The Future is a Destination of Value

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Thank you, Kirstin. Thank you to VSAC, the planning committee and partners, and the many VSAC colleagues here today; and a special thank you to Cathy Printon for her support, grace, and especially her patience with my spotty correspondence leading up to this event.

And I want to thank all of **you** for being here today. Looking out I see professionals, colleagues, and friends who comprise a collective of talent, commitment and vision; a collective showing up every day in service to Vermont students and families, holding sacred the power and purpose of bearing witness to the lives of Vermont students, and committed to ensuring that they are seen, known, and valued. You are seen. You are known. You are valued.

Good morning!

I'd like to treat today as a conversation, a generous opportunity for teaching and learning together. I am hoping that as you hear from each other about the opportunities, creative solutions, and the progress you've made we'll co-create the promise - **the reality** - that the future is a destination of value.
I'm honored that I get to kick off the conversation.

This past fall, I began the year with a speech [*at the 11th Annual Rowland Conference*] about communities as centers of and for hope; describing hope as a state of action, a hammer – a tool for allowing us to be agentic and disentangle our feelings and dispositions from our commitment to inquiry, action, and change. In that speech, I proposed that as a community we need to convince our children that their future is a meaningful destination that they design. I want to continue and evolve that proposition in our conversation today.

Yesterday, we marked the end of the COVID public health emergency. I don't blame those of you if this announcement inspired a rye, stray thought to flit through your brain…perhaps, even, an internal eye-roll. As we contemplate the official "end" of the emergency, one might ask, "what does that actually mean or

look like in our own communities and circles of care?" However bureaucratic yesterday's official marking may be, I want to propose that we embrace it as an invitation to change. It is **permission** to let go of what we have been holding now for three years – a looming "threat," and our resulting hypervigilance.

Recently, I had been attempting to explain to a legislator about the connection between traumatized systems and traumatized people, and how the manic flood of legislative and policy "fixes" for education might contribute to perpetuating that trauma. In fact, for several weeks now, I have been circling around (somewhat aimlessly) this same idea, as I thought about what I wanted to say to all of you today.

And then just this week [Michael B. Horn](#), author of *From Reopen to Reinvent: (Re)creating School for Every Child*, was speaking to a board I serve on, and in one of those moments of happenstance or kismet, he provided the vocabulary I needed.

In his book, Horn describes that "threat framing" – communicating something as a threat – has value when organizations experience "an abrupt event in the environment." This framing allows organizations, states, nations to pay attention, marshal resources and respond quickly.

An analogue when talking about people versus organizations, that will be familiar to many of you, is the psychological phenomenon of "negativity bias." Negativity bias describes when adults use negative versus positive information to make sense of their world and that "across an array of psychological situations and tasks, adults display [...] the propensity to attend to, learn from, and use negative information far more than positive information." [(Vaish, Grossmann, & Woodward, 2008, pp. 383-403)](#).

Essentially, our brains act like hungry, hungry hippos for bad news.
And, like "threat framing," negativity bias isn't all bad – it's argued to be an adaptive function developed in humans over time to serve a purpose (beyond just survival.)

However, staying in a "threat framing" orientation for too long, like being mired in negative thought, often leads to what Horn calls "threat rigidity." Threat

rigidity presents in a number of ways but a few examples that resonated with me and may sound familiar to you, were:

- Doubling down on existing processes or routines
- Replicating actions/structures in different contexts/environments
- Top-down control
- Refusing to experiment or focusing on existing resources

Or, something we've heard a lot…"getting back to normal."

It sounds safe, right? It sounds like progress, a destination promising relief. But, what threat rigidity inspires – inflexibility, risk aversion, resistance to change – is not progress, even when disguised as the familiar, but an entry point into an infinite loop of exhaustion. It's a recipe for being stuck. It stymies innovation and blinds us to opportunity.

It's joyless.

Interestingly, in one of the limited research studies on the impact of natural disasters on education systems, the resulting "crises" were described as having a specific anatomy or equation: pre-existing vulnerabilities *plus* a disaster (like a global pandemic) *equals* a crisis ([Lai, Esnard, Wyczalkowski, et al, 2019, pp. 32-51](#)).

I share this for two reasons:
1. If we go back to "normal," we may be recommitting to, or creating the conditions for, those pre-existing vulnerabilities (and a resulting systemic myopia); and
2. You.. we… can't stop disasters, but **we can prevent a crisis.**

We know that in many respects our work is just beginning, despite the official end to the health emergency. And we've been working really hard – all along – these last three years. So today, let's give ourselves permission to start working differently; because **how we work matters.** Let's reframe the threat and how we are talking and thinking about our children and students. **Let's re-magine how "at risk youth" can become "youth who take risks."**

We can do that by co-creating and refining together connected pathways for students to be more; and to do that, we need to start thinking how that might happen **by doing less, better, and with more joy.**

That means **we have to take risks too.**

<u>Five Hows; Five Whys:</u>
1. Let's **commit to rejecting "threat framing" so we can prevent "threat rigidity"** and embrace the question not the answer.
2. Let's accept our brains and remember the "[Negative Golden Rule"](#) - because **there is power in focusing on eliminating the negative** rather than cultivating the positive. It's a good place to start.
3. Let's be purposeful in taking risks and stop "getting back to normal" – so we **communicate our resilience and start imagining what's next**;
4. Let's **prioritize play** – and I don't just mean soccer and scrabble. Play-based Learning Practices aren't just for the young. When we allow our students (and ourselves) to play with words, with ideas, with identities, with failures and solutions, **it creates opportunities for learning, for community, and for joy.**
5. Let's hold the tension between the security of evidence and the promise of disruption – **strong communities run toward questions; let's stop treating data like a decision and more like an invitation to the next question**. We don't know all that is unknown - we can't always stay safe and wait for the evidence base, for what is known. We need to be creators of that evidence.

You/we are not responsible for predicting or even describing the future of our students. Instead, we are curators of the **Now**, developers of the conditions that allow our students to take risks, to be resilient, to center hope and be designers of the future - a destination of value because they are valued.

Thank you.