fair if they are congruent with the values and reflect the concerns of the people involved." Of course, it's hard to predict the values individuals bring to an organization like a school, but you can frame specific values you think your school stands for and refer to them. You can always go back to the why: *This is what we are trying to accomplish. This is why we are trying to accomplish it. These are the things we value as a community*.

In the introduction, we described a meeting Denarius held with students where he listened carefully and showed that he was making decisions based on data and with the long-term well-being of students in mind. In the process of doing that he said no to students—although, he reinforced a rule that was to their benefit, so perhaps "said no" isn't quite the right term. Several came to agree with his decision. Many

more understood the decision even if they were not in favor of it. But all of them felt important and valued and heard. They became more connected and felt more belonging in the process of disagreeing with their principal. This to us is the sign of a well-run school.

Having observed many such schools, here's our recipe for rebuilding faith.

1. **Be really good at the core work of schooling**. One key aspect of developing trust is making certain to be effective at the core mission of education. People feel trust and faith in well-run organizations that appear capable of accomplishing complex coordinated tasks. Don't make it a choice between that and a responsive culture. A school that makes students feel belonging but doesn't prepare them to accomplish their dreams does not meet standard. On the other hand, keep in mind that academic excellence is necessary but itself not sufficient to the endeavor.

2. **Help people feel a strong sense of purpose**. We are, as we hope we have established, groupish. We succeed by forming a village—a group of people connected by place, sharing a clear vision of the future. Having a shared purpose this is to say. Because something is simple does not imply that it is easy to achieve. A simple goal is hard work in a complex world.

   To us the purpose has to begin with the shared pursuit of student knowledge, and the *shared* part is easily overlooked. A great school or classroom is first or foremost a culture that values learning. Student well-being is the second element of shared purpose. Schools that are positive, optimistic, grateful, and altruistic are psychologically healthy places, and the pursuit of virtues—which we'll discuss in Chapter 4 but which essentially means doing right for ourselves by doing right by the people around us—is perhaps the best way to accomplish this. As Angela Duckworth, founder of the Character Lab, puts it, virtues are "all the ways of thinking, feeling and acting that we [can] habitually do that are good for others and good for ourselves."

A school doesn't need much more than that. Achieving simple and important things in a complex and challenging world is no easy task and adding more goals can create as much distraction as benefit. Getting everyone focused on one or two key things is plenty difficult.

One important step in developing a strong sense of shared purpose is sharing a vocabulary. Language, W. H. Auden wrote, is the mother, not the handmaiden, of thought. Having words for things conjures them into being. A school should establish a shared vocabulary for the things it wants to instill and the purpose it seeks. This makes those things legible for students and parents. Ultimately, understanding and feeling connected to a purpose not only makes people happier, it also makes them feel more connected and more trusting (more on this in Chapter 4).

3. **Focus on process**. We live in a world where it is sometimes difficult to imagine a decision everyone in a community would agree with. In the final chapter, we examine what this might mean for the idea of school choice. In the meantime, we have to fall back on process. People have to feel that the decision-making process is founded in purpose and data, is transparent, and takes their voices into account.

A VILLAGE EMERGES

We close with a final observation about our evolutionary past. Likely we existed first, even before we were fully humans, in small and loosely connected family groups, probably a lot like the family groups of other primates today. As we were more and more able to coordinate, we became increasingly social, meaning more mutual reliance and probably larger groups. The greater the degree of cooperation and mutualism, the greater the chances of survival. As cooperation conferred increasing advantages on those groups that achieved it, we doubled down and evolved to become what biologists call "eusocial," a rare state of elevated mutuality where members of a species are willing to sacrifice for the good of the group, willing to help rear one another's young,

willing to care for the aged. There are other eusocial species—bees are the classic example of self-sacrifice and coordination—but eusocial mammals are incredibly rare. It's basically us and the naked mole rat. And we are the only eusocial primate.

Over hundreds of thousands of years we formed something more interconnected than mere groups. Call them societies; they were mobile, often fluid groups and hunter-gatherers. You might form a group with other bands for a season and then when the prey moved on so did you, splitting into subgroups and separating until the next year. But these groups were different in their complexity and mutuality from what any other primate did.

"To form groups, drawing . . . comfort and pride from familiar fellowship, and to defend the group enthusiastically against rival groups—these are among the universals of human nature and hence of culture," biologist Edward O. Wilson writes. "People must have a tribe. It gives them a name in addition to their own and social meaning in a chaotic world." Our identities derived from our groups as much as or more than ourselves.

Adopting agriculture changed all that. It meant all your hard work was left standing in a field each night just waiting to be stolen.[11] Mutual obligation and reciprocity were even more necessary to survival, but flexibility and choice in group membership were reduced. We could no longer migrate or come and go from a group we didn't agree with. We had to form more stable communities: villages.

This translated the legacy of mutualism and community into a more fixed model. You might not like everyone in your village, but you needed each other and needed to be able to rely on each other. You might dislike your neighbor, but you were also ready to stand shoulder to shoulder when danger approached. That was what made you a village and gave you your identity. The village was the bridge between our biological past and the modern world.

We think the village is a decent metaphor for a school. We cannot come and go as we please.[12] We do not always agree. Yet we are bound together and must be willing to accept the terms of a social

contract that causes us to rely on each other for mutualism and reciprocity. If dissenters march off in anger when the majority rules, everyone loses.

That initial social contract—stay and protect what is ours; work together if there is a crisis; set rules to make the place livable—ultimately became the basis of society and all of its institutions. In a successful village, young people come to accept the demands and appreciate the benefits of shared endeavor. They come to see that the former are comparatively small in comparison to the immensity of the latter. Just maybe they come to see that the demands are not a burden, but in fact a tool that allows us to bind together to maximize individual and group benefit.

A village in the end is founded on mutualism, and specifically, as Robert Putnam describes it in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* on *generalized reciprocity* (Putnam's term for Keohabe's idea of diffuse reciprocity). Sometimes "reciprocity is specific: I'll do this for you if you do that for me," Putnam writes. Even more valuable, however, is a norm of *generalized reciprocity*. I'll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you in the confident expectation that someone will do something for me down the road." Generalized reciprocity—acts of generosity, selflessness, altruism—are the ultimate messages of belonging. They reinforce the strength of the group and remind everyone in the village that they belong to and are part of something worthy. In many ways the value each community creates in the lives of its denizens correlates to the degree to which it is successful at creating generalized reciprocity.

Notes

1. That death by stoning is described in the Bible—and still practiced by some cultures in the world—reflects its significance. The choice of the method of killing is not symbolic. It was probably the standard method, even if now we barely recognize it.
2. Quoted in Daniel Coyle, *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups* (New York: Bantam, 2018).

3. Evolutionary biologists refer to this as multilevel selection: we compete as a group at the same time we compete within the group. Edward O. Wilson's *The Social Conquest of Earth* is excellent on this topic.
4. Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review (2010), https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316
5. Phiana Wilcox, KIPP Tech Valley Primary School, March 11, 2022.
6. Adam Grant and Francesco Gino, A Little Thanks Goes a Long Way: Explaining Why Gratitude Expressions Motivate Prosocial Behavior, https://www.umkc.edu/facultyombuds/documents/grant_gino_jpsp_2010.pdf
7. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706740
8. It's worth noting here that humans also compete within groups, especially in terms of sexual selection.
9. It's important to note that it is also a time of massive learning loss for students, so we'll need to prioritize their well-being in ways that work in synergy with academic progress rather than instead of it.
10. We often meet well-intentioned educators who tell us that the answer is for schools to teach students to make better decisions about social media. This is folly. Do we really think a few assemblies by the adults telling kids to "be smart" is going to make a difference in the face of what is for all intents an addiction? Do we really think we're qualified to do that work? We are not counselors and social psychologists; we are teachers. Perhaps we could if we spent a tremendous amount of time on the topic, but schools have a specific job in society. Our job is not to address all social ills but to teach students academic knowledge.
11. Interestingly, hunter-gatherer societies often struggle with the idea of ownership. A newly killed carcass can be saved or taken with you. The incentive is to share it—to share everything. There is no benefit to keeping it.
12. In the last chapter of this book we will discuss the relevance of increased choice in schools.