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SAM graduation speech
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SAM, of course, is not a person. SAM, as an acronym, names a program. But then, this program is made up of a group of people: apprentices who have used SAM as a ladder of hooks on which to hang our developing knowledge of school leadership; our master crafters (to stick with the apprentice model) who have used their own experience and expertise to guide their apprentices from hook to hook; and — most significantly — our school communities, faculty and students, learners all, who have provided the strong base on which that ladder must stand.

So, SAM is people. Not books, not target populations, not products. People. Each of us apprentices, as a final rite of passage to school leader qualification, has taken or will soon take New York's School Building Leader examination. As I have prepared for that test (think of me on March 5 — and join me for a drink that evening: The Ginger Man on 36th Street between Madison and Fifth), I have helped myself remember the answers to questions by creating a rhetorical guide I call "Sam."

This Sam is an imaginary friend. Sam is the perfect school administrator. He knows everything a school leader should do — and also knows what a school leader should do first. Sam knows that ideas come from below, and interventions must be based in data analysis, and all stakeholders should be involved in all decisions. Sam is indeed perfect. Whenever I cannot quite conceive the answer to an exam question, I ask myself, "What would Sam do?"

So, SAM, the acronym, has enlivened Sam, the helpful friend. This works because SAM — the acronym, the friend and the people with whom I have spent two years imagining that perfect school leader —is guided and motivated by two things: a moral imperative and an ethical conviction. Learning must develop, broaden, swell out to all reaching minds. Leaders must inspire by what they learn, not what they teach. So, knowing the answer is moral and ethical, when I am faced with a difficult question, I think of my mentors, like young Padawan Skywalker searching for the Force, and ask, "What would Sam do?"

The answer rests on three basic tenets.

First, Sam insists on measuring data. We all count French fries, as my dearest wife points out, particularly when we are unsure that French fry resources are being fairly distributed among hungry fry monsters. We count dry-erase markers in schools blown dry by the winds of budget-driven deprivation. Hell, we count how many minutes one person talks in a meeting while three others think about what each of them wants to say at the next possible moment.

We SAM apprentices have learned to do what we do — that is, we do not learn what we read or discuss, but we learn what we do. The basic premise of an apprenticeship model is that the apprentices learn by doing, so we have been doing school leadership. One of the things we have done is count data, most famously with our target populations. For example:

- Monthly pre-assessments are given in Hillcrest social studies classes. Initial data from six Global 1 and nine Global 3 classes indicated a mean 5% gain (range -10% to +20%) and a mean 4.4% gain (range -15% to +20%), respectively. We summarize the results in the table "Pre-Assessment Results for Global History."

Yes, that is a quote from a product I helped to write.

Numbers describe. Teachers observe. When numbers describe our observations, we can communicate those observations and act upon them. Sam would hope the system in place would not allow numbers to become facts on their own. Numbers must describe life; facts on their own are as hard to pin down as playing cards in Wonderland.

Descriptions that can be quantified and quantities that can be described are numbers that count. The most important number to count is how much a student learned. Since Graham Nuthall, in *The Hidden Lives of Learners* — and everyone here should order the book from New Zealand or go to www.nuthalltrust.org.nz to get a glimpse of the decades of research behind it — stated the need to measure student learning much better than I could, I'll use his words:

> Generally, effective teaching means that students learn what you intend them to learn (or some part of what you intend). You may want them to acquire new knowledge and beliefs, new skills or different attitudes, or some mixture of all of these. But whatever you intend, in order to know if you have been effective, you must have some way of knowing what your students believed, knew, could do, or felt before you taught them and what your students believed, knew, could do, or felt after you taught them. Learning, of whatever kind, is about change, and unless you know what has changed in the minds, skills and attitudes of your students, you cannot really know how effective you have been.

Sam requires that we ask how effective we have been.

Second, Sam accepts that everything changes. Look at Professor Nuthall's definition of effective teaching: "Learning is about change." We must know what our students knew before we taught them and we must know what our student knew after we taught them — and only then do we know that our students have learned.

The same holds true for us teachers. We must change as we go along our professional path. If nothing else, our students change, and we must adapt as needed so that those in our charge continue to learn. Much like a tailor, we look at how the suit of learning fits and we ask, “Does it fit well? Will the sleeves ride up with wear? The hem, should it be a quarter-inch higher? Not too tight in the shoulder, is it ma’am?”

The un-reconcilable tension in America’s public schools, particularly in urban schools, is that each student needs a couture fit, a one-of-a-kind education. But the school system can barely provide ready-to-wear let alone made-to-measure or couture.

Sam says to get small to make big change. We start with a small group of students and learn their measurements. We change. We alter the education these students experience, and we measure the results. Then we see if we can change the entire factory, if we can leverage change throughout the system.

Were Sam to write her own perfect school leader position description, it would include phrases such as:

- “You will be a motivating and inspiring leader,”
- “You are non-hierarchical in approach but shoulder responsibility,” and
- “You are willing and able to challenge stakeholders appropriately and to be challenged in return.”

In other words, you accept change, you direct change, you understand change — not for its own sake but because change, when well done, is progress.

Third, Sam should be committed.

Yeah, I’m making a joke here that Sam belongs in an institution. But then, we teach in the New York City public schools and so already spend most of our time institutionalized.

But Sam requires commitment, twice.

Sam's first pledge is to be a lifelong learner. Lifelong learning, both inside and — more importantly — outside classrooms, emerges from how we think critically about our experiences and the experiences of others in literature, science, history, language, etc.

And make no mistake about critical thinking. This is not some wishy-washy term to name something we do not understand. Critical thinking is a specific set of skills and sub-skills that thinking humans use to interpret, to analyze, to infer, to explain, to evaluate, and to regulate ourselves and our interactions with the experiential world. Without critical thinking, our experience has no point, tells no story, creates no meaning. More sadly, our students' experience will remain similarly meaningless unless we, their teachers and co-learners, are committed to showing and sharing how we think about this world.

Sam's second pledge is to care. Of course, we must care enough to think. We must care enough to continue learning and to lead our peers and colleagues along this learning path.

But more simply, we must care about our students. What we teach is never as important as what our students learn. We do not teach math, literature, modern languages, earth science, rope climbing, basketball or basket weaving. We teach students. Our radical responsibility is to care about our students and our students' learning — to accept reality but to insist that reality must change to better serve those we care about.

Sam says to accept the responsibility to change yourself, to change the system, to take risks, and to ask questions about what works and about what does not work. But Sam says to care about these questions and to care about how we ask and to care about why we ask.

Three tenets, three beliefs: One, count everything so we can actually know what's missing and measure our progress. Two, change as you need to change because progress comes only when we are willing to move forward and shift direction as obstacles arise. Three, care about our learning and commit to our students.

Not much. Only three things to do. Not much, but enough. More than enough. In fact, the world. Thank you all for sharing this world with me. See you around.