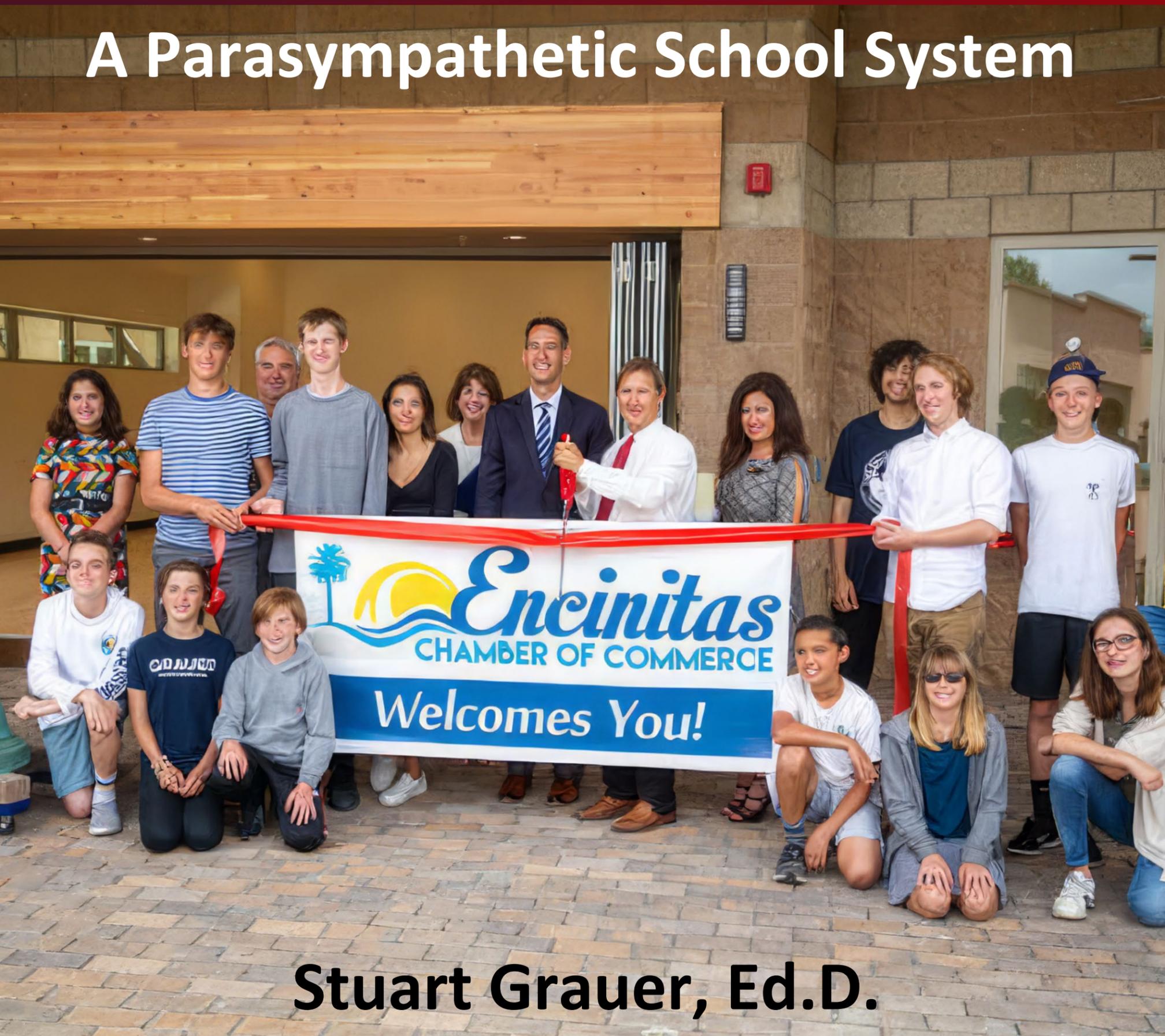


**WINTER 2026**

# **LEGACY**

**TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION**

**A Parasympathetic School System**



**Stuart Grauer, Ed.D.**



**The Worthy Educator**

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## A Parasympathetic School System

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i.

The year was 2021. Required COVID masks were coming off all year, and groups were re-forming. Like schools everywhere, we were in recovery. Anxious and exhausted, but maybe out of the woods at last.

A seventh grader stumbled on a pornographic image and forwarded it to his class chat group. Within hours, it was everywhere—students, parents, even donors. What once would have been a private schoolyard antic had spiraled into viral, public crisis.

Our leaders braced themselves. The ubiquitous media was a spiritual contagion, an insidious virus infiltrating the essence of our school community, the souls of our kids, and the fears of our parents. And we understood: hardly a campus in the world was immune.

We understood that this was not about a single student, parent, text message, or electronic device. We took a breath and searched our own souls first, which is what leaders and leadership teams do. First look in.

That year, following a year sequestered with their kids home alone, record numbers of anxious parents were already obsessing about their children's health and safety. Aside from COVID, school shootings, media addiction, obesity, loneliness, depression, and suicide were all at record levels, becoming prominent topics of discussion in media and policy debates everywhere you looked, from school faculty rooms to congressional chambers.

How did we get here, so disconnected, so exposed? How could we get through and out, together?

The great school is a heartbeat. A school campus is the "central nervous system" of an educational community, coordinating and regulating its various functions. During this post-pandemic year, external stressors were like toxins disrupting our neural pathways.

Just as stress hormones like cortisol flood our bodies when we're anxious or threatened, disrupting our natural state of balance, so too do external challenges like aberrant or threatening behaviors moving through the gateway, activating the schoolwide "stress response system." This is more than a metaphor. Just like in a human body, negative stressors and threats cause our campus to feel more rigid, less open and open-minded, more stuck, and less free.

Disrupted schools react as if jolted by a sudden clap of thunder: classes go outside less, teachers worry more, students become less creative, and concentration falters. In the wake of increasing gun violence, such as the Columbine High School massacre in 1999 or the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, leaders witness how traumatic disruptions create permanent shifts in community and culture, demanding a new kind of leadership—one rooted in an enduring commitment to healing. To being a healer, first. And then to find opportunity. New growth, maybe in unexpected places.



As we study the balance of nature, we often overlook its capacity for violence or trauma, and the profound ways they can shape our growth, whether as students or leaders. In times of crisis, the leader's calling is to restore balance and stability, guiding their community through lasting, compassionate change. And yet, though shocked into awareness by crisis, this is the calling of all leaders, pretty much all the time. Violence and tragedy, illness and injury, and even fruitful opposition may be our most compelling, powerful, and perhaps necessary teachers in leadership.

ii.

Like a body, every school strives for balance—homeostasis. When its subsystems (admissions, faculty, curriculum, parent body) are aligned, the whole feels resilient. When they're not, the whole falters. That interdependence is one of the great advantages of a small school.

In a healthy body, heart and brain are in constant communication, fine-tuning rhythm and response. Under threat, that communication frays. Stress hormones surge, blood pressure rises, and learning shuts down as survival mode takes over.

The same thing happens in schools. Culture is the nervous system. When fear, discord, or misuse of technology enters, it triggers a kind of inflammation: the curriculum stops reflecting the culture, teachers lose perspective. Students lose creativity.



In 2022, post-pandemic, many schools lived in this inflammatory state. Absences soared. Teachers felt flooded, like a body awash in cortisol—narrowed vision, scanning only for the way out. But no school is immune in any time.

The antidote is the same as in the body: to activate the parasympathetic response. To help the whole system shift from urgency back to calm, from tunnel vision back to creativity. That is the leader's work.

By far most teachers and students I ask or survey describe nature, not classrooms, as their favorite places. What would it take for a classroom to feel as alive as a grove or a garden?

How could we make the school campus emulate the natural world people long for, embodying its amazing properties for receptivity and learning? How can leaders reclaim the tranquility stolen by pandemic, too much time indoors, too many hours staring into digital screens, and other stressors and toxins? What if we re-envisioned campuses blooming with life—gardens teeming with biodiversity, well-chosen pets, hallway speakers echoing with nature's symphony, and naturalistic classrooms illuminated with serene landscapes on posters or large flatscreens showing nature feeds—even wall colors from the natural world? What if we could collect and store cellphones, a top distraction according to our students—would students be open to giving that a trial run into a more sacred space? In each corner of the classroom, plants—small pieces of the wild—remind us of growth, resilience, and the balance we knew we must reclaim? What if school bells were replaced with chimes or ocean wave sounds (a program I have called “Zenbells”).

What if teachers felt free to hold class in a school greenery, nearby forest, or even treehouse classrooms? Flowers and produce from our garden could be handed out at drop-off and pick-up times. By making the school boundaries more permeable, we could transform the educational environment into an interactive community space where learning more seamlessly integrates with the natural world. This openness would encourage a deeper connection between students, teachers, and the environment—and between the mind and body—that extends beyond traditional classroom walls.

The parasympathetic school derives its palette from the ecosystem in which it was planted. Just as these natural environments, tones, and images soothe and relax our bodies' own nervous systems, they can offer peace and well-being to a school campus and community. The calming influence of the natural world puts teachers and parents at ease. Teens will still make outrageous mistakes. We treat them one at a time and, dwarfed by the scale of the natural world of which they are a part, we can keep them in perspective: teens need wide open space and judgment-free room to make their mistakes. Unamplified.

In most countries, we tend to evaluate schools based upon the scholastic performance of students and a number of other factors, such as donations and graduation rates. And yet, now, we can evaluate schools based upon their nurturing connections and sense of safety and belonging—the information is available. Connection, safety, engagement are reliably measurable. So measure them. We can even rank them that way if we insist—and we must. We must evaluate our schools on their wellness.

We have a way to go and some fantastic work lying ahead in evaluating how to make students and teachers maintain a joyful, safe, and healthy homeostasis in this fragile ecosystem we call school. We only need to look back to the Orwellian removal of windows, seen as a distraction, from classrooms in the 1970s to see how possible change is and how far we have come.

Near the end of our third long, pandemic year, I lay in bed with COVID, and writing two alumni obituaries, unaware of all that was emergent in my field, gathering. Our kind board chair said, "You have to look after yourself first."



"You've got to be kidding," I replied along with, I assumed, thousands of school leaders, and then caught myself. I understood then that in order to lead others, the leaders must first nourish their own nervous systems—to prioritize calm, perspective, and mindfulness. From there, that ethos can enter the gateway and spread across campus.

That summer, we went all in: small gardens sprouted, nature sounds filled the hallways, classes spilled outdoors, art retook the walls. Teachers reshaped lessons for creativity and self-direction, the van pool ran constantly to serene little spots for study, and our counselor opened wider doors for drop-ins and resilience. It was exhausting—and it was proof: leaders can pivot fast when survival depends on it.

By fall, the ecosystem was alive again. Attendance rose, test scores and homework steadied, and well-being climbed—because we chose to measure it. Better evidence still: picnic blankets on the quad, every day. More than any time in three years, the school felt like a sanctuary. Before long, new school entrepreneurs would be emerging and new school leadership models would begin sprouting up.

This balance wasn't a luxury add-on. It was the nervous system of the school coming back online. If you don't design for parasympathetic balance—calm, creativity, connection—you are, by default, designing for a random state of health, if not the anxiety we've all heard too much about.



The naturalist campus we were creating and that enabled us to return from a global pandemic is what needed creating all along. For the first time in three years, the school parasympathetic nervous system was back in balance and our campus felt like a sanctuary.

### For Further Reading

Grauer, S. (2025, September 3). "[Keeping Admission on Mission.](#)" *Independent School Magazine* (NAIS)

Grauer, S. (2022, April). "[Climate Change: The Thief of Childhood.](#)" *Phi Delta Kappan*, 103(7).

[The Grauer School](#)

[Small Schools Coalition](#)

[Fearless Teaching Blog](#)

[Community Works Journal](#)



Stuart Grauer, Ed.D., is Founder and Head of School Emeritus of [The Grauer School](#) in Encinitas, California, and Founder of the [Small Schools Coalition](#), a global network advocating for human-scale, expeditionary education. An internationally recognized educational leader and storyteller, Dr. Grauer has spent five decades teaching, writing, and consulting on school leadership, naturalist education, and community building. A recipient of the [Author E. Hughes Career Achievement](#) Award from the [University of San Diego](#), Dr. Grauer continues to write, consult, and speak internationally on educational leadership, nature-based learning, and the art of keeping schools true to their mission. His essays have appeared in *Independent School Magazine*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, *ASCD SmartBrief*, and *Community Works Journal*. His books include [Real Teachers: True Stories of Renegade Educators](#) and [Fearless Teaching: Collected Stories](#), with *The Way to Pancho's Kitchen: Founding and Leading Small Schools with Heart, Purpose, and the Wisdom of the Natural World* forthcoming in 2026, published by [The Worthy Educator Press](#).



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