

WHAT IS A SCHOOL?

A Philosophical and Practical Guide
for Independent School
Leaders, Trustees, and Friends

Peter Gow



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Leaders, Trustees, and Friends**

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About the Author

Peter Gow began his career in independent schools in 1974 at the boarding school in upstate New York that his grandfather founded. He has been a middle- and high-school teacher, a department chair, a director of athletics, a college counselor, an academic dean, a consultant, and a school trustee. Peter has presented at numerous national conferences, and he has written on multiple topics on school management for the National Association of Independent Schools; he has served that organization as a researcher and writer. He is the author of *An Admirable Faculty: Recruiting, Hiring, Training, and Retaining the Best Independent School Teachers* (National Association of Independent Schools, 2005) and *The Intentional Teacher: Forging a Great Career in the Independent School Classroom* (Avocus Publishing, 2009), and he is co-author of *Messaging and Branding: A How-To Guide*, with Carol Cheney (National Association of Independent Schools, 2010). His writing has appeared in *Independent School* magazine, *Education Week*, the *Harvard Education Letter*, and *Teachers College Record*, and he blogs at www.NotYourFathersSchool.org. Peter lives outside Boston, Massachusetts, where he is an administrator at Beaver Country Day School and executive director of the Independent Curriculum Group. In 2013 he founded Gow & Associates, which provides strategic, marketing, and professional development services to independent schools.

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Preface

What is a school? In particular, what is an independent school of the sort that North Americans have been founding and supporting for the last couple of centuries?

I began the exercise of answering this question in the winter of 2011 as I pondered the growing number of exciting and sometimes conflicting ideas of what schools are and what the schools of the future should be. Some experts are advocating for (and some seem to be warning of) whole new kinds of institutions, largely on line, while others are convinced that the day of the brick-and-mortar school is by no means done. Others envision a “blended” model that merges the power of online learning with the social and developmental benefits of physical schools.

I’m on the side of the brick-and-mortar and “blended” believers, although I am fully persuaded that online courses and even online schools have the potential to offer experiences whose impact could at least close approach that of physical schools. I believe that the essence of an effective school lies not in its physicality but in the principles and values that live in the minds of the schools’ members and friends.

What I have tried to offer here is a relatively short list of first principles, concepts, and in some cases practices fundamental to the existence of independent schools. In places I have also adopted a hortatory mode to press for things that I think schools need to be doing in order to insure institutional sustainability and other things that they need to get over. Much of the “research” behind my thoughts came as a serendipitous fringe benefit of the writing, research, and modest consulting I have done for the National Association of Independent Schools and some of its members; I have also spent virtually my entire life, starting at birth as a “faculty brat” and

continuing through a nearly forty-year career, in independent schools, and I have been blessed to work in some superb ones, with outstanding leadership.

An idea popped up early as I made my mental list of things for schools to “get over” that has me hooked for the moment. It’s simply this, that schools need to get over the idea that “a school is just a school.” While a kiss may be just a kiss, independent schools are much more than self-defined and self-contained systems of students, teachers, parents, and alums governed by self-perpetuating boards. To be an independent school is to be many things to many people. (This is quite different, incidentally, from the temptation in admissions and marketing to be all things to all people.)

So, then, what is a school?

I propose here fourteen answers this question, with a pause at the midway point for some reflection and stock-taking. I’m also hoping to suggest reasons that this perhaps banal-seeming question is important, and why developing a comprehensive “definition” of a school can be helpful in developing ways to fortify operations and programs for the future.

This volume was originally “serialized” in the form of consecutive sixteen *Not Your Father’s School* blog posts that I called “verses,” but here I’m referring to them as meditations. I have also made necessary editorial changes to improve and clarify the content for transformation into the medium of a book.

PG

Essex, New York

July 2011

(Revised October 2014)

Meditation I

A school is an idea representing an ideal or aspiration.

On one level, this is like a brand—a set of expectations built around an experience—but on a deeper level, this is of course a combination of the ideas and beliefs behind the school's founding and its current stated mission. Rather like constitutional law, schools evolve as time and experience—both in routine operation and in crisis—force the leaders of the institution to adapt their understanding of its purposes, aims, and values to changing conditions. Like the law, there may be a thick encrustation of interpretation and precedent and operational procedures akin to statutes, but at the core must live those principles—call them constitutional principles, if you will—that guide the school toward its ideals and its most lofty aspirations.

What are the ideas or aspirations that come to mind when people hear the name of your school? This is an important question, and in presenting your school to the world and to itself (external and internal marketing, both equally important) it is critical that there be congruence between the school's view of itself and the world's view of the school. (And what do you do if you suspect the world's view is the more accurate?)

A school that lacks clarity on this issue is in difficulty, although if the world's view is generally favorable, then things aren't all bad. But a school's business must be to have a sure understanding of the alignment, or lack of it, between the ways in which the school wants to be seen and the way it *is* seen.

Sometimes the key to adjusting misalignment lies in messaging, but just as often it lies in program. What a school says about itself and what it wants others to say about itself should above all be true. The “constitutional principles” need to be visible in practice. If they are not, either the principles need to be amended, or practice needs to be changed.

Meditation II

A school's name is shorthand for a set of shared experiences—lived, hoped for—deeply understood across generational and other boundaries.

To those who have attended or who have been associated with any independent school, its very name will evoke a body of experience. To those who hope to be associated with or even those who just make reference to the school, the name will likely have meaning as a standard of comparison, as a place where something in particular exists or happens, or perhaps even as a conversational or social weapon—or a shield.

Beyond brand and beyond mission, a school assumes in the individual mind an identity and existence through its name and through associations with that name. Consider the personal meaning a school's name takes on for a graduate—prideful, happy, even sacramental, or bitter or sad; quite probably, because of the emotional complexities of childhood and adolescence, some combination of the all of these. In the community, the school's name may reverberate as a symbol or even a mantra of power, privilege, exclusivity, excellence—or mediocrity. To parents, hope is encoded in the name, an incantation that represents all their wishes for the transformation of the student from child to successful, happy young adult.

The name of a school is magic, drawing power both from what the school actually is and does but even more from the miracle of human development and growth that takes place within it. Successful schools understand this and are continually engaged in work that sustains the magic, a balancing act that requires an exquisite sensitivity

to what is authentic and not pretense, what is essential and not superfluous, and above all what is best for students and not for the school.

There is danger lurking in a name that has become invested, usually through the efforts of the school but sometimes accidentally, with so much power that it has come to define a Type or an "ideal." When the notion of this ideal becomes so ponderous or so rigid as to stultify or warp students, or even the way in which students are seen and their school experience understood—even by themselves—it becomes time for Herculean efforts to liberate the school from the *limiting* power of its name. Counterintuitive though this may be, sometimes a school becomes a victim of its own success, unable to evolve in ways that could better serve a new generation of students.

Meditation III

A school is an aspiring utopia: an intentional community driven by ideals.

As a community, an independent school sets its own standards of behavior based on its abiding beliefs and values—its constitutional principles, but deeply held in the hearts of constituents. Students and staff are subject to these standards, which may range from small things like observing “proper” table manners to great ones like affirmations of spiritual belief. Within the community that is the school, then, a certain idealism reigns, informing actions and words in the hope of raising community members—and for some schools the world at large—to the level of the school’s dreams—not as Ideal Types but as evolving humans prepared to play an active role in changing and improving the lot of humankind.

A school’s idealism is represented in its primary topics of internal and external discourse. Are these about children, and learning, and the betterment of our world, or do such subjects receive only lip service or—worst of all—have they become objects of “political correctness” to be tiptoed around by jaded cynic and discouraged idealist alike? Or is the school in such a perilous state that the talk is all about management, or survival?

There are those who would call fatuous, even plain silly, the idea that students (and teachers) might check their biases, petty prejudices, and even their cynicism and materialism at the schoolhouse gate. It might seem unnatural, or inauthentic—and yet why else do we have and work in such schools? For a few hours a day we ought to be able to expect the best of our students and ourselves, in the hope that the lessons learned under the umbrella of school’s ethos might take root in the world at

large. (Isn't this what alumnae/i magazine profiles are intended to celebrate? Isn't this why we admire Martin Luther King?)

This will always be a struggle, to live up to an ideal in a world where we are constantly reminded of the need to "keep it real." But the very tension in this struggle should be inspirational—keeping it real, after all, is about retaining integrity as we work toward a better world. Whether their foundations be spiritual or secular, independent schools have always, at their best, been about far more than college admission, test or athletic contest scores, or the preservation of the status of elites. A school that has forgotten the better angels of its founders' natures or the great ambitions of its heritage is a school whose idealism needs rediscovery and revival.

In theory it is school leaders who must take on the role of "idealists-in-chief," but anyone and everyone in a school community lives under a gentle but inexorable obligation to call the institution and its members to their duty—to make the school a place devoted to ideals that may be, and perhaps even should be, unapologetically utopian.

Meditation IV

A school is a social enterprise, with obligations to the society that supports it.

(And I will freely admit to cribbing this line from the teaser for an article by Lawrence Bacow, Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, and Saran Kaur Gill in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 January 2011)

Some independent schools have lately embraced the tagline “private school with public purpose” as if this were uniquely an attribute or perspective only of some schools, or of my school more than your school (in a manner of speaking). But of course, the very independence of independent schools from government regulation and their tax-exempt status suggests an acknowledgment by society that there is some virtue in having such schools exist. What is this virtue, and how must schools manifest it in their work?

This virtue is not to be found in nor defined by community service, which is often spoken of as a way for students (and institutions) to “give back” to society and which at its worst—and thankfully we encounter less of this attitude with each passing year—is regarded by the providers as an expression of *noblesse oblige*. (Until fairly recently the awarding of financial aid was often regarded in this same light.)

Nor can this virtue be distilled into services and payments in lieu of taxes. In these tight economic times “PILOTs and SILOTs” (payments and services in lieu of taxes) are regarded by strapped communities as a kind of programmatic or fiscal entitlement that is easily understood and easily demanded: the privileged School On The Hill should cast down some portion of its wealth lest the villagers arrive at its gates with pitchforks and torches. While schools need to consider carefully and to

demonstrate thoroughly and convincingly their actual net cost and net value to their community, reducing the obligation to a kind of tribute exacted in access to playing fields or an annual check to the volunteer fire company is narrow and rather disheartening—too petty to reflect the real moral and social exchange that should be taking place.

Society grants certain exemptions to independent schools in the belief that there is virtue in offering families choice in the way in which they educate their children—choice in “quality,” in program, in philosophical or spiritual foundation, in the very nature of the school community. Relief from the necessity of paying taxes is a kind of economic stimulus measure to encourage the establishment of a variety of schools, and relief from regulation—at least academic regulation—stems from a fundamentally American belief in the value of a diversity of ideas. (This can of course be a mixed blessing, especially where ideologies, religion, and politics collide to generate schools or teachings of enforced narrowness or bias of perspective—but, alas, one person’s science is another’s witchcraft, and vice versa.)

What independent schools are obligated to be is the very best, and the very most true to their missions and values, that they can be. This is not about some puffed-up version of “excellence” but rather about serving their immediate community of students and families superbly: teaching well and living up to their own highest stated ideals. Affordability, and casting the widest net possible to attract and retain the most appropriate students and teachers, ought to be ambitions of equal importance.

A great school enhances its surrounding community not by finding ways to make payments or do service but by authentically and transparently existing and participating in all its communities. The model of the School On The Hill ought to be long-since dead, replaced by an idealization of the school whose functions and people are alert and responsive to the ongoing needs and aspirations of both internal and external communities.

The public purpose of independent schools is to vigorously exercise their freedom to be themselves and, in our time, to explore and innovate as perhaps only they—permitted and even encouraged as they are to pursue and grow around their own ideals—are able to.

Meditation V

A school is a society unto itself: a key locus for social interaction among students, former students, families, and staff.

This almost seems too obvious to mention. Whether the school is day or boarding, it is in many ways a society unto itself. The school is the scene of a million little stories—dramas, romances, comedies, tragedies, failures, and triumphs—and for many of its current denizens it is *the* most important place in the world for 180 or so days a year. The effect may be intensified in residential settings, but the day-school counterpart of this intensity lies in the reality that day schools assemble students from diverse and often distant communities who would never otherwise know one another—and who depend on the school to be the congenial setting and conduit for a good part of their social lives.

Some independent school campuses are virtually cocoons, sheltered from “the world” and inward-focused by mission and tradition, while other schools relish being in the middle of things. There is no “right” way to be, although too much inwardness can be a dangerous thing if it finds expression in self-reverence, self-congratulation, or closed-minded exclusivity.

But a school must be conscious of its place as a social nexus for so many people, and it must find ways to make this part of its identity attractive and comfortable even as it encourages members to cross beyond the familiar in building their relationships within the school community. Authentic diversity is based on the discoveries made by crossing social frontiers, however challenging; the traversing of boundaries, when

it passes beyond “work” to become a way of being, can provide enormous individual pleasure as well as build group and institutional solidarity and fortitude.

Lately there has been quite a bit of attention focused on the kinds of unsafe and antisocial actions that can occur in school communities—the dangerous side of being a place of so many intense interactions. Even as they work to strengthen the lighter, intentional, and positive aspects of their existence as social communities, schools need to be alert to the ways in which risky and even cruel behaviors can arise and change the tenor of community life. This should, perhaps, go without saying, but there is evidence that some schools are reluctant to acknowledge the full depth of their role as places of social intercourse, seen and unseen, positive and negative.

The expansion of school campuses into cyberspace and across time through social media can wonderfully strengthen critical bonds in the service of advancement—particularly for current families and between the school and its graduates. It can also provide a virtual preview of the “school as community” for prospective students and families.

Schools now must harness and sometimes contend with the virtual campus exoskeleton created by social media, skeins of digital filaments covering the school universe—sometimes involving school “business” and sometimes existing just because of connections originating within the school. Of the school but not exactly in the school, these connections are increasingly and probably properly regarded—especially when they transmit dark forces—as lying under the umbrella of the school’s responsibility to its community and its individual members.

Ultimately, though, the role of the school as social setting and social community is most often a source of joy among its members. Though they may have their moments of pain, schools are above all places of comradeship and for the highest expression of love in all its classical forms—as desire, as appreciation and loyalty, and as the love of humanity itself.

Meditation VI

A school is the incarnation of ideals to which some people will want to dedicate themselves and their resources.

I've already written on these ideals and their importance, but not to be underestimated is the degree to which some people will want to devote their energy, time, and treasure—even their lives—to helping the school enact its great values.

Humans are hard-wired to seek both meaning and connection, and for many people the first stirrings of these instincts come in late childhood, when an awareness of group membership can appear in the form of what is loosely called “school spirit.” Children at the age of ten or eleven begin to feel especial pride in their school, and many independent schools are adept at fostering this feeling by reminding students of the specialness of the school, its values, and the experience they are having. Shared endeavors like class plays, curriculum-related exhibitions, and sports teams reinforce positive feelings about the group and secondarily the institution.

For many students these feelings increase as they pass through middle and high school. Fierce loyalties develop, and although these may manifest themselves as blind partisanship and even arrogance, some students feel a deep, transcendent (and often hard to express, at least publicly) connection with their school. This connection is intensified as students develop rich and increasingly candid and mature relationships with others who love the school and what it stands for—fellow students, teachers, other staff, and administrators. These students—not necessarily the most accomplished or “decorated” or even the athletic, extracurricular, and academic stars on whose leadership and performance the school’s public fortunes

ride from year to year—quietly aspire to become the true-blue exemplars of the school’s most excellent qualities. They have received something of inestimable value, and they set themselves, at first quietly and even unknowingly, to pay that gift forward.

Most independent schools have become expert in cultivating this impulse among these students as they graduate, move on, and then settle into communities and careers. Schools also know that they need to be prepared to add tinder and oxygen to the spark of loyalty that flares up in other alums years after their graduation. A school that was and above all has remained worthy of such dedication can expect great things from its graduates—great works in the world and great support of the school itself.

The dedication of faculty and staff should never be discounted; even short-time employees can have an extraordinary and—yes—transcendent experience that makes them lifetime loyalists. Some senior staff are pleased simply to identify themselves with the glory and reputation of the school, but many long-time employees stay because of a deep commitment to a school’s best values and the satisfaction they derive from living in a community driven by particular ideals. They may become living embodiments of the school, treasured as such by students, families, past students, and colleagues. (And let me be clear that while teachers and administrators often play these roles, staff in all categories can be powerfully influential in their identification with and devotion to the school.) In schools that find ways to continually activate and fuel such devotion, the utopian spirit of which I wrote in *Meditation III* is palpable.

Of course, along the way most independent schools also acquire what annual reports often lump under the category “friends of the school”—parents and past parents, community members, and even more randomly connected individuals who find themselves attracted to what the school stands for and to the work it does. The desire of such “friends” to involve themselves or to remain involved with the school stems from idealism and sometimes gratitude, and they form yet another identifiable—and

cultivable—cadre of devotees whose contributions strengthen the school in all its efforts.

There's a brief and obvious lesson about "change" and "innovation" here: However a school may wish to move forward in its programs and practices, it must be clear with its constituencies as to how these advances support and extend its fundamental ideals.

Meditation VII

A school is a set of intentional and unintentional learning experiences for students.

We have come almost half way through this exercise before getting around to academics, you might say. But I am not even thinking specifically about academic learning here, although I am thinking very much about curricula.

Many years ago the school where I now work began to think about curriculum, and many of us read an extraordinarily little monograph by my now-friends Steve Clem and Vance Wilson called *Paths to a New Curriculum* (NAIS, 1991—it's currently out of print, so you'll have to look for it on line). Along with offering a very useful and still, I think, very timely process for curriculum review, Steve and Vance also suggest a set of distinctions in thinking about a school's program that I still find compelling. They lay out three kinds of learning experiences—curricula—that students experience:

1. **The explicit, intentional curriculum.** This is the breadth of what is intentionally planned and taught within the totality of the school's programs, including not just classroom learning but the designed, guided (and in the best of all worlds, clearly mission-connected) experiences had by students in all areas of endeavor—from athletics to recess to extracurricular clubs and publications to "character education" to residential life. These are the things that schools tend to work hardest on, although the most proactive attention tends to fall on the academic side. In many schools the other matters are largely allowed to take their own course within the broad framework of mission, values, custom, and school culture.

2. **The hidden curriculum.** Where “custom and school culture”—sometimes involving an intentional blind eye—mostly outweigh proactive planning and control, we find the hidden curriculum; these are the lessons students learn largely from their own experiences, things that “are what they are” rather than products of anyone’s intent or planful, strategic instruction or guidance. Sometimes the hidden curriculum is literally so—a world of student traditions and attitudes unseen or ignored by adults or of shared adult practice so ingrained as to be indiscernible—while sometimes it is an seemingly random accumulation of reactive decisions and policies that operates in parallel to and sometimes at cross-purposes with the intentional curriculum.

3. **The null curriculum.** This is the sum of what NOT taught, but might be—academically, ethically, spiritually, behaviorally. High-minded educators have tended to consider the null curriculum as a kind of giant escape clause in which schools essentially tell students, “This stuff isn’t important to us, so it needn’t be to you, either.” While this may overstate the case, it is worth considering those things that are purposely omitted from a school’s intentional curriculum, and why the omission. Of course, attempting to fill these holes can turn program planning into a giant game of whack-a-mole and poses the danger of piling apparently unrelated program upon program, ad infinitum.

(Incidentally, in doing my homework for this section I ran across a website posted by Professor Leslie Owen Wilson of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point describing different types of curriculum:

<http://www.uwsp.edu/education/lwilson/curric/curtyp.htm>

Professor Wilson breaks curriculum types down even further, perhaps going beyond usefulness, but the distinctions she suggests and her commentary are instructive.)

The point, of course, is that kids learn a whole slew of lessons in school, and it’s a very good idea for schools to maximize what is intentional—and to base intent on

consistent and thoroughgoing principles, such as the mission—and to be alert to the desirability of minimizing what is hidden and what is “null.”

A Pause for Reflection

With seven meditations down and seven more to go, this seems like a good place to catch our breath and reflect on where we have been so far. In writing this I've had a couple of revelations and perhaps ought to have had even a few more, and it's probably worthwhile to explore these.

First, a couple of thoughtful readers of the original blog posts suggested that my focus on ideals, as embodied in mission and values, might give the impression—or worse, give schools permission to believe—that having a lofty set of principles is all that a school needs to achieve virtue (and success): That if you spout your ideals loudly enough, especially to yourself, you won't need to do much else.

I'd like to put that idea to rest, quickly. A school that wants to survive and thrive, lead, and inspire had better carefully and deliberately walk the walk as well as talk the talk. I fear that the world of independent schools is as full of self-congratulatory impulses as any other endeavor, but self-congratulation never built a utopia.

There hasn't quite been a place to discuss this here, but somewhere between arrogance and abjection lies a place of quiet self-reflection where honest humility and justifiable pride are in balance. If the unexamined life is not worth living, neither is the unexamined school worth maintaining, and the only effective path to the delivery of intentional, internally consistent education is a high level of institutional self-reflection and willingness to adjust policies and practices in the response to changing circumstances and worthy new ideas—even to change course when necessary. Reputations, to put it bluntly, are not permanent, but a commitment to exploration must be.

I'd also like to talk a bit about the nature of the "school" I'm thinking of. While brick-and-mortar has been more or less the only viable model for the past two or three millennia, this is changing as online and blended learning opportunities proliferate. While the emphasis in virtual education has tended to be on the technology and the delivery methods, I believe that in time online and blended schools will need to provide ethical, extracurricular, and interpersonal experiences that are as powerful as those provided by brick-and-mortar schools. The missions and values underlying the operation of these schools must be robust, internally consistent, and increasingly focused on the total experience of students rather than just on delivering academic instruction. The experimental work being done today by some of the virtual high schools, such as the thriving Online School for Girls and Fred Bartels' nascent Online Progressive UnSchool, will help educators discover ways to deliver some or perhaps all (or more) of the rich experience of the physical independent school in virtual environments. This work is both exciting and daunting.

Of course it's entirely possible that the independent school of the future will be something else entirely, but I'm willing to stand by what I have written so far as the fundamental elements of sustainable schools, virtual or physical. The human need to connect will mean that in years to come whatever sorts of entities call themselves schools will, if they are to survive as such, need to create communities of practice and principles, yes, but these must also be communities that foster authentic, emotionally nourishing relationships.

Meditation VIII

A school is a workplace whose product is personal experience and growth.

Widget factories make widgets, and insurance companies sell and service policies. While the business wisdom of the moment would focus on the “people” aspect of these enterprises, in point of fact you can hold their products in your hand and see them at work. Schools are different.

To have become a teacher or a coach or any of the people who work in schools and have contact with children as part of their jobs is to be interested in children’s lives and children’s worlds. I will even stipulate for the sake of argument here that school people believe in kids and root for their success, or at least they did at that moment they decided to stay in the profession.

At its best, a school’s true product, then, is a wondrous series of developmental and intellectual advances: “Aha!” moments, smiles, struggles well struggled, changed minds and attitudes, opinions and attitudes confirmed and strengthened by evidence and logic, gradually dawning understandings, new images and ideas created in a score of media, empathy and compassion extended by new points of view, instructive failures and recoveries, moments of chagrin and pride, tragedy and triumph. (That’s a short catalogue, I know.)

In short, adults in schools get to observe, listen, guide, comfort, cajole, instruct, suggest, clarify, correct, confirm, and marvel. We get to watch young people grow into themselves. What a job! What a career! What a life!

I am a firm believer in the idea of the teacher as observer, and I do not mean this in a passive sense. The best educators are as attuned to subtleties in student work and student behavior as Sherlock, or better Mycroft, Holmes, and as we advance in our careers we add methods and attitudes and occasionally revelations to the toolkit on which we draw as we try to figure out the best way to respond to situations that are almost always, in some tiny but crucial way, unlike anything we have encountered before.

All of this, incidentally, places a giant, wonderful burden on schools and their people. We have to supply experiences, challenges, and opportunities that are *worthy* of the great work that we have been given to do—experiences, challenges, and opportunities that will truly engage and inspire our students. There's no room for shoddy programs or for low standards when the potential of each student is at stake.

To reiterate a point made earlier, the best kinds of schools are those in which students are indeed encouraged to grow into themselves. Almost fifty years ago I attended a school in which there was then (no longer, I am quite sure) a kind of beau ideal of the “--- Man:” athletic, hardworking and book-smart (but not intellectual), socially at ease, and modest about his many accomplishments. Other schools have had and promoted, explicitly or implicitly, their own ideas of what children *should* be, of what boys or girls should be, of the perfect artist or athlete or citizen or scholar. I like to think that the work independent schools have been doing around diversity has opened many eyes not just about race and ethnicity but also about the essential nature of children, and that idea of helping kids to become “the best version of themselves” (as opposed to beings measured against some school-established standard) has taken hold even among the traditionalists among us.

A few years back, “risk-taking” was a staple of school mission statements, and while the idea behind this was noble and good, we have not done much of a job to really encourage this in our schools, and we need to do better. Learning can be described crudely as a feedback loop, and part of good feedback involves finding out what happens when you try something new. Sometimes you fail. Sometimes you need two

or three tries to get something right. How many of our schools really encourage kids to take risks by allowing them to fail (with the failure as its own penalty) on their way to success?

A quick and slightly disturbing thought: At the moment my main work is as a college counselor, and we joke sometimes about being the “shipping department”—a line that is perhaps too clever by half. Cynically, I worry that there are many people who believe deep down that our schools’ true products are in fact commodities in list form to be judged and measured by the “quality” (i.e., perceived prestige) of the places students go when they leave us. I reject this, and I hope you do, too.

If we are doing our jobs, we are giving students the time, space, and opportunity to learn and try new ideas, new attitudes, new approaches, new understandings, and above all new concepts of who they are and who they can be. With good and well understood curricula—the intentional, the hidden, and even the null—we produce people of whose accomplishments and growth we may be proud, but most importantly, people we are just plain proud to know.

And what’s really cool: As we work with children, we grow and develop ourselves. As I said, *What a job!*

Meditation IX

A school is a community resource to the extent that it is willing to share.

There's a good deal of buzz these days about payments and services in lieu of taxes, the infamous PILOTs and SILOTs. These are monetary charges and demands for services that communities are attempting to levy on independent schools and other nonprofits in order to fill growing budget gaps. We have to ask ourselves who can blame these communities, on one level, while on another it looks a bit like extortion, a kind of extralegal *quid pro quo* in which the school is just a convenient target of opportunity. Schools are advised to pre-empt such demands by issuing "community impact statements," meticulous and carefully calculated enumerations of the ways in which the school contributes financial value and social capital—as an employer, as a destination, as a consuming entity, and as a physical resource.

The community impact statement is a good idea, and in the winter of 2011 we were reminded of the astonishing regional value of a large, thriving institution by a study featuring a Canadian school—all the better since the study had been conducted not by the school but by a university business school. The report neatly indentifies specific benefits provided by the school and makes appropriate use of the multiplier effect to arrive at a hefty dollar amount—perhaps hefty enough in a case like this to lower the volume of chatter about PILOTs. The study, well promoted by press release, offers a solid assurance of the school's value as a resource.

But the school that really wants to make its mark as a resource had better back up such statements with accomplishments that give evidence of real impact. I do not doubt for a second the estimates in responsibly made studies, but there is a

qualitative distinction between a number and a palpable sense of benefit. I admit that I am challenged to define that distinction well or even suggest ways to discern it, but here's a go at the problem:

A school's interactions with its external community can be measured not simply by employment numbers, the amount the schools spends on goods and services, or the number of students from the local community who attend. These are important figures, of course, but equally important are the ways in which the school makes known its beneficial intent and its interests with regard to the community. Do school trustees and administrators participate in local affairs? Does the school make an effort to work with local vendors and support local businesses? Do students, families, and faculty participate in the cultural life of the community as real partners rather than only in ways that showcase the school and its successes? Do the school's graduates play an active role in the community at large? Is the school proactively responsible in its environmental and even aesthetic citizenship? Is there a sense of mutual pride and affection between the school and its external community?

Most schools have found some ways to open their doors and campuses to their local communities—Little League on the practice fields, community theater in the auditorium, Saturday morning children's art classes in the studio. Most have also found ways for students to provide service in the community, and the best of such programs have aimed at giving students a deep understanding and appreciation of "place" in the shared context of the community and the school's mission rather in notions of "community service hours." Some schools have targeted at least some of their financial aid budgets for promising local students, and in a few places (see details in this National Association of Independent Schools advisory at http://www.nais.org/files/PDFs/Partnerships_FINAL_52809UPDTD_81809.pdf) independent schools are taking first steps toward professional partnerships with public school systems and public school teachers and even involving themselves in charter school development. These are all good things, but they become excellent things when schools engage in them not simply to appease the community or exhibit their own glories. What is required is honest and thoughtful good will and a full and

generous understanding of both the community's and the school's needs and resources; this is the nature of partnerships with real impact. A school that can create such partnerships will seldom feel threatened by community economic or political pressures.

The year 2011 has been the year for “advancing our public purpose” in independent schools. In order really to do this, schools and school people need to keep working to develop a mindset in which they view their external community not simply an accident of founding, an audience and market, or an adversary to be kept at bay. Our public purpose is not just a nice idea or turn of phrase but an expectation—and we need to remind ourselves that our very existence is based on a social contract, manifest in our special exemptions from certain taxes and regulations. While as schools we set out to achieve our own missions, we have an implied mission to make our work worthy of that special status by living up to a broader and higher purpose, in our communities as well as on our campuses.

Meditation X

A school is an economic entity whose operations must be prudent and ethical.

This is about governance and money.

Historically independent school governing bodies have a simple role: to determine the course the school is to take (i.e., “set the mission”) and then make sure the school has the resources (material and human, in particular at the head-of-school level) to keep moving forward on that course.

As anyone who has ever sat on an independent school board can tell you, it’s seldom so easy. An independent school is a human organization with not only a mission but, if you will, a conscience. In many schools the conscience is on display most visibly in the annual ritual of setting tuition—the main resource-gathering exercise in which schools regularly participate.

The challenge in setting tuition is always to balance the resource needs of the organization—the funding of salaries, instructional programs, campus facilities maintenance, and future needs—against the dictates not just of the marketplace but of the school’s conscience: the desire for affordability against the desire to pay salaries at a decent level, the mandate for socioeconomic inclusivity against the need to keep expenses “close to the bone,” especially in uncertain economic times. Does the school ramp up tuition to do some new things and build a cushion against the vagaries of the economy, or should it minimize increases so as not to discourage or drive away current or potential families? The first strengthens the school for the long run, supporters might say, while the second, to its partisans, sends a message of “we

understand and we care,” underscoring the most humane aspects of the school’s mission and values.

At its heart, this conundrum can involve a question that generates discomfort: Should an independent school be a vehicle for the redistribution of wealth? In a sense, most schools already are, insofar as the gifts and tuition payments of the more-or-less affluent directly or indirectly fund financial aid as well as general program expenses—either through a direct transfer of tuition dollars or more commonly by the processing of gift dollars into income-producing endowment. The extent to which this happens at a particular school is dictated by the operational realities of the school’s financial situation and the willingness of its governors to participate in such an exercise.

I wrote in Meditation VIII that the product of an independent school is personal experience and growth, but I omitted something else. What I left out there is perhaps any school’s most important “product,” although I suppose it could be regarded as a byproduct: opportunity.

The opportunity that an education affords a student is arguably at the heart of our work. It could be said that the opportunities vouchsafed to students, broadly construed, are the putative reason behind the privileges accorded to independent schools with regard to regulation and taxation: the school experience “adds value” to society by offering opportunities to students, who in taking advantage of these become increasingly engaged and productive. (A bit of a digression, if you will excuse me: Historically, the founding impulses of even what we now might consider the most elite and elitist of independent schools were not just about maintaining status—although that was probably understood in many cases—but also about the idea of turning the children of elites into citizens who would exist not as pampered parasites but who would live lives of “usefulness and purpose.” Here indeed was opportunity, not just for the individual but also for the society that would presumably benefit from the lives of these educated and thus productive individuals.)

“Prudent and ethical” ought to go without saying, but the deeper challenge for the school as an economic entity is to find the balance between the accumulation of resources to enact vision and enable growth, on the one hand, and the school’s more generous ethos as expressed in its mission and values—and conscience. And all of this is in a righteous cause: not just experience and personal growth but opportunity, for individuals and for society at large.

Meditation XI

A school is a legal and corporate entity whose structure, operations, and management must conform to the legal and ethical standards of multiple jurisdictions.

More nuts and bolts here, but the requirements that jurisdictions place upon schools will necessarily have more than a small effect upon their culture and programs.

Sometimes the effects can seem vexatious and trivial. I currently happen to work in a place, for example, where our local authorities have had a deep-seated aversion to food waste. This meant that for many years can and bottle recycling was off the table, lest the sticky innards of empty soda cans attract pests whose presence, it was felt, would far outweigh the social benefits of recycling the darn things. Somehow in recent years there has been a change of heart, but decades of well-meaning and energetic student environmental initiatives came to naught, creating a frustrating hidden curriculum in which next-level efforts and great ideas—"The students want to make a proposal to the town!"—failed, as well.

One of my favorite reads is a downloadable U.S. Department of Education document (<http://www2.ed.gov/admins/comm/choice/regprivschl/regprivschl.pdf>) entitled *State Regulation of Private Schools*: 337 pages of detailed, state-by-state information on the rules and laws under which independent schools must operate. For instance, in most states it would take a mathematically adept lawyer or bureaucrat to answer the "How many snow days are we allowed before we have to start making them up?" question. On the whole, though, the book—which I dearly wish I might own in dead-

tree form, because I know just where I would like to keep it as a casual pick-up-and-read—is full of entertaining surprises.

In New Hampshire, for example, the trustees of any private school must supply the school with a “United States flag, not less than five feet in length, with a flagstaff and appliances for display outdoors.” In the U.S. Virgin Islands, “The commissioner of education is responsible for disseminating materials to private and parochial school[s] for the celebration of John P. Scott Day, Melvin H. Evans Day, Rothschild Francis Day, and Cyril Emmanuel King Day.” (This last is April 7; King was a governor of the U.S.V.I.—you can look it up!) And, confuting thirty-some years of my own assumptions, in Massachusetts “there is no mandate regarding what courses private schools shall teach”—including the suddenly mythical “mandatory” year of American history (which most colleges do “require” for admission, whether the Commonwealth tells us to teach it or not). On the other hand, many states require that students in high school and/or middle school study and pass tests on both the United States and their state constitutions, an idea which stirs an atavistic smile within my late, inner history teacher. (And before you smugly dismiss this old-school fancy, please tell me how many of your students clearly understand the legislative, executive, and judicial operations of your state government and whether you consider this important in a time when states are being asked to do an increasing amount of government’s heaviest lifting?)

Mostly, it’s just interesting to see where regulation has burrowed itself into the skin of independent school operations, and it is interesting to speculate on what systemic, practical, crisis-related, or purely notional motivations lie behind the odder regulations. In many states the rules make the federal tax code seem straightforward by comparison.

But then there is the more serious and often more visible and visceral sides of the issue—for example, the school’s stance as both a citizen and a “jurisdiction” in its own right. Where do the boundaries lie when a school wishes to enforce its own “good neighbor policy,” its rules relative to student behavior away from the campus,

or in the virtual world where legal requirements—embodied in burgeoning anti-(cyber)bullying statutes or anti-hazing laws—bind the school to some potentially very harsh realities? Such laws force schools to make difficult and often painful calls on matters where once they might have been safe in turning a blind eye or simply maintaining a firm distinction between things that happen in school or at “official school functions” and things that happen away from the campus.

And then there is case law, where independent schools have to consider issues ranging from “special education” to simple liability to athletic eligibility to food safety. Lawsuits spurious and serious shape our operations as well as our basic assumptions around “due diligence” and the fading—I am told—doctrine of *in loco parentis*. Criminal background checks—repeated at regular and specified intervals—are now absolute necessities, as is the practice of making clear to teachers the nature of their legal role as “mandated reporters.” There are and can be no shortcuts and no secrets—no “I promise not to tell”—where children’s welfare is concerned.

Regulation, where it does impinge on independent schools, is really a very big deal, an elephant in every room we occupy. By and large we push ourselves—and are sometimes pushed—to do the right, or at least the legally prudent, thing, and by and large we make it work. Some among us may long for good old days (Were they, really, though? I think not so much, on the whole) before anti-bullying laws and the like, and we may grumble at the sometimes nitpicky level of effort that conforming entails, but schools must conform, in the end, not just because the laws and rules require it, but because we recognize and embrace the need to make school better—safer, happier, healthier—for kids.

Meditation XII

A school is a place whose environments must practically and aesthetically serve students and staff.

When I was a child I wanted to be an architect, but the profession fortunately dodged that bullet. It's more than just as well, because every year the whole idea of designing spaces for a school becomes more complicated. Adding to the complication is the growing reality that more and more, those spaces are becoming virtual or even imaginary. It's about environments, not classrooms or buildings, nowadays.

For perhaps obvious historical reasons, school architecture in the past tended to reflect the ecclesiastical origins of European education, and schools and colleges today are still happy to exploit the drool factor of a richly Gothic or otherwise faux-medieval campus; a dining hall or library that "looks just like Hogwarts!" to starry-eyed visitors on campus tours must assuredly house a better sort of student and educator, and the school must be just a bit more better and perhaps a bit more, hmmm, luxurious. (The parents, at least, are not at that moment thinking of the solicitations they might receive for funds to keep soaring belfries free of bat dung and the hammer beams in the chapel varnished, but oh, well). In New England the plain, durable, and fireproof brick used by Harvard's founders generated another, "Georgian" look, characterized by simple white trim and dark-painted wooden shutters.

Although President James Garfield once famously quipped that "The ideal college is [Williams College president] Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other," his predecessor Thomas Jefferson had opted for the democratic, understated

elegance of brick at “his” University of Virginia. At some point in the late nineteenth century, though, the American campus arms race began, with its emphasis on picturesque exteriors and inspiring public and community spaces (often with paradoxically plain sleeping spaces). The rectangular classroom predominated at all levels from kindergarten through university, and the sameness of these is striking in every schoolroom photograph from the daguerreotype era right into the 1980s: desks in rows, blackboards, pull-down maps, a few meager bookshelves, perhaps a flag, and the inevitable portraits of Washington and, later and north of the Mason-Dixon Line, Lincoln.

What gives the spark of life to the most endearing of these photographs is usually the presence of students and, if one takes the time to look hard, evidence that the teacher who claimed the place was indeed human and not so different from ourselves. A stuffed and mounted bird becomes an idiosyncratic icon of an interest in nature; the personally chosen framed prints or mottos—and nothing has ever been cheap on a teacher’s salary—demonstrate a love of history and ideas. We can’t see the titles of the books usually, but there they are. We tend to imagine all teachers of the past as sanctimonious martinets, but here we occasionally see evidence that they could be vibrant, curious, funny people (like us!), enjoying their work and the company of children, and we can even imagine that most worked to make their poorly lighted and chalk-dust filled cells into interesting, perhaps even fun, places to learn. They filled these otherwise dreary boxes of desks with things that represented their own passions, situated to amuse, cajole, and inspire their young charges into the joys of learning and thinking. Teachers do the same today.

We ought to be careful when judging teachers by the spaces they may be forced to keep. Our Sudanese former foster child learned English in an open-air classroom in which dozens of refugee boys shared a single textbook. It would be churlish indeed to fault his teachers or criticize their rote style of teaching—they did extremely well with what they had, which above all was a passion to help their students prepare for a time beyond the endless waiting that filled their lives; their students venerated

their efforts. It wasn't "21st-century learning," but it was collaborative in the extreme and fitted to students' most fundamental needs and interests.

Today we can take our classes to meet peers from across the world in Second Life simulations (or perhaps, scaled digital representations), and school libraries have to decide whether they are coffee bars, study spaces, media centers, or laboratories of applied information science. I very much doubt that the British-style open dormitories with curtained sleeping spaces that were found until the 1970s at one school where I taught are still as they were; privacy and other concerns must have changed their configuration by now. And faculty lounges, once foully smoky bastions of gossip and posturing characterized by pecking orders every bit as rigid and intimidating as those among students, have mostly given way to offices and workspaces designed to "foster collaboration and interdisciplinary thinking;" the smoke at least has gone, although I dare say all the gossip has not. The cafeteria system has largely replaced table service in even the most Hogwarts-like of dining rooms, and portraits of founders, benefactors, and former heads now stare benevolently or bleakly out onto soft-serve ice cream machines and steam tables arrayed with broccoli sauté and vegan hot dogs.

And of course there is always the fun of imagining the ideal teaching and learning space—flexible, high-tech, LEED Platinum, with infinite connectivity and furniture out of the Jetsons. Architects and designers of 2011 have both lucrative opportunities to design such spaces anew and probably even more lucrative mandates to retrofit elderly School Georgian and Collegiate Gothic buildings to meet modern needs—the best of both worlds. It's a good thing I never got into this work.

Who knows what the future will bring? Will blended learning environments change the whole meaning of "classroom space," and will schools even begin to revert to the kinds of community centers of which "alternative school" founders dreamed in the '60s, with social functions taking precedence over "teaching" as students do their academic learning on line and depend on schools mainly for activities, sports, and companionship?

I believe that independent schools are likely to be safe from on-line replacement for a while, as their strong foundational values and reputations for developing powerful student–faculty relationships will keep families who can find ways to pay sending their children for the rich personal experiences even more than for the chance to cavort in true-life Hogwartzes. But new ways of teaching as well as the brute force of technology are changing the meaning of space, and schools will need to be thoughtful and nimble as they negotiate the next decades.

It makes me almost wonder whether one day the pendulum will swing back, and parents will be seeking bleak Neo-Dickensian environments to give their children a dose of cold-water reality (perhaps with a bit of birching, for good measure) that would go places like Scotland’s Gordonstoun and the rugged wilderness term-away schools of North America way more than one better. I’ll be gone by then, I hope.

Meditation XIII

A school is a laboratory of the human experience in the context of a distinct, intentional, and internally consistent mission and set of values.

I've probably worked over the concepts of mission, values, and intentionality past the point of saturation, but it has occurred to me—and I write this during one of those endless February weeks when spring teases us but when we and our students are perhaps closest to unraveling—that we are engaged in an continual process of human research and development.

I think I first heard from author and Association of Independent Schools of New England executive director Steve Clem the factoid that teachers make something like four hundred instructional decisions on the average day. Whether the number is too large or too small, winter probably contains the days when most teachers feel the burden of these decisions most acutely. There is a missing element, I think, that explains the sheer exhaustion we sometimes feel and perhaps also why no school day is ever the same as any other: each of those 400 or so decisions is freighted with an emotional component, the requirement to make judgments not just to get some point across but to respond to what the teacher believes are the immediate needs and best interests of students.

Now, it may be true that some teachers believe that the needs of their students at any given instant are solely about the academic issue at hand, with no consideration given to such warm and fuzzy notions as “values,” “character,” or (heaven forbid) Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Such teachers might believe, in the moment, that what their students need is not sleep, security, self-esteem, or moral exploration

but rather a solid and unshakable knowledge of the Krebs Cycle, of how to spell “pharaoh,” of the pluperfect subjunctive, or of the themes of *The Scarlet Letter*.

It’s never that simple, of course, and even moderately good teachers know this all the time and act on it most of the time. Sleep, security, and self-esteem do matter in determining how well kids learn (duh!), and moral exploration is arguably what teenagers, at least, should be doing for a living and what we want younger students to grasp as a really important activity for their growing brains. The Krebs Cycle, spelling lists, and Hester Prynne’s travails play out in schools against dynamic emotional backdrops of almost unbelievable subtlety and complexity. No wonder teachers appreciate vacations.

I have written earlier of my enthusiasm for the old concept of the teacher as observer, and I believe that the most successful and probably the happiest schools are those in which this role is acknowledged and encouraged. Plentiful and thoughtful teacher talk, open communication and the rich (and respectful to the students) exchange of ideas, observations, best practices, failures, and puzzlements creates the culture of a think tank. The school becomes a mini-Los Alamos with its great object to discover and implement the best way of teaching Kid X and Kid Y right now, tomorrow, and next year.

If a school’s faculty embraces the role of “think tank” and is both a brain trust and a “heart trust,” the discoveries will be made and renewed, over and over, responding to each child’s needs in the moment (and sometimes the need is indeed to sit down and pay close attention to the Krebs Cycle) all the while serving their long-term needs and fueling their growth not simply as lifelong learners (which should be the natural condition of human beings) but as lifelong thinkers, creators, empathizers, and participants in the life of the mind and in society at large. Along the way the most effective educators and schools are amassing a bank of authentically “best” academic practices that we all need to be able to tap into.

I can't help thinking that the Los Alamos effort helped "win" World War II, no matter how dubious the means its scientists created. We've arguably got a global crisis—political, environmental, and moral—of similar magnitude on our hands, and it's obvious, I think, that the path to surmounting the world's problems must start in the laboratories of the human experience that we call schools.

Meditation XIV

A school must always be a set of undiscovered possibilities in the realm of the human spirit and a community devoted to their exploration and realization.

As I suppose most of us who work in schools do from time to time, I've been known to imagine what I might want to do out in what our private-sector siblings and friends chide us about as being the "real world." What sort of work would I be fitted for and would I want to do? Some days collecting tolls on the Massachusetts Turnpike seems as though it might be refreshing, or perhaps selling something really expensive, on commission.

And then I remember something really wonderful, perhaps the most wonderful thing of all, about working in an independent school, something that, whenever it happens, reminds me why this is what I need to be doing, at least for now.

The wonderful thing, and occasionally I find a colleague who admits to sharing this belief, is being wrong. In particular, being wrong about a kid.

Little Joey can't write his way out of a wet paper bag—until the day he turns in an essay that makes you gasp for the insights and the strong, sure voice it conveys. Sullen Lulu is so self-absorbed that you grumble to yourself about the values with which she must have been raised—until on the bus ride back from the field trip she starts talking about the work she did at the animal shelter near her vacation home last summer and you realize it's not about the vacation. The 16th player on your soccer roster squibs in the winning goal; the pouty hulk with his sweatshirt hood up all the time is just big and clumsy and worries about his Down Syndrome younger

brother; the basketball star mentions that he likes reading Hunter S. Thompson; the girl with even less fashion sense than you have (so you think) creates stunning costumes for the winter musical—in which a small, shy sophomore you’ve only vaguely noticed reveals a powerful baritone that fills the auditorium.

These experiences are reminders that making assumptions is a terrible thing; educators (like other people) rely too heavily on our experience and judgment and wisdom at our peril. But more importantly, being wrong is an object lesson in what good schools do best: allow what lies within each student to bubble up, to come to fruition, to stake a claim on some special space that is that student’s, even for a single moment, and theirs alone. Most often we have an inkling or more of what is coming, but there is almost nothing more delightful, more inspiring, than when we completely miss something, either because the child has carefully hidden it or, more often, because the child is as shocked and delighted as we are when the moment, what the house-and-garden makeover shows call the “reveal,” arrives.

I’ve grumped here already about schools that maintain is a stated or strongly implied student ideal, the perfect incarnation of what the school wants its students, who arrive apparently as imperfect versions, to become. I think that such schools, no matter how laudable their ideal, are missing the most exciting part of the great and wonderful experiment that they could be conducting—the opportunity to experience and take full and unadulterated pleasure in the truly unforeseen, to glory in those moments when a child becomes fully and in the best way possible himself or herself.

We are engaged in an endless experiment, to see whether our students, in our schools, can not just endure but also triumph over all the obstacles, important and petty, personal and societal, that childhood and adolescence throw in their way as they move, sometimes wriggling, sometimes streaking like lightning, toward adulthood and toward those lives of “usefulness and purpose”—and above all of meaning—that we want for them.

An Afterthought, or Two

Well, so ends my attempt to define the indefinable. I hope that readers will keep a couple of further thoughts in mind:

First, the public purpose of independent schools is probably more important as a subject for discussion than ever before. Of the many ways in which schools can live this purpose, a few are:

- As living laboratories for new kinds of pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment. Independent schools have been at the forefront of a number promising and extremely innovative educational models, and freedom from state testing requirements allows us to test some of these models in a more or less pure form. When the No Child Left Behind standardized testing pendulum swings back, our educators may be positioned make a real difference as leaders in disseminating the understandings gained in our classrooms.
- As relatively resource-rich sites for the teaching of new and ever more sophisticated approaches to the problem of meaningful civic engagement. We have “community service” and service learning down pat, but research and advocacy—beyond simple volunteerism—are increasingly understood as central to the education of active and involved citizens, and independent schools can excel in these areas. I sense a growing understanding of the value of such activities, educationally and for society at large, and plenty of room remains for our teachers and our students to demonstrate this value.
- The growing number of independent school–public school partnerships, while promising, requires that we open ourselves to new definitions of service and partnership. Authentic partnering demands real symmetry in our

relationships across sectors and real honesty and openness to new ways of understanding and expressing our purpose as coequal institutional citizens.

Of course, independent schools must make some preparations of their own if they are to achieve their public purpose at the highest level. For one thing, our schools have not been especially good at talking to one another, at least openly and without pretense about things that really matter. The competitive nature of our enterprise (despite our nonprofit status!) has made tweedy posturing and blue-blazered pontification too often our mode of interscholastic discourse. We need to climb down off our high horses and engage in some yeasty, candid dialogue about the essential nature of teaching and schools, setting aside our rivalries in a higher purpose.

And for whatever reasons, independent schools and their leaders—with some notable exceptions—have been largely absent from the national dialogue about education. We're always present when the talk is of selective college admissions, but when it comes to teacher training and evaluation, enriching curriculum, the teaching of writing, and rigorous assessment of student learning—all areas in which many of our schools are individually forging ahead in excellent, innovative, and very thoughtful ways—our voices are barely heard. These are, it must also be said, areas in which we have much to learn from our colleagues in the public sector. We will need to find avenues—perhaps through our professional organizations and even through the efforts of influential members of our communities—to speak up, to offer (in humility) what we know, to listen and learn about what we don't know, and to indicate our willingness to take an active role in solving a national problem.

It's a wonderful thing we do, making independent schools work, because the work has such enormous meaning and value. We know the meaning and we understand the value, and above all we are alive to all the most wonderful possibilities—possibilities we see daily, shining in the eyes of our students.