



# RESONANT AND RELEVANT

**SUBJECT** It's not enough for independent schools to be "defensible" in the larger context of education. They must show they are purposeful and necessary contributors to the lives of students, families, and communities. Schools need to be able to name their shared purpose—or else they will continue to be disappointed by how others define them

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**For me, the best endings often have** hints of beginnings baked in.

In his Fall 2021 *Independent School* article, "Why Do Independent Schools Exist?" John Gulla ends his piece this way:

*Nature provides beautiful metaphors for our world of education, and one I've found especially valuable at this moment is that of "punctuated equilibrium," where evolutionary biology teaches us that once a species appears in the fossil record, it is remarkably stable until extraordinary external events cause rapid evolutionary change. Such, I think, is the case with schools (basically the same organizational structure and curriculum for a century and a half), but the extraordinary external events (technological advances,*

*globalism, climate crises) call for rapid evolution for survival, and I believe independent schools—nimble, pedagogically creative, differentiated, covenantal, and responsive—can best show us the way.*

This ending is powerful because it points to the future; it represents Gulla's well-earned belief in independent schools; and it creates a demand for those who are endeared to these schools. The demand is fascinating because it is cemented within a compliment—nimble, pedagogically creative, differentiated, covenantal, and responsive. Great independent schools aspire to be all these things, and on their best days, they are. Gulla calls out our better selves and makes it clear we are going to need to double down to flourish



beyond the current truth of “extraordinary external events.” He calls us to purpose.

In addition to creating some counterbalance to the negative media attention that has poked independent schools in recent years, Gulla’s piece created a nascent form to a years-long conversation about independent schools in which he and I have, at turns, meandered and prodded and disagreed and, more often than not, aligned. Our alignment is centered on a belief that can feel quaint and, in the hands of independent school critics, duplicitous—that is, independent schools exist for reasons greater than themselves alone.

We’ve also aligned on the idea that independent schools have not done a good job of telling the true and compelling story about themselves writ large, and perhaps consequently, they have not lived up to their full potential to steward young people to face and help meet the challenges of the world ahead. Nor have they made a compelling case that independent schools should exist at all to those who are unaffiliated with them.

It is not enough for independent schools to be “defensible.” We must show that we are purposeful and necessary contributors to the lives of students and families, as well as our communities.

With all that and more in mind, Gulla and I co-founded The Purpose Project with the goal of igniting a

wide-reaching conversation about how we can proudly proclaim the purpose of independent schools to the world around us and hold ourselves accountable.

### Answering the Call

We envisioned The Purpose Project taking shape through a series of conversations with independent school leaders—heads,

administrators, and teachers—in which we facilitate discussion and engage participants to develop language that makes the greater purpose of independent schools more explicit. We designed the project as a way to examine and better articulate the purpose of independent schools while embracing the vast diversity of independent schools, which each seek to put students at the center of their work. We unveiled the project during a session at the 2023 NAIS Annual Conference during which we provided some preliminary context for the conversation, and using the app Poll Everywhere, recorded responses to these questions:

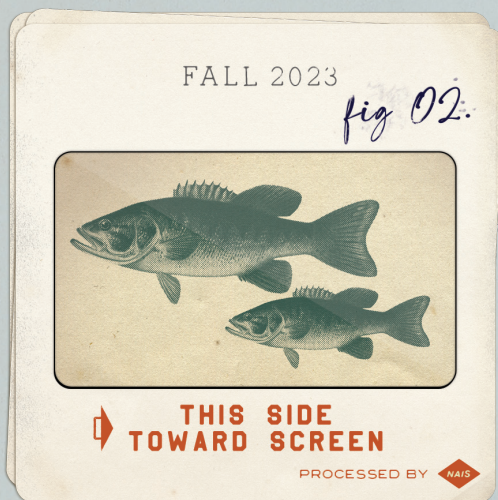
- What is the benefit of independent schools for our students?
- What is the value of independent schools to society at large?
- What is the value of independent schools to the communities in which they exist?
- What is our role/purpose in the conversation about education in general?
- How do we tell a better story?

In a well-attended webinar this spring, we dug deeper. We asked attendees, “What does it look like for independent schools to be good partners with families?” We shared a ChatGPT-generated definition of the purpose of independent schools and asked for their reactions to it. And we asked attendees to review the responses from the initial session in February and asked: What are you glad to see on that page? What surprises you? What challenges you?

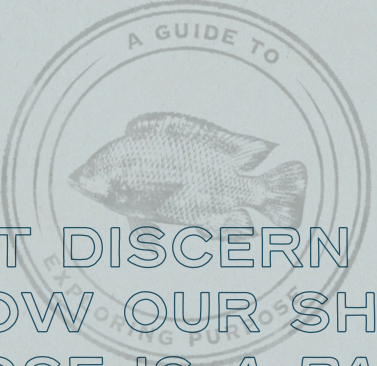
My hope for The Purpose Project is not simply that we will come up with language that captures the differentiated value of independent schools, but that we discern a sense of how our shared purpose is a *part of* rather than *apart from* the other voices in the dialogue about education. Independent schools shouldn’t be the only voice at the table, but they need to be represented at the table about the future of education.

### Response Time

Those of us who have benefitted from our independent school experiences struggle to articulate a compelling argument that names the purposefulness of our schools in a way that is both current and future-focused. We find ourselves caught in what can appear to







# WE MUST DISCERN A SENSE OF HOW OUR SHARED PURPOSE IS A PART OF RATHER THAN APART FROM THE OTHER VOICES IN THE DIALOGUE ABOUT EDUCATION.

be a zero-sum game, where the better our independent school experience, the worse someone else's non-independent school experience. But zero-sum games exhaust people and present a challenge to anyone seeking to assert purpose and nuance for independent schools. And we are living through a time of zero-sum conflict across our cultural and political milieu, where it has become far too easy to succumb to reductive arguments. This serves no one well, and it has not and will not serve independent schools well. Yet all too often independent schools and their detractors have slid into zero-sum thinking, much to everyone's detriment.

This was particularly evident in the muted response of independent school leaders to the April 2021 *Atlantic* article, "Private Schools Have Become Truly Obscene." There was a lot of talk and whininess about the article among independent schools, and the article had ample flaws to name—its narrowness, its generalizations regarding all independent schools through the lens of a small subset, and its clickbait headline, which was willfully ill-suited to the content of the piece. However, there was only silence where a rebuttal might have been. There was a missed opportunity to assert the purpose of independent schools in a functioning and healthy society.

Of course, even setting out to define purpose assumes there is one. Is there? If you're like me, you're certain there is, that it is indeed on the tip of your tongue—but what is it? Why *are* independent schools necessary? How are independent schools

useful parts of the communities in which they exist? How would others, those not affiliated with any independent school, describe our purpose? How would we like them to answer? These are uncomfortable questions. And they should have answers. Without them, no one should be shocked when people complain that independent schools are simply bastions of privilege and elitism without a viable role to play in the future of education.

That's why there's good reason to move The Purpose Project forward, and we are deeply committed to it. While the information we have gleaned from The Purpose Project so far is powerful, it is incomplete. There is more to be said and to be heard and more to be refined, and given the uncertainty of the world, independent schools will need to begin the process again if they ever fancy the illusion that it is finished.

## The Purpose Challenge

Zombies scare the hell out of me. The idea that they exist without purpose except to continue to exist and drain resources scrapes against my innermost fears. I've written about this before (in a May 2020 EXPLOR Elevate essay), about not just my fear of zombies, but my fear of how independent schools run the risk of becoming zombies—of becoming directionless facsimiles of purposeful mission-driven institutions, ones directed only by the need to stay open and attempting to be all things to all people rather than directed by the worthy missions and important work that should center them.



Recently, I've come to believe that the risk for independent schools is that our small industry's outpost on the educational landscape might itself become a zombie industry. A zombie's goal is simply to keep existing. Zombies are scary because of what they lack, not because of what they have. They lack a soul, and they lack purpose beyond self-preservation or personal benefit of some kind.

Now, I am a believer in independent schools, yet I believe in their possibility and promise rather than blindly cheerleading from the sidelines. To me, they are never quite yet what they should be. They are forever works in progress—or they are not doing their job correctly. In this way, schools should be like great students: always becoming, always open to learning something that might change their minds and their actions going forward. If their best language, artfully written and prominently displayed on webpages and in viewbooks, only exists to create the impression of what they would like others to think they are, they have not yet found purpose. Bluntly, without aspiration born of purpose, they don't need to exist.

In some ways, independent schools are an awkward grouping to begin with, seeming to represent an obscure and disjointed

educational archipelago. However, it is vital to assert here that individual independent schools do not operate in a vacuum, even though they represent a wide array of founding stories, demographics, missions, values, sizes, and resources. Independent schools are connected to each other in myriad ways through associations, regions, affiliations, data-sharing networks, hiring pools, university backgrounds, etc. And they clearly share enough in common to yearn for a connection to each other through conferences, phone calls, and group Zoom meetings. Through all this connective tissue, they share the tensile strength of experience, new practice, support, and generative thinking.

And they must do all this sharing better, to develop the muscles they need to flourish amid so much existential vulnerability. They need more tensile strength—even more than they needed throughout 2020 as COVID-19 forced them to turn on a dime. And they will need more tensile strength as they face more voices asking, “Why do independent schools need to exist at all?”

The glacial pace of change that has preserved independent schools over the past century-plus is no longer suited to the tasks ahead. To meet the increasing speed of change and intensity of conflict, schools need to be able to name their shared purpose or else they will continue to be disappointed in how others define them. We should not be surprised the next time someone asserts “private schools are indefensible” if it remains true that they have not humbly and thoughtfully made the case for independent schools aside from preaching to their respective choirs. Absent that case, independent schools should not complain when people describe the current truth of independent schools with the old—and often justified by history—tropes involving elitism, entitlement, privilege, racism, and prejudice of all types. Not only do independent schools need to do the hard work to ensure those descriptors are indeed inaccurate in our current histories, but we need to tell the accurate and complete history *and* assert the new truth and shared purpose.

This does not mean independent schools should become homogenous. In fact, it means embracing our individual differences

### LEARN MORE

The Purpose Project debuted in February 2023 with an invitation for school leaders and teachers to “help us celebrate and clarify the purpose of independent schools for a new day,” noting that “As independent schools, we need to communicate our resonant and relevant purpose as a means of reinforcing the valuable work that takes place in our schools and of identifying ourselves accurately and compellingly for the next generation of communities, families, and students.”

Nearly 200 participants have joined the conversation so far, and the initial feedback is fascinating. You can find the project’s guiding core questions and every comment collected in response to those questions, share your thoughts and comments, and sign up for updates at [explore.explo.org/purpose-project](https://explore.explo.org/purpose-project).



as sources of that same tensile strength. We need to make sense of ourselves writ large, our histories, our sameness, our differences, and our shared aspirations. We need to move through this process to create the necessary “why” for our existence so that we can, in Gulla’s words, “proudly proclaim the purpose of independent schools”—a clear and compelling purpose to those who haven’t chosen them and perhaps might argue against them, and one that will push internal work in each independent school to meet a higher bar of focus and practice.

### A Way of Seeing Independent Schools

Forever seeking and updating our way of seeing the world around us, of seeing ourselves and those with whom we create purposeful communities, is at the heart of lifelong learning. Necessarily then, independent schools need a functional *way of seeing* the why of their existence and committing to it. In large part, they talk among themselves without placing equivalent effort into impacting what would be said about them when they are not present. To do this sort of seeking requires deep reflection, hearing the voices already among them, certainly, and, most important, understanding the world and people around them—not simply those who might become applicants, but those who are outside of the rings of their communities. Their neighbors. And the whole world is their neighbor.

In thinking about discovering a *way of seeing*, I think of the arts, for each offers the potential to alter one’s way of seeing, feeling, and hearing both the novel and the familiar. More than a decade ago, I taught Louise Glück’s collection of poetry *A Village Life* as part of “21st Century Short Fiction and Poetry,” a senior English elective I designed at Hawken School (OH). We started it together the first day after it was published. In the first poem, “Twilight,” I stopped on this line: “In the window, not the world, but a squared-off landscape / representing the world.” This is a provocative encapsulation of what it means to have a way of seeing. Through a window, like through a photograph, one can both “square-off” the “landscape” and “represent the world.” It is a beautiful insight not just for artists but for all of us. And it is useful for those in

independent schools seeking to understand and be understood. What have we shown the world in our own squared-off landscape? What have we sought to find through our window on the world?

Independent schools have acted upon an incomplete view of the world, and the world has an incomplete view of independent schools. Their view does not yet “represent the world,” and the world’s view of independent schools does not represent them—yet. A clear, shared purpose among independent schools is a critical step in mitigating this challenge of perception. What should we place in our squared-off landscape? This is our purpose. Some of the most powerful teaching and learning anywhere takes place in independent schools. Independent schools come from different sources, have different potentials, and have something to both take away from and contribute to the dialogue about how to best educate young people who will navigate all the polarities and opportunities queued up over the generations that have preceded them.

The incomplete or simply incorrect view of any “other” leaves people believing in zombies of all types, for such views suck the life out and leave just a shell of what was taken. Incomplete views make it easy to create heroes and villains, winners and losers. Creating a shared purpose for independent schools gives permission for those leading and teaching and learning within independent schools to chafe against such easy worldviews and to hold themselves accountable not just in word but in deed to a purpose higher than themselves alone.

To meet this moment of punctuating equilibrium and flourish beyond it, independent schools must hold tightly to some transcendent strengths, and they must be nimble and brave enough to let go of what must be left behind. Purpose can create this permission—the permission to hold on and the permission to let go. ■



To read Ross Peters’ May 2020 essay about “zombie schools,” go to [elevate.explo.org/zombies-undead-colleges-and-schools](https://elevate.explo.org/zombies-undead-colleges-and-schools).

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INDEPENDENT SCHOOL FALL 2023

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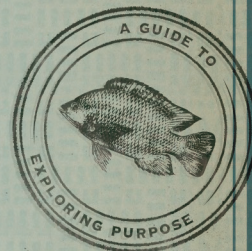
Ross Peters

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**SUBJECT**

How can we tell the accurate and complete history *and* assert the new truth and shared purpose of our schools?



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