

10.3.16

## On Saying No

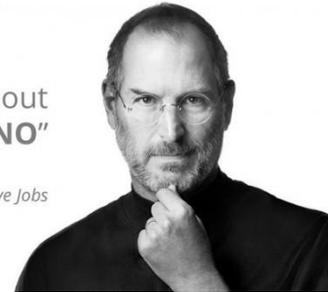
By: Bob Schaffer, LCHS Principal

Parents probably have no idea how many requests we get from researchers wanting to conduct studies on our students at Liberty Common School. We nearly always say no.

We certainly do not wish to be uncooperative when it comes to legitimate research about public-education methods and outcomes. On the contrary, there are profound lessons to be divined through analyses of our students, their families, our instructors, our pedagogy, curriculum, instructional habits, and organizational leadership.

"Focusing is about saying **NO**"

- Steve Jobs



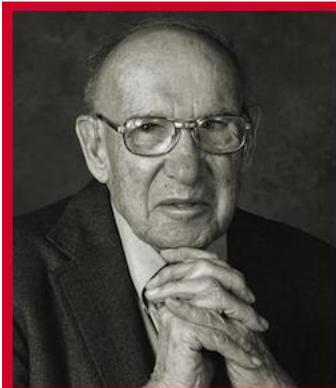
Enticed by consistently high achievement throughout all grades, many researchers, graduate students, dissertation writers, and government officials want to track our students, staff, and management practices. It's wholly understandable.

There are, no doubt, scalable practices that could arm lots of other American students with the same academic advantages our students acquire by attending Liberty Common School. But saying "yes" almost always consumes too much time.

In an ambitious school setting like ours, time is a rarefied commodity. We pack every available minute with either classroom instruction, or preparation for classroom instruction such as lunchtime, recess, study halls, etc., depending on the student's age.

In his book "How to Fly a Horse: The Secret History of Creation, Invention, and Discovery," author **Kevin Ashton** tells the story of a Hungarian psychologist who asked famous innovators to be interviewed for a book he was writing about successful people. Fully a third of them said no.

One notable written rejection came from management guru **Peter Drucker** who wrote, "One of the secrets of productivity (in which I believe whereas I do not believe in creativity) is to have a



**"There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all."**

-Peter F. Drucker

VERY BIG waste paper basket to take care of ALL invitations such as yours – productivity in my experience consists of NOT doing anything that helps the work of other people but to spend all one's time on the work the Good Lord has fitted one to do, and to do well."

Well, Liberty tends not to reply to

research requests in the terse terms of Drucker, but we are just about as resolute in waiving them off. In addition to time consumed by such projects, we are duly concerned about the privacy of student data.

We're wary of outside requests that could expose personally identifiable data. We're even cagey about the growing demands from local, state, and federal government agencies for personally identifiable student data, which, when requested, is always framed as being needed for wholesome research and data analysis.

Nonetheless, we're pedants chiefly for maximizing student time on task. In fact, we work to preserve it with unabashed jealousy.

According to Ashton, "Time is the raw material of creation. Wipe away the magic and myth of creating and all that remains is work: the work of becoming expert through study and practice, the work of finding solutions to problems and problems with those solutions, the work of trial and error, the work of thinking and perfecting, the work of *creating*. Creating consumes. It is all day, every day. It knows neither weekends nor vacations. It is not when we feel like it. It is habit, compulsion, obsession, vocation. The common thread that links creators is how they spend their time."

As leaders and parents of one of Colorado's, if not the nation's, most successful primary and secondary schools, we know this. We are confronted with all manner of distractions from both within the school and from countless outside interests.

We know how to say no, and we are rather accustomed to the stinging reactions we sometimes get when telling well-credentialed researchers to go away, despite our typical efforts to be kind and explanatory in the rejection.

Ashton makes his point perhaps best with a particular **Charles Dickens** quote in which Dickens rejected a friend's invitation. It's too good to not use here.



"'It is only half an hour' – 'It is only an afternoon' – 'It is only an evening,' people say to me over and over again; but they don't know that it is impossible to command one's self sometimes to any stipulated and set disposal of five minutes – or that the mere consciousness of an engagement will sometimes worry a whole day... Who ever is devoted to an art must be content to deliver himself wholly up to it, and to find his recompense in it. I am grieved if you suspect me of not wanting to see you, but I can't help it: I must go in my way whether or no."

Saying “no” sometimes makes us seem insulated, unpleasant, indifferent, possibly arrogant. But it is usually a proper response that ultimately empowers our students to say “yes” to a far brighter future of academic success, intellectual prosperity, and personal liberty.