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October Principal's Letter
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It was the summer of 2005 and I had just finished my first year of teaching. Finally having saved up some money, I took my first big trip that summer and traveled to Bolivia and Peru. As I've never made a secret, I tend to like visiting places during the colder months (not a beach person). Like many who make the trip down to this amazing region of the world, I had the opportunity to hike the famous Inca Trail. For those who don't know, this is a popular and spirit-challenging endeavor, taking hikers on a 3-4 day journey - hiking and camping - to the Incan ruins of Macchu Picchu.

Anyway, you're probably like, 'Okay, what is he talking about and why does this matter?' Well, maybe but doesn't a whole lot, but this trip has recently been in my mind, as I always consider metaphors for things going on in other aspects of life. As I've reflected a lot lately on what our schools - specifically our teachers - have had to navigate over these past few weeks (and months), this hike popped into my head. Here's why...

Anyone who knows of this famous hike knows it is moderately strenuous, but characterized by being an up-and-down kind of journey. There aren't a lot of long, flat patches; you're pretty much either climbing up or descending down...fairly steep in some places. It's tiring. The first day of the hike finds hikers immediately ascending towards the first peak. The legs are definitely burning on night one in the tent. Now, I kind of compare this first up-and-down stretch as our virtual learning period. At first, it was hard - for teachers, for students, and for parents and families. It challenged muscles that we didn't know were there. The initial virtual wave was hard, but then we got into a rhythm. And things have been going pretty well - well, actually, I think our teachers have been doing an outstanding job.

Now, back to the hike for a moment. After descending from the first peak, we found our way to a valley between the two peaks and a new climb is ahead. One of the hikes signature features is 'Warmiwanusca', which is Quechuan for Dead Woman's Pass, made famous for its altitude of nearly 14,000 feet. It comes early in the hike, during the second day, exposing hikers to rockier terrain, colder temps, and rapidly changing weather. It's also overcoming these challenges that make the pass so rewarding. So, as I was thinking about this up-and-down journey, with new challenges around the corner, I began comparing it to our hybrid environment that we've just stepped into.

The hybrid environment is exciting because, simply, we get to have kids back in the building. Elementary kids will learn best in-person and we're excited to get our young learners back into this positive environment, around peers, and back into some comfortable routines. But, the work of hybrid teaching is no easy feat. We're teaching kids in-person. And at home. At the same time. Inherently, teachers are perfectionists and overachievers in the sense that they want to be everything for everyone, even though they often know that that is impossible. But that's the bar that so many set for themselves. That's the source of the anxiety that many teachers have in this environment - it's that they want to do it all so well and it's so hard to do so.

Now, I have no doubt we'll be saying the same thing that most are saying now in just a few weeks - "Wow! Our teachers are doing an amazing job!" But, let's all remember that this next climb is ahead. New challenges are going to arise that we have not tackled yet and we certainly did not learn when studying in graduate school to be teachers. There will be imperfections and a learning period, again, for all of us - teachers, staff, students, and families, especially in these early weeks. So, I ask that you stick with me here and support our incredible teachers with positive and encouraging support during the launch of hybrid learning.

These next couple of weeks are the first 'phase' of hybrid learning. The synchronous streaming from home into the classroom will not nearly be as robust as it will be in subsequent weeks. We are orienting our in-person students to new safety routines, classroom routines, and ensuring a warm, nurturing environment for all. We might find our morning meetings starting at 8:45 in a couple of weeks. Great! But not week one.

Fairly quickly, we will be establishing regular, frequent, and vibrant connections between our in-person and at-home cohorts of students. And, remember - this isn't CSPAN. You know, that channel you skip through once in a while and just see people working live on TV. No, that would not be teaching. We will stream in for whole-group lessons and be cameras off for independent work, with teacher guidance on when to check in, come back, etc.

To finish up...you know, on Day 3 of the hike, after scaling *Warmiwanusca* and descending down to our third night campsite, the hike begins to flatten and ease. We stopped early on Day 3 so we can camp out short of Macchu Picchu. The goal is to be close to the ruins and wake up super early on Day 4 to see the sun rise at the entrance to the ruins. They call it the Sun Gate and it's just amazing.

After we scale this next "peak" at school, things are going to settle and ease. If life takes us back to full-virtual (we hope not), we'll be ready to excel. When we're ready for full in-person, we'll be ready to hit the ground running. The sun will be up and things will begin to be a bit more enjoyable again.

Thanks for sticking with us on this journey, despite the peaks and valleys that challenge us all. Thanks for sticking with our teachers and giving them the positive encouragement that fuels empty tanks when they need it most. I want to think that it is those kind gestures and that sense of community that become what we remember most about this school year for years to come.

Anthony Bambrola
Principal