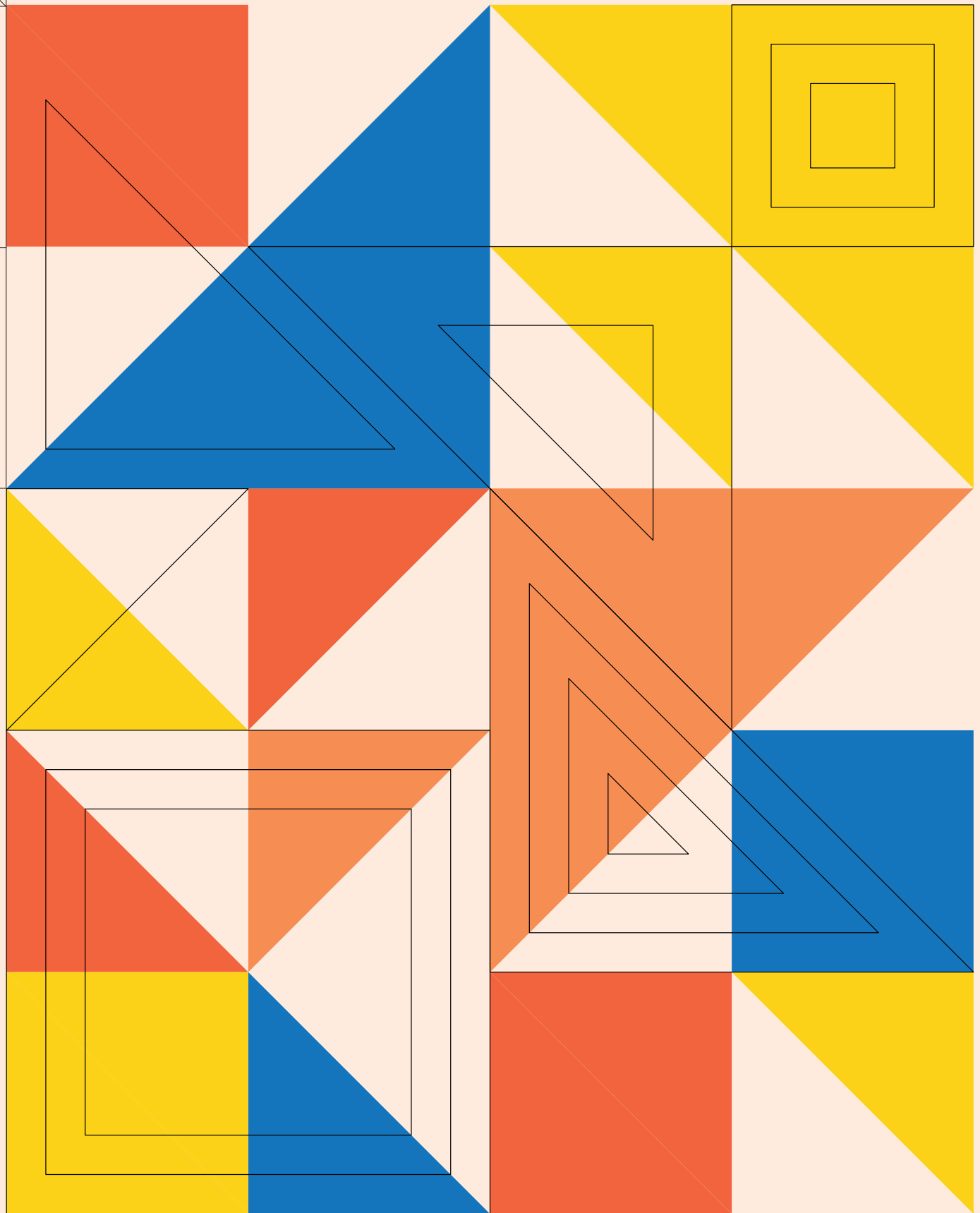


Intent and Purpose

By Ross Peters

Amid the current existential challenges in society and education—especially in the context of higher education—naming and claiming the purpose and value of independent schools has taken on new significance. Being clear, as a collective and on an individual basis, about our *why* is critical for schools in this moment and for the future



T

There was a concurrent sense that [higher education] contributed mightily to the civic good—that it made society culturally and morally richer. That feeling is now fighting for survival. So much over the past quarter century has transformed Americans' relationship to higher education in ways that degrade its loftier goals. The corpus of college lumbers on, but some of its soul is missing.

I stopped in my tracks when I read that in Frank Bruni's July 14, 2025, *New York Times* article, "I'm Watching the Sacrifice of College's Soul." I thought, does this represent independent schools too? Is the same true for the future of independent school education?

For years now, the purpose of education, specifically the purpose of independent school education, has been much on my mind. More recently, the drive to define independent school purpose and understand its relationship to the actual and perceived value of independent schools has been inexorably knotted with my reflections on the current state of our union.

The perceived qualities and value of American higher education, in particular, have been a uniquely powerful export of the United States. I recently asked the board of trustees at a school in Switzerland to name the most powerful educational brand in the world; they almost universally named Harvard, even though they were increasingly uncertain about the U.S. generally. Eight of their other top schools were also located in the U.S.

Whether or not these schools remain in such esteem is beyond the powers of my crystal ball; however, there is no doubt that American colleges and universities are facing a level of uncertainty that was not there before.

And whether we look at independent schools in isolation or as part of the larger narrative about American education, no one can deny that a crucible moment has arrived—a moment as significant as the one brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The dismantling of the Department of Education is an unambiguous and ominous signal.

Even after the administration took aim at Columbia and Harvard and even after books were removed from the Naval Academy's library, it was the forced resignation of Jim Ryan from the presidency of the University of Virginia that made me understand the breadth of the threat to education—a threat that extends to independent schools

just as much as it does to colleges and universities. To a significant degree, the fate of independent schools is tied to the fate of higher education.

This may seem like a leap of logic. It is not. The value of independent schools is inexorably linked to their higher purpose, and many of the events of the last few months have placed at risk several areas of what E.E. Ford Foundation Executive Director John Gulla calls the "covenantal" relationship of schools and students, forcing a reckoning with the purpose and thus the value of independent schools.

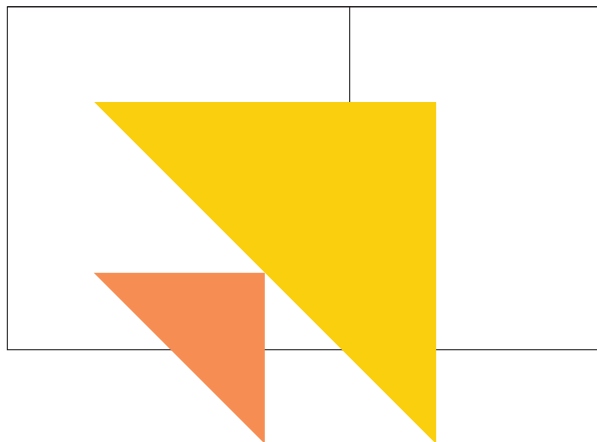
Despite their differences—or maybe even because of their differences—independent schools have a unique role to play in how education more generally finds its way through what appears to be an epochal moment in history. Independent schools may represent only a small voice by total number, but they nonetheless have a unique and important view.

Whether we look at independent schools in isolation or as part of the larger narrative about American education, no one can deny that a crucible moment has arrived.

Connecting Purpose and Value

When John Gulla and I co-founded The Purpose Project in 2021, we sought to ignite a wide-reaching conversation about how independent schools can proudly proclaim the purpose of independent school education to the world around us and hold themselves accountable to a standard higher than simply institutional sustainability. Among our challenges was to define the purpose of independent schools without using comparisons to other types of schools—not raising our value by diminishing the value of other types of schools.

Like nearly everyone who has committed their professional lives to serving independent schools, we believe that our schools exist for reasons greater than simply the transactional benefits for those who attend. These schools—and their students—are worth preservation and defense and, perhaps most importantly, a strongly voiced assertion of their purpose and value. John Gulla and I have each explored components of this in *Independent School* magazine: Gulla wrote “Why Do Independent Schools Exist?” for the Fall 2021 issue, and I followed in the Fall 2023 issue with “Resonant and



10/12

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Millbrook School

Millbrook, New York

Coed, boarding high school

On a cold February morning at the Trevor-Lovejoy Zoo at Millbrook School, Smithsonian Institution biologists collect sperm samples from a trio of endangered red wolves in the veterinary clinic. And they have some help—from students, for whom it’s a regular day, learning about conservation and immediately putting their knowledge to use to preserve the Earth’s biodiversity.

Similar scenes play out throughout the six-acre zoo—the only zoo located at a high school in the U.S. and accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA). A kinkajou tail tightens around the finger of a delighted freshman, an unbelievably adorable red panda eats juicy raisins from the hand of another student, and zoo community service student leaders prepare for a trip to the AZA annual conference or DC Advocacy Day, where they’ll meet with politicians on Capitol Hill to discuss wildlife conservation policy.

Across the street from the zoo, at the Hamilton Math & Science Center, student scientists work on independent science research class projects. In white lab coats, they complete college-level research to answer questions about zoo animal stress levels, the efficacy of dietary supplements, or the impact of human activity on the campus ecosystem. Their peers in AP Statistics analyze and visualize the data for publishing in research papers and posters.

Next door, in the Holbrook Arts Center, visual and performing artists are hard at work putting on Tony Award-winning plays,

recording music in a professional studio, and creating art. Outside, smoke rises from a ceramics kiln as students fire projects to display in the Warner Arts Gallery.

Across the Flagler Memorial Quad, students engage in respectful debates, and student leaders ensure everyone on campus is known, needed, and cared for. At the head of the quad sits the stately Flagler Memorial Chapel, where the community gathers for student-led assemblies, sharing announcements and music and recognizing the daily acts of kindness that make Millbrook, Millbrook.

A short walk through the heart of campus is all that’s needed to see that every space is designed to train service-minded leaders. Community service is embedded in our program as a class that meets four times weekly. These service groups pitch in to recycle, grow food on our farm, and make “Midnight Run” trips to serve the unhoused in Manhattan, providing countless opportunities for students to lead their classmates and even their teachers in making the world a better place. From dialogue to action, we devote our time to serving each other, our neighbors, and our planet.

Aaron Case
Writer/Editor

Relevant: Naming the Collective Purpose of Independent Schools.” The world has changed significantly since these articles were published, making the work of The Purpose Project more important than we could ever have imagined.

Creating and living into a shared independent school purpose statement is now more than a way to share the core value, the “why” of independent schools, both with those choosing our schools and those seeking to criticize them. It is a way of operating arm-in-arm and, perhaps most important in this particular moment, a way of announcing shared convictions. By vocalizing what independent schools have in common, each school will become individually stronger when the challenges arrive.

Ideally, a school’s actual value is an outcome grounded in its purpose as expressed in the resonance between its actions and mission and values. In 2024, we developed the Statement of Purpose for Independent Schools, which allows a wide range of schools to voice their

specific purpose. The precepts of the statement are the result of input from myriad sources over the last several years, and it is a combination of truth and aspiration:

Independent schools are engines of hope. Hope is not wishfulness; rather, it is a set of actions taken in the world.

In the words of environmental educator and activist David Orr, “Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up.” Independent schools embody hope and help create it in others. Inherent in the actions of hope is a desire to impact the world beyond the confines of school. Education at its best is always about hope, and independent schools strive to live to this truth.

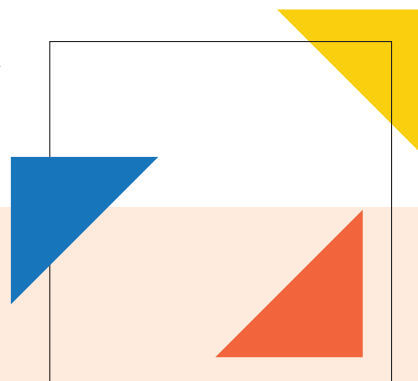
Independent schools are unencumbered by governing structures not directly related to their mission statements. The independent school board of trustees maintains a school’s devotion to its mission, as well as its long-term financial viability. This creates the potential to provide extraordinary learning environments for students, and it also

creates generative thinking and creative practices that can and do extend beyond the individual school itself.

Independent schools and their faculties share a belief in the power and necessity of critical thinking, and they have the institutional autonomy to allow their students to question, challenge, and revise their points of view.

Independent schools provide high-quality settings for deep, engaged, and transformative learning, providing students with the ability to see things as they could be.

Independent schools transcend mission differences through purpose, uniting and encompassing elements of intentionality. Purpose has an aim: It can inspire, and it can give meaning.



The Purpose Project

In the Fall 2023 *Independent School* article “Resonant and Relevant,” I stated that independent schools need greater shared tensile strength to face the remarkable challenges ahead—the sort of strength that comes from recognizing the aspects of purpose and value they all have in common. The Purpose Project seeks to play a role in creating a context where that might happen more successfully. I often use the language of what I call strategic permissions in my work with schools: The Purpose Project and its Statement of Purpose offer a broad set of permissions for schools and groups of schools to work together.

To help think through the purpose of independent schools and the potential of the Purpose Project, we met a number of times with a small group that has now been sunsetted. The group that provided specific feedback on the statement included Penny Evins, head of Holton-Arms School (MD);

Nicole Furlonge, executive director, Klingenstein Center at Columbia University; John Gulla, executive director of the E.E. Ford Foundation and co-founder of The Purpose Project; Stuart Gulley, former president, Woodward Academy (GA); and Dan Heischman, associate director, ELM Program, Yale Divinity School, and former executive director, National Association of Episcopal Schools; Donna Orem, past president of NAIS; and Meera Viswanathan, head of Ethel Walker School (CT).

The statement remains malleable. If you have input about the Statement of Purpose for Independent Schools, please share it; email me at rpeters@explo.org. Consider one or both of the following questions: What isn’t there that should be? And what is there that shouldn’t be?

Learn more about The Purpose Project at exploelevate.org/purpose-project.

Independent schools are places where students can make meaning, not simply accumulate knowledge.

To paraphrase the 19th century educator William Johnson Cory, schools are places one goes to not so much for knowledge as for arts and habits: for the habit of attention; for the art of expression; for the art of assuming, at a moment's notice, a new intellectual position.

We had several reasons for creating this Statement of Purpose for Independent Schools, but current realities—the impact of AI; a volatile global context; and increasingly interventionist local, state, and federal government—have made it even more urgent. Added to these factors is the probability that the challenges facing higher education will find their way to independent schools. Independent schools are not inoculated from challenges that would limit, undermine, or eliminate some of the key concepts of the Statement of Purpose. Critical thinking, for instance, creates a fertile ground for dissenting voices, voices that challenge the status quo or preconceived knowledge. Critical thinking seeks evidentiary support for conclusions and pushes back against arguments that lack logical premises.

The critical thinking and collaboration that are among the most important outcomes of an excellent education are also a requisite for independent school boards. The months and years ahead are going to require more of independent school boards than in the past. The most successful schools will have board members who are not only high functioning but also demonstrate clear alignment around purpose, mission, and values—the transcendent language of the school. This is an area of vulnerability in independent schools during such a contentious time. As schools move into more forms of uncertainty, they need to

Advent Episcopal School

Birmingham, Alabama

Coed, junior pre-K-8, Episcopal day school

At 1:00 on a bright Friday afternoon, the front doors of the school swing open, and a dozen eighth graders spill onto the sidewalk, their laughter weaving between the brick and marble buildings of downtown Birmingham. This is their rhythm now: Every Friday, they step out of the classroom and into the story of their city as part of their eighth-grade capstone experience called Discover Birmingham.

With a mix of energy and ease, they walk, sneakers scuffing the pavement and voices rising in waves. This week's destination is the Negro Southern League Museum, which preserves the rich legacy of African American baseball. Some have passed it before without noticing, but today they enter with purpose, eyes wide as they trace the faces of the Black Barons on the walls, hear the echoes of cheering crowds from Rickwood Field, and stand still before uniforms steeped in history.

The museum, which honors players who broke barriers and built community through the game, conveys a vital narrative of resilience, talent, and pride, deepening students' understanding of sports history and the broader struggle for racial justice in America. Students learn about legends like Willie Mays and Satchel Paige, discovering stories of grit and greatness, of players who carved out joy and dignity in a world that tried to deny them both. They listen closely, marveling at the carefully curated artifacts.

Afterward, they step back into the sunlight, the city

buzzing around them. Crossing the street, they saunter into Railroad Park, a 19-acre urban green space built on former industrial land. This park symbolizes Birmingham's renewal, connecting communities through nature, recreation, and the city's historic railroad roots. Bricks and tracks from the industrial space have been transformed into artsy walls and ample seating, making it a lively gathering spot. The class settles in the grass near the water, and students pull out colored pencils and drawing paper to craft sketches and reflect on the changing and beautiful landscape of their city.

These walks have become a thread linking place to purpose, classmates to companions, and past to present. In this hour of light and laughter, the city feels close—their city—theirs to know, to carry, and to shape. Next week, they will head to the rusty red Sloss Furnace, another powerful symbol of Birmingham's industrial past. For nearly a century, iron was made here, shaping the city's economy, workforce, and identity in the American South. Now, it marks the skyline as both a testament to the past and a current hub of cultural connection.

This unique Friday rhythm exemplifies how Advent Episcopal School lives its value proposition and commitment to teaching, learning, and belonging in the heart of downtown Birmingham.

Brooke Peterson

Assistant Head of School for Teaching and Learning

have complete board alignment on the understanding of purpose, value, and values, even when there is disagreement about how the school can live toward them. This is not a small point, nor is it a new one; however, it has never been more pressing than it is today. Boards have to understand that alignment is nonnegotiable even when constant agreement on the particulars may be elusive.

The Moment We Face

In June, when the president of the University of Virginia resigned under intense pressure from the Trump administration, the Justice Department, the governor of Virginia, and the university's conservative alumni, it was a watershed moment not only for the university but for education in our country. Ryan's forced resignation was a result of his perceived resistance to dismantling the university's diversity, equity, and inclusion programming.

Sometimes, it is possible to miss a watershed moment, to remain unaware of the larger significance of what is happening. At other times, we may be aware of a critical moment but are unable to stand against the tide's pull that it represents. And then there are moments when we are aware and may be able to stem the tide if—and only if—we are willing to stand fully behind our convictions and purpose. For this third possibility, several things are requisite:

courage, alignment, value, and values. Together with a clear, shared, and actionable purpose, they are the high ground we can stand on.

Which kind of watershed moment was Ryan's resignation? Certainly not the first kind; the larger significance could not be missed. His resignation was the first time a college or university president was removed specifically as a result of the intentional and partisan actions of a presidential administration paired with a similarly aligned state governor. That this happened at UVA, which was founded by the primary author of the Declaration of Independence to promote free and rational inquiry, makes it even more poignant and unsettling.

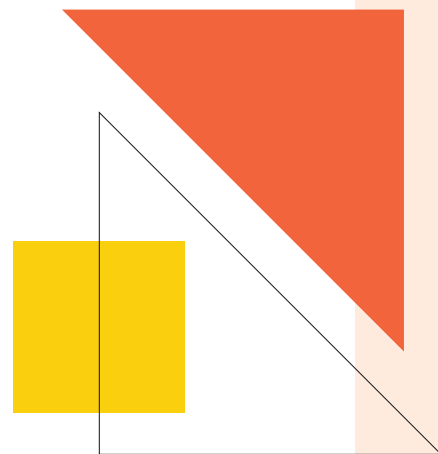
Was it the second option? Are American universities and colleges now so helpless and vulnerable, perhaps made so by the speed at which their intellectual freedom has been infringed upon, that they are unable to push back? Maybe. However, this seems unimaginable given the formidable resources—financial, intellectual, brand power—that these institutions have. Perhaps they are understandably frozen as a result of schisms within their governance structures and thus cannot form cohesive responses.

Higher education is not my area of expertise. I have spent my career working within and trying to help independent schools, but this watershed moment extends to independent schools possibly just as much as it does colleges and universities. Let that sink in. Independent schools have been busy trying to recover from the pandemic, anticipate the challenges and opportunities of AI, manage family expectations, understand cryptic enrollment trends, and move earnestly and humbly toward more equitable and inclusive communities out of histories that fell short. (This is the same list that college presidents have had before

them.) The independent school plate is more than full already, yet the threat to American colleges and universities is aimed at the heart of education, making the entire educational ecosystem equally vulnerable. Independent schools have made higher education the capstone; therefore, if higher education is fundamentally changed, secondary education will inevitably be as well.

Independent schools have at times behaved like the envious younger siblings of high-brand-strength institutions of higher education—envying their demand, their money, their intellectual capital. But independent schools have also been dependent on them, most visibly by borrowing from higher ed brand strengths to bolster their own through the product placement of their college lists. Even independent school marketing language overlaps with higher education in myriad ways. The stated values of each are often indistinguishable. Are independent schools shielded from the reckoning that higher education faces? How will they use their shared purpose to bolster their ability to preserve their purpose and value?

The good news is that, as students, teachers, and leaders in independent schools, we were trained for this—trained by extraordinary teachers and impacted by mottos that point to seeking and defending the possibility that we might rise to greater human flourishing. If we



Read More

Explore purpose and value in greater depth in *Independent School* magazine. Go to nais.org/independent-school to read:

- “Resonant and Relevant: Naming the Collective Purpose of Independent Schools,” by Ross Peters, Fall 2023
- “Why Do Independent Schools Exist?” by John Gulla, Fall 2021

drift from this, if we choose the neutral path, then we never actually held the convictions we have so often proclaimed, hung on the walls of our classrooms, printed on coffee mugs. Independent schools must not only understand their purpose but also conscientiously and vocally live it out so that their value to individual students and families, the dialogue of education, cannot be missed.

Only with clear purpose do we have something greater than perceived value. With purpose, we have defense against forces that may see independent schools as a threat simply because they claim independence from external control. Independent schools should be more than chaff in the wind. The watershed moment in which we find ourselves pushes us to rise above existing only as facsimiles of mission-driven institutions.

The venues of U.S. education—public, independent, higher, and professional—have always been the sinew of the American experiment. Education has both fertilized the vision of the nation’s founders and challenged each new generation to address its flaws. Schools have served as the seedbed for the republic. Claiming and living into independence is an American value, and independent schools need to lean into that part of their value now more than ever. ■

Ross Peters is founding partner of EXPLO Elevate, and a former head of school.

12/12

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Ashley Hall

Charleston, South Carolina

Coed pre-K and all-girls K-12 day school

It’s challenging to capture the value of a school in words, but at Ashley Hall, it is captured in three letters: PQV, which stands for *Possunt Quae Volunt*, meaning those who have the will have the ability.

I was first introduced to PQV during my interview when someone said “PQV, Cintra.” I didn’t know what it meant and hesitated to ask. Later, the former head of school explained that PQV is the motto at Ashley Hall used to celebrate and encourage someone and isn’t reserved for girls only.

Three years ago, during her commencement speech, English teacher Libby Russler talked about PQV, highlighting its power and versatility as three letters that can represent multiple parts of speech. One may use it as a noun—“she has PQV”—as an adjective—“you have PQV spirit”—or even as a valediction.

From my first encounter with PQV to enjoying Libby’s witty repartee on our school motto, I have been fortunate to see countless moments of PQV around campus. On any given Friday, our youngest learners in early school explore the outdoor classroom, remarking on their findings around campus, making connections at the bear cave and growing gardens that rival the likes of Butchart and Longwood. Meanwhile, lower school students start the day with a dance party, fueling their energy for their last day of learning before the weekend. Middle school students lead their peers in morning assembly, while upper school students manage their multitude of responsibilities with aplomb.

Beyond the picture-perfect palmetto trees lies a

remarkable story of resilience and community. In our highly relational school, teachers are stepping into new territory to support students who are leading affinity spaces for the first time, guiding them through the trials and tribulations of being trailblazers. Many teachers are juggling a myriad of stressors—everything from caring for aging parents to pursuing professional goals to managing health issues. Some celebrate being cancer-free, while others help students navigate their first encounters with grief following the loss of a beloved teacher. Our fearless leader and head of school, Anne Weston, can often be seen pulling weeds, only to dust herself off and take the stage to offer heartfelt greetings to students, families, and community members.

Every independent school has stories about campus spirit, but as I am now in my 10th school, I can enthusiastically say that the spirit of PQV is something special and unique to Ashley Hall. The love of school and affection for its purple and white colors far exceed school pride. It encompasses the powerful boost that comes with seeing PQV in oneself and others. This spirit is evident in the stories of students who have experienced remarkable moments, from achieving sports success to boldly taking the stage, or even sailing on a tall ship during a 10-day voyage through the Offshore Leadership Program.

Cintra Horn

Assistant Head of School
for Student Affairs