

■ ■ vision



serving and accrediting
INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

www.sais.org | [@SAISnews](https://twitter.com/SAISnews)



SAIS
6050 Peachtree Pkwy, Ste 240-199
Norcross, GA 30092
www.sais.org

© SAIS 2016

Vision

Preparing for the Future.....	2
Faculty: The Visionaries in the Classroom	4
The Spaces Where the Learning Takes Place	12
Bringing the Vision to Life.....	22
Threats to the Vision	30

*Vision is the art of seeing what
is invisible to others.
- Jonathan Swift*

VISION: Preparing for the Future

The very essence of leadership is that you have to have vision. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet.

Fr. Theodore Hesburgh

Every school lives by its mission statement. Words such as *academic excellence, leadership, growing in faith, serving others, and thriving in community* often festoon the hallways of independent schools, and serve as a set of guiding principles. Mission statements do not change often, but a school's vision is ever-evolving and refocusing to meet the needs of its students and to fulfill perhaps a need in its community.

Many schools desire to transform themselves in order to sustain themselves. With competition from charter, public, alternative, and even other independent schools, schools are somewhat caught in an arms race of increasing their offerings to be *the* school of choice in a given market. As expressions of their vision statements, many schools are re-examining their traditional campus design, the professional development programs they provide for their faculty, and scrutinizing both their curriculum and their pedagogy. As costs rise and the number of potential full-pay families decreases, schools must find the best way to serve the students, meet expectations of teachers and parents, and dedicate appropriate resources.

In seeking to be an entity that not only sustains but continues to thrive in the future, many independent schools, some of whom boast 100-year histories, also want to maintain a respect for their past and for the tried-and-true

methodologies that have worked well and will continue to meet the goals of the school.

As part of a future-minded thought process, many schools have crafted a vision statement to accompany their mission statement. While the mission is the stalwart set of principles that may date back to a school's founding, designed to govern a school for decades, a vision statement may accompany a new strategic plan, a capital campaign, or a milestone for the school, such as an anniversary.

In this booklet, we will look at three aspects of school life that are impacted by a school's vision: campus, people, and programs. In addition, we will examine potential threats to a school's vision. Using the examples of several SAIS schools who recently revisioned some part of themselves, we hope these models will offer insights and potential models for all independent schools.

Faculty: The Visionaries in the Classroom

By Christina Mimms, SAIS

Published October 2016

The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see.

Nelson Mandela

Teachers in independent schools serve as visionaries themselves. While they focus primarily on their own classrooms and the students who pass through their doors, they likely set goals they wish to achieve both for themselves and their students, and they seek out professional learning programs that will aid them in their work. They constantly look toward the future.

Schools may wish to hire individuals with certain credentials or experiences, or, as they implement new strategies school-wide, they may provide training for faculty in areas such as technology. Professional development for faculty and administrators can play a significant role in a school's vision, literally altering the day-to-day academic experience.

"As a head of school, I believe faculty and administrator professional development is critically important as people need to be supported in their ongoing advancement and learning so that the students and the school benefit from these opportunities," said the Rev. Dr. James Hamner, head of **St. Martin's Episcopal School** in Atlanta. "Ideally, teacher professional development is rooted in the strategic vision of the school as well as the school's mission so that the vision and mission are being embodied in the decisions regarding professional development."

St. Martin's teachers coordinate their professional growth plan with their principals. They submit requests to attend conferences, seminars, or other PD programs to a committee comprised of faculty members and the school's three principals. The committee reviews all requests, carefully considering the available budget

and the type of request. A teacher likely would not be approved to travel out of state every year to attend a conference but may be able to take advantage of local opportunities more frequently.

Funding is the biggest issue for many schools regarding their PD process. They would love to say “yes” to every request for every teacher; but with myriad needs around campus, it doesn’t always happen. “Schools and boards should recognize and make adequate provisions, in both time and money, to support the professional advancement of their school’s most valuable resource – their teachers,” Hamner said. “This is a key investment for a school’s long term well-being and success.”

Woodward Academy in Atlanta uses the Folio Collaborative software system to track the professional growth of its teachers. “It’s really important for them to grow as teachers,” said Marcia Prewitt Spiller, vice president and dean for academic affairs. “People are getting to see and do things that are helping them to be better teachers.”

While every teacher is guaranteed an approved PD request every three years, sometimes they can participate in programs more frequently. “We don’t say ‘no’ much,” Spiller said.



At **Cannon School** in Concord, NC, each division head oversees professional growth for his or her group of teachers. Head of Lower School Michelle Alexander incorporates an element of PD in every faculty meeting through a topic discussion or other presentation so that everyone can benefit. They also read a book each



summer and discuss it back on campus in the fall.

Teachers who wish to attend a conference submit a request to Alexander and she also provides PD suggestions to her teachers.

She oversees a budget, which recently grew. “Last year our director of business and finance looked at our PD funds and found that we were not in line with other schools, and so our budget was increased,” she said.

At **High Meadows School** in Roswell, GA, teachers attend a variety of professional development programs and are always encouraged to share their findings with fellow teachers. Along with attending conferences and training, teachers frequently observe other faculty at High Meadows as well



as at other schools around metro Atlanta. “There are so many benefits to pure observation,” said Kate McElvaney, director of educational advancement. “It doesn’t cost anything and it builds a collegial relationship. For teachers who are being observed, they can act as a mentor or leader, plus it causes them to reflect on what they are doing and explain their strategy.”

Teachers at High Meadows have been able to share their expertise with a wider audience through the new High Meadows Center for Progressive Learning, which hosts workshops, book studies, and speaker programs for parents and professionals in the community. McElvaney also serves as director of the center. In the past year, three teachers led workshops and this coming year, High Meadows will welcome author Dr. Madeline Levine for a speaking engagement. The center provides many resources for educators seeking applicable professional growth opportunities, and, for McElvaney and others at the school, it “is a dream come true,” she said. “We’ve had tremendous success so far and we want more people to continue to grow and learn along with other educators.”

While schools want to continue to develop their existing faculty, they frequently must hire new faculty due to retirements or turnover. What qualities are schools seeking in hiring new teachers? Whom do they envision their teachers to be?



At Woodward, some of those qualities are rather intangible. Spiller has certain questions in mind when it comes to new hires. “Are they happy people? Do they bring a good spirit to their role? Are they learners?” she asked. “We are looking for people who are high energy, motivating, and inspiring.”

While all the teachers possess skills in technology and 79% hold graduate degrees, finding people who are the right fit for the school community is the priority, according to Dr. Chris Freer, upper school principal at Woodward. “We maintain the backbone of a college prep environment, but we’re not afraid to be progres-

sive,” he explained. “We want people with experience, but we also might hire someone right out of school.” As part of its new strategic plan for 2016-2021, the school has set a goal to add more diversity to its faculty to reflect current student demographics.

Alexander seeks new hires with qualities that will help Cannon School in its growth and advancement. “Teachers need to be able to be flexible based on the needs of our children,” she said. “I’m looking for team players with a collaborative spirit. I need people who constantly want to get better, who are passionate about the age and the discipline they are working with, and who are truly child-centered.”



In future years, teachers may be called upon to make changes. Flexibility may be a required trait among all teachers. Some schools have done away with a single classroom for each teacher in favor of shared experimental classrooms. Libraries

no longer house just books but also computer labs, collaborative work spaces, design centers, and even coffee counters. While change can be new and exciting, principals and other school leaders must continue to support their employees, provide adequate funding for PD, and also ensure that any changes truly further the school’s mission and vision.



SAIS INSTITUTE FOR HEADS

June 27-30, 2017

This engaging, energizing, and nurturing retreat offers an opportunity for thoughtful dialogue and engagement with colleagues on key issues facing school heads.

Featuring Rob Evans and Michael Thompson.

www.sais.org/IH
#saisIH



SAIS ATHLETIC DIRECTORS CONFERENCE

January 12-13, 2017

Crowne Plaza Ravinia, Atlanta

A unique professional development opportunity for independent school athletic directors. Learn about strategic leadership and operational excellence with your SAIS colleagues.

www.sais.org/ADC
#saisADC



SAIS INSTITUTE FOR NEW TEACHERS

Atlanta, GA | July 10-12, 2017
Charlotte, NC | July 18-20, 2017
Nashville, TN | July 25-27, 2017

The Institute for New Teachers is a must-attend workshop for the teacher new to teaching or just new to the world of the independent school. In addition to the educational component, there is also an experiential one — each participant presents a videotaped lesson that is critiqued by peers and the experienced faculty. Past participants have rated this as one of their best learning and growing experiences.

www.sais.org/INT
[#saisINT](https://twitter.com/saisINT)

The Spaces Where the Learning Takes Place

By Christina Mimms, SAIS

Published October 2016

If you are working on something exciting that you really care about, you don't have to be pushed. The vision pulls you.

Steve Jobs

Many heads of school walk their campuses each and every day. Sometimes it's a casual stroll to check out the latest classroom happenings; other times the walk involves taking a hard look at facilities, perhaps with a board member or even an architect, and asking the hard questions: What is missing? What do we need to support this program? What will our neighborhood allow? And even, what should be torn down?

Campus improvements serve as a physical representation of a school's vision. Not only do they provide the space for students and faculty to flourish, with ample space for the programs that previously had no home on campus, but they also allow new dreams to be fulfilled.

At Atlanta's **Woodward Academy**, which first opened its doors in 1900, school leaders carry enormous respect for their school's founders and history, including the physical campus itself. With the age of the property, however, some decisions had to be made to raze some of the older buildings and make way for new, modernized learning spaces. Following a campus master plan that launched in 2000, construction has been a common sight over the past 15 years, with more ideas in the works.

Several new structures have been built using brick similar to the previous buildings and similar to many homes in the neighborhood. In some cases, Woodward was able to repurpose older elements to fit into the new facilities. For example, a beautiful old magnolia tree, which was a popular gathering spot for students, had to be removed to create space for the new upper



school humanities building (Jane Woodruff Hall). The building opened in August 2014 and recently received Gold Certification from the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program. The tree was re-crafted into two benches in the lobby of the new building, still serving as a place for students to sit and mingle, according to Dr. Chris Freer, vice president for student life and upper school principal. Interior lighting and elements from the old building's façade also were repurposed in new spaces.

Freer, who led the construction of the new building, included students in the project. "It gave me the opportunity to talk to students and faculty about what they wanted their building to be," he said.

The students even selected the desks for the new classrooms.





In addition, Freer has enjoyed the opportunity to work with the neighbors who reside near the campus, which include about 140 school families. “We’re respectful of our neighbors and their interests, and we’re going to do what’s right,” Freer said. For example, when the primary school, which is located at the edge of campus near homes, was torn down because it contained asbestos, it was rebuilt to fit into the neighborhood aesthetics.

At **Providence Day School** in Charlotte, NC, students also played a role in the visioning process for new construction on campus. The school’s \$27 million Charging Forward Campaign seeks to build a new 80,000-sq.-ft., four-story academic center; a 7,200-sq.-ft. campus gateway building to house admissions and college counseling; and a parking deck. Additional funds are

earmarked for the endowment and the annual fund.

Students contributed greatly to the project. “Every time we met with students, they injected new ideas,” said PDS Head of School Dr. Glyn Cowlshaw. “We were able to



make changes to the design based on student feedback.”

“I really loved this process because we were given freedom to say what we felt about the look of each space,” said PDS junior Olivia Comer, who participated on the building design committee. “We could be honest if something looked uncomfortable or if something was very appealing, and the people running the program seemed to really care and listen.”



The campaign resulted from plans that actually began ten years ago but with a downturn in the economy and a change of school head, the designs to replace older facilities were shelved. In 2011, with the arrival of new Head of School Dr. Glyn Cowlshaw and new Associate Head of School for Institutional Advancement Jeff Appel, the first order of business was to start the wheels turning again. Rather than picking up the dated plans, the school crafted a new, more elaborate vision for the property. “Within six weeks of my arrival I was speaking to the board about campaign plans,” Appel said.

The projects address academic needs as well as practical concerns. With little room to expand on the existing acreage, the multi-level parking deck will fit more cars on campus. And everyone wants to relocate students out of the “temporary” trailers that have been parked on campus for the past 23 years. “The buildings will create a new front door to the campus and serve

to improve pace of life for students and faculty alike,” Appel explained.

The admissions and college guidance offices currently are housed in the middle of the property, but the move to the new gateway center will allow visitors to meet staff at the campus entrance in a bright and welcoming space. The new academic building will not only replace the trailers but will elevate what happens in the classrooms each day. With learning labs, collaborative spaces, experimental spaces, a lecture hall, student exhibit spaces, and 35 classrooms, “these are spaces that fit the pedagogy,” said Derrick Willard, assistant head of school for academic affairs.

Despite all the excitement about a new space, however, some teachers expressed concern about losing the positive feelings they enjoyed in a single-story setup. “The teachers who work in the one-story building were trying to wrap their heads around moving to a four-story building, and they worried about losing their community,” Willard said. “So how do we capture that spirit? It’s about teaching and learning but also about culture and community.”

The answers to the teachers’ concerns came in some innovative design that addressed not only the look but also the feel of the new facility: the first floor will contain a café and a school spirit store, which will bring everyone to those areas. The second floor overlooks the first-floor lecture theater, thus including more people in activities happening there. Every floor includes some type of student lounge space, with a more spacious senior lounge on the third floor. With a lot of open space and many glass walls, no group will be cut off from any other. Everyone agreed that the designs for the new buildings far surpass the original ideas from 2005. “We’ve had a great opportunity to remaster the plan and live up to the vision,” Willard said. “We’ve had a second chance.” The new facilities are expected to open in fall 2017, making this a busy year of construction.



A new building project at **Mason Preparatory School** in Charleston, SC, directly responded to a need to compete with area magnet and charter school programs. Mason Prep previously served 1st-8th grades but added a Kindergarten program two years ago to be on equal footing with other local schools. The Kindergarten has been full or nearly full since it launched, according to Head of School Erik Kreutner.

In a \$1.2 million campaign, Mason Prep constructed a two-story, 14,000-sq.-ft. lower school building to house Kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grade



classrooms along with a lunchroom/multipurpose space. That room is used for parent meetings, grade-level performances, and lunch, bringing all the students to a community space and eliminating the need to eat lunch in their classrooms. “The new facility has given us a bright and airy space, larger classrooms, and great flexibility,” Kreutner said. “Current families really appreciate having something that all students can use, and prospective parents have been very impressed by the space.”

Phase II of Mason Prep’s campaign, which will launch in approximately five years, will include classroom enhancements, a full-sized gym with space for assemblies and graduation, four new classrooms, and a multipurpose room to house a lunchroom, performance space, and the extended-day program. The lunchroom/multipurpose room in the new lower school will be converted to 3rd grade classrooms.

Cannon School in Concord, NC, is enjoying its second school year in new and renovated spaces on campus. The \$8 million Building Bright Futures Campaign addressed several key needs, including a new performing arts center, a new strength training/condi-



tioning center, a new field house, a central green space, a new turf field, an expanded dining hall, and renovations in the middle school. “Our real need was to do better by our students,” said Todd Hartung, director of advancement. “We were a little behind our peer schools, and we were not on par with our competitors in athletics.”



Previously, the school had only a hall with a stage as its performing arts center; the athletic locker rooms were insufficient, and there were no concessions at home games; there was no science classroom in the middle school; the dining hall was too small; and the green space was a little lacking.

The campaign was fully funded by donors. While no funds went toward the annual fund, the school also did not take on any debt for the projects. A total of \$5 million was raised during a silent phase. “The community was excited,” Hartung said. “We rolled it out the right way, and it was clear we had thought this through. The students and families are proud of how the campus looks, and enrollment continues to grow.”

Sometimes facilities require upgrades or updates for better day-to-day functionality. This past summer, **Tuscaloosa Academy** (TA) in Tuscaloosa, AL, performed extensive renovations to its cafeteria. The previous lunchroom setup had a bit of an awkward layout and required students to seek out a staff member



in charge to pay cash for their lunch. Now the program operates with a swipe card and technology-based system with an improved layout and more food options, similar to a college cafeteria. Charges on the student's

account card are billed to parents. "This was long overdue for modernization," said Head of School Dr. Isaac Espy. "As your lunchroom goes, so goes the morale of your students; and it's important to have an attractive space."

Another important project completed this summer was an upgrade to the college counselor's office, which relocated to a former classroom. The move took her into a more private space where she can better discuss sensitive matters with parents and students, and also gave her a beautified and spacious home base. "We wanted her area to be more favorable toward meeting with families and students," Espy said. "The old space didn't allow that and did not reflect one of our greatest values at TA as a college prep school. Admissions and college counseling offices should always be attractive and inviting to parents."

TA utilizes its annual fund to pay for campus improvement projects. Past projects include a library renovation, classroom updates, and security enhancements. The school plans to refresh all upper school classrooms and phase in iPads and more STEM curriculum for all lower school students. Administrators also intend to upgrade the school phone system, which was damaged in the 2011 tornado that ripped through Tuscaloosa. Looking

toward its 50th anniversary in 2017, the school may launch a capital campaign for buildings to better support its arts and athletics programs with



a practice gym, a performance stage, and dedicated space for instrumental music.

When it comes to campaigns and any type of construction or renovation, there is one key to success: “Plan, plan, and plan more,” Cowlshaw advised. “It’s easy to focus on the amazing impact of bricks and mortar but you also must focus on teaching, learning, safety, and security.”

Flexible spaces give schools the best opportunity for future changes. A library may be a library one day but a learning commons the next. In five more years, it may turn into something else. What best serves the students now? What might a school plan for? It can be hard to predict future needs. Under the guidance of a mission and the inspiration of a vision, a school might say that its campus evolution is never finished.

Bringing the Vision to Life

By Christina Mimms, SAIS

Published October 2016

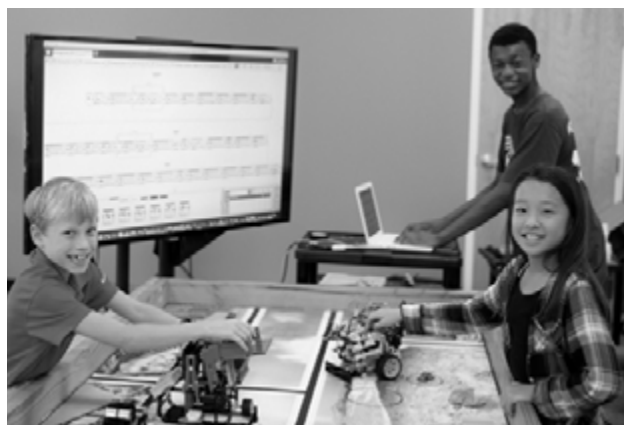
The only thing worse than being blind is having sight and no vision.

Helen Keller

When students arrive on campus to begin their classes, each day represents new opportunities. It can be a day to make a difference in the world or a day to try a new experiment in a lab. Even a test day might be a new adventure of sorts. Teachers are evolving into new roles, with new titles and different spaces where they can try new methods in pedagogy and see their students light up with excitement.

A school's vision translates to the classroom in myriad ways. Traditional schools have found ways to implement non-traditional elements, such as a STEM or STEAM curriculum; 1:1 technology; use of drones; library programs providing a host of services; gardening; 3D design; changes in assessments; and more collaborative and team-based learning experiences.

Leigh Northrup, dean of innovation and technology at **Cannon School** in Concord, NC, oversees a new ThinkTank that resulted



from the middle school renovations completed in 2015. In the space, students work on robotics, film and edit videos, design objects for the 3D printer, record and broadcast morn-

ing announcements, practice exercises for the Science Olympiad, work on the Apple computers, and sometimes just sit together for discussions. One 6th grade class built their own catapults, chain mail, and castles. Another group of students created a hydroponic garden to grow lettuce for lunchtime salads. A 7th grade science class crafted the solar system to print on the 3D printer. An 8th grade science class built individual cell phone microscopes.



“There is a constant flow of activity,” Northrup said. “This has been the most exciting time of my career.” Students come in before school, after school, and during open lab times to work on projects. Teachers sign up to bring their classes to the labs as well. Northrup does not teach classes but serves in a support role to teachers and students, consulting with the different programs and activities. He manages all of the ThinkTank’s resources. “I’m rarely sitting,” he laughed.

While the ThinkTank is utilized primarily by middle school students, upper school students at Cannon also enjoy unique learning opportunities through a new Winterm program in which they have the opportunity to travel locally or abroad, participate in college-level academic classes, or perform service work. As part of their regular course work, seniors may sign up for a self-designed independent study course to explore a new interest. Working with a teacher, students develop their own course; past topics included veterinary medicine, guitar, songwriting, American Sign Language, Arabic, and novel writing.

In a dramatic change, Cannon eliminated midterm exams in favor

of a “midterm experience,” according to Fabio Hurtado, upper school dean of academics. Instead of sitting through three hours of a written exam, students participate in an activity related to the course. For example, students might work through 17 different stations in the chemistry lab and be graded on their hands-on knowledge. The “experience exam” also serves the school’s vision to create autonomy and competence in their students. “We want students to choose to enter the learning process, and teachers have to be able to empower their students,” Hurtado said.

A flexible type of learning experience – and a flexible space – serve students well as schools look to transform for the future. At **Jackson Academy (JA)** in Jackson, MS, classrooms and other learning areas have been modified with movable walls and flexible furniture that allow students to work in groups and collaborate more easily. “We’ve learned more in the last ten years about how the brain works and we need to adapt to that and reach students in new ways,” said JA President Cliff Kling. “If we don’t adapt, we’re doing a disservice to our students.”

The STEM instructors at JA were given a great opportunity to customize curriculum for their own goals, from early learners through middle school. Several years ago, after seeing other innovative projects in other school divisions, teacher Holly Collums wrote a detailed proposal for a STEM-like lab for grade K3 at JA. The space was approved, funded, and opened in 2014 as a SMART lab with



sensory bins, a light table, work tables, and other activities. SMART stands for sensory motor science, manipulative-based math, applied art, reading readiness, and technology time. Teachers bring their

students to the lab twice weekly where they delve into an hour-long activity related to their regular classroom curriculum. For example, if students are studying the letter D in K3, in the SMART lab Collums might have the students go on a dinosaur fossil dig, make their own fossil impressions for art, play a technology-based game with the letter D, and make dinosaur footprints with numbers on them for a math lesson.

By the time students move into the lower school STEM lab, the curriculum feels comfortable to them and they can do more advanced work at younger ages. Both lower and middle school students do a lot of hands-on, collaborative projects in their respective STEM labs.



Programmatically, the goal is to teach kids a STEM curriculum, but also much more in terms of big-picture life skills. Working in teams teaches students a lot about responsibility and leadership. “Some kids hang back and some kids get bossy,” said lower school STEM instructor Cliff Powers. “It can be hard for kids to compromise their vision but over time they learn to appreciate others and community. It’s the journey that is most beneficial.”

While students enjoy new and interesting programs in the classroom during the school day, they also revel in off-campus opportunities to learn, grow, and explore. Many students at JA participate in the Soar program, which launched years ago as a 7th grade rafting trip and evolved into an elaborate program now serving 5th through 12th grades. The program focuses on ethics, faith, service, and leadership throughout the school, and students take part in



outdoor activities that develop their teamwork and leadership skills. For example, the 6th grade travels to the Heifer International Global Village in Perryville, AK, where they learn about poverty and world hunger. Fifth

graders canoe down the Mississippi River and spend the night on a small island. Seventh graders still take the rafting trip but also go on an adventure ropes course and a canoe trip.

The experiences truly impact students, according to Nic Henderson, associate dean of the middle and upper school at JA and chair of the Soar committee. “The 6th graders bring back empathy but they also come back inspired to do things for other people,” he said. “They recognize that they take some things for granted.” Henderson has even seen students picking up trash around campus after some of the camping trips. “They come back with more of an appreciation for nature,” he said.

The name of the Soar program is based on verse Isaiah 40:31, a favorite of retired teacher and coach Ray Higgins, who started the 7th grade rafting trip. *“But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”*

Soar is just one example of the character and ethical education in place throughout school life and an example of the JA mission to “inspire and equip each student to lead a life of purpose and significance.”

Woodward Academy in Atlanta offers an Outdoors Club that takes students on a variety of adventures. “Sometimes impactful learning takes place outside the classroom,” said Dr. Chris Freer, upper

school principal. In recent years, the group has gone backpacking in Jacks River Falls in Georgia, skiing in Colorado, camping at Fort Mountain State Park in Georgia, and hiking in Caesars Head State Park in South Carolina.



St. David's School in Raleigh, NC, developed a program called the Innovation Warriors Initiative (IWI) to provide students with opportunities in personal growth and leadership. The goal is for students to develop skills in communication, collaboration, and empathy by creating innovative solutions for world problems. Now in its fourth year, students in lower school through upper school participate in the program.

Designed for lower school through upper school, the Initiative is built upon the four cornerstones of design thinking, innovation, entrepreneurship, and servant leadership. In varying age-appropriate executions, students are tasked with identifying a problem in the world, and then designing an innovative solution. Lower school students work as a whole class while 5th graders work individually and then break into team projects that are actually judged by professionals in the community. Sixth grade and older students work on projects in their classes, all with a problem-solution approach. Seniors participate in an independent study course.

Past projects from students across the different grade levels include apps, an electric car, mosquito nets, water conservation plans, and a water filter. Students must address three key words for their projects: "Is it desirable, feasible, and sustainable?" asks Middle School Principal Neville Sinclair.

Empathy is another critical component of the lessons that teachers try to impart through the program. “We want students to look outside their own circumstances and think of others,” said Scott Shaw, upper school principal. “It’s more than an initiative, it’s a way of thinking that complements the kind of education we want students to have — to be curious and courageous and to make an impact on others.”

It can be a tall order to provide students with a robust and innovative curriculum that includes cutting-edge STEM or STEAM programs, a healthy dose of fine arts, a smorgasbord of athletic and extracurricular offerings, leadership development, nurturing of social and emotional skills, and also teach them to live by the highest ethical standards. And somehow, schools have to accomplish all of that within a budget — perhaps the only thing that limits their vision at times.

Fundraising for facilities and programs often can be an easy sell. Construction of a shiny new building or the launch of a dynamic new program excites parents and other donors, but sometimes cutbacks provide another way to make room for new growth. After all, if few students show interest in once-popular programs such as Mandarin Chinese or a film-making club, then perhaps those resources can be redirected to the latest demands.

“It is the nature of education to add and not take away,” said Dr. Stuart Gulley, president of Woodward Academy. “There are market sensitivities that schools can be cognizant of. We need to manage demand and eliminate where there is not demand. Courage is required to eliminate programs.”

Indeed, schools do not want to raise eyebrows or suggest instability by cutting from school life. Schools also do not want to invest in a questionable venture or implement a change for change’s sake. With 2,700 students on two campuses in its charge, Woodward frequently conducts pilot programs with smaller groups before launching new programs school-wide.

“Does the program enhance learning? We try a pilot and if it doesn’t work, we don’t do it,” Northrup said regarding Cannon School’s decision-making process. For example, Cannon did not purchase SmartBoards as many schools have done in recent years. “It’s not really enhancing learning or communication. We moved on to other things,” Northrup said.



A change in Cannon’s lower school is expected to bring better results this year. “We spent a lot of money on standardized tests but they weren’t giving us what we needed,” said Lower School Head Michelle Alexander. Instead, Cannon is implementing the Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP) assessment program for 2016-17.

The very nature of independent schools as tuition-funded, private entities creates an expectation that schools will be the standard-setters in the greater world of education. Where would cutting-edge evolutions exist, if not in independent schools? Some changes may be student-driven but parents expect a “wow” factor both in the classrooms and in the entire operation of the school. They are looking for a powerful day-to-day learning experience, whether in a STEM lab or a library commons or on a campground.

“Our constituents are going to demand change, and transformation in education is ongoing,” said JA Head of School Pat Taylor. “The independent school community has an opportunity to change education in the U.S. by being a leader and by being flexible to change what we know we need to change.”

Threats to the Vision

By Christina Mimms, SAIS

Published October 2016

Where there is no vision, the people perish. Proverbs 29:18

While everything seems possible and positive when a visioning process is completed, a school would be remiss not to look at the flip side. What threatens the vision?

Ambiguity. The vision statement must be very clear so that all constituencies can understand it and so that the statement can serve as a guide in the day-to-day life of the school. A vision statement can be quite useless if there is no “walk” to go along with the “talk.”

“Be careful in the phrases that are used in the vision and have clear definition around it,” said **Woodward Academy** President Dr. Stuart Gulley. His school’s vision statement says that “Woodward Academy will be a national model in college preparatory education” – a phrase that has left a few folks sometimes asking questions.

“*National model* represents excellence in everything we do, every class and every co-curricular,” Gulley said. “But how do you know when you get there? Is it something you ever fully achieve?”

Lack of a clear plan. A strategic plan is an essential partner to a vision statement. Most schools adopt a five-year plan with measurable goals. “You can’t put together a strategic plan without vision,” Gulley said. “The strategic plan provides details for how you achieve the vision.”

While communication plays an important role in the activation of vision on a school campus, other practical issues – things beyond a school’s control – may threaten a school’s ability to achieve all that it wishes to be.

Curriculum Change. While generally positive, curriculum change can have unintended consequences. Certain ideas that schools experiment with worry some administrators. For example, while **Jackson Academy** Head of School Pat Taylor favors alternate types of assessments, he is concerned about how those will impact college admissions for high school seniors. “In schools of the future, there will not necessarily be the same grading system as in the past,” he said. “But how will colleges read that?”

Thinking more broadly, Taylor said that independent schools must be cautious with any new programs, whether trying new assessments or implementing new curriculums. “There are periods when we see a lot of initiatives and then a period where initiatives need time to take root,” he said. “Flash-in-the-pan initiatives are usually short-lived.”

Taylor would still encourage independent schools to think innovatively and test new ideas. “Sometimes independent schools don’t think independently enough,” he said. “Independence has a real meaning and sometimes we forget that meaning.”

Rising Tuitions. In large markets, some K-12 schools now charge \$25,000+ annually in tuition. For a family with multiple children enrolled, the choice to attend an independent school includes a significant price tag, and the number of “full-pay” families is shrinking. How can schools continually prove that their brand is worth the cost, especially with unpredictable dips in economic stability?

“Will the market sustain it?” asked Gulley. Even with a goal to attract the best and brightest faculty with top salaries, he said, “It is a concern.”

Location/Traffic. Traffic is a problem in larger cities. For example, Woodward attracts students from 23 counties around metro Atlanta. Of the 2,700 students, 500 ride a Woodward bus to school and 400 more commute via the city MARTA system. A seat on the

private bus costs families an additional \$4,000. The school has studied traffic patterns around the city, even going so far as to send empty buses on various routes to analyze the travel. To allow sufficient time for students to get to school, the day starts at 8:20 AM; the day ends at 3:30 PM and the last bus leaves at 6:10 PM. On Fridays, however, the school day ends at 3:15 so that students can load earlier and get on their way faster. Gulley said that their studies showed that the 15 minutes made a significant difference on Friday afternoons.

Knowing that many parents drive through traffic to campus to drop off and pick up their children, as well as to attend school events, Woodward plans to create a space for parents on campus, addressing their need for a place for fellowship as well as to conduct work during the day. Parent events may be held in the space, or parents might relax there with a cup of coffee after morning drop-off while they wait for traffic to subside.

Transportation Costs. The cost of bus transportation is another factor. While parents pay for the private bus service offered at Woodward and other schools, administrators budget for transportation of students to and from athletic events, field trips, and extracurricular activities. Some schools must travel 50, 80, or even 100 miles to reach an athletic competitor. Maintenance, gas, and insurance dollars add up quickly when supporting multiple sports teams.

At the **Westfield School** in Perry, GA, athletes and their families are accustomed to traveling about an hour to reach their games in Statesboro, Milledgeville, Valdosta, and even Augusta. With recent decreases in fuel costs, the school has experienced some savings. "It's still an expensive venture," said Head of School William Carroll. "It's just a matter of planning and anticipating what's coming up."

The school owns five buses, two of which are used exclusively to transport athletes. The school pays stipends to a number of facul-

ty members who own commercial licenses to operate the buses and hires other drivers as needed. Westfield athletic staff work closely with athletic directors from the opposing teams to arrange the best possible schedules. For example, Westfield rotates hosting duties with **Augusta Preparatory School** and **Westminster Schools of Augusta** so that Westfield does not have to travel to Augusta (a 150-mile trek) twice in the same season.

Another drawback of the distance between competing schools, particularly during playoffs, is that students often must depart campus before the end of the school day, causing them to miss class. “This has been an issue at every school where I have ever worked,” Carroll said. “It’s a dilemma with no easy answer.”

While that issue may not have a budgetary impact, it might affect a student’s performance or require a teacher to provide time for extra help or for a makeup test. The long travels also diminish a student’s at-home study/homework time.

Healthcare. Many independent schools employ fewer than 100 teachers and administrators and often experience a challenge in finding healthcare insurance companies that want to support such small numbers. Some school employees may be on a spouse’s health plan, further reducing the number of eligible enrollees. In addition, the Affordable Care Act has pulled many Americans away from employer-sponsored plans. Schools likely have to bounce around to different companies every few years to get a better price and frequently experience cost increases.

Episcopal School of Knoxville in Knoxville, TN, had budgeted for a 25% increase from its healthcare provider for this fiscal year and instead was handed a 104% increase this past summer. With very little time to shop around for a new plan prior to the start of the school year, Head of School Dr. Jack Talmadge and the school board pulled funds from reserves to cover part of the increase but also had to impose a higher deductible for employees on the plan.

Going forward, the school is researching health savings plans, health reimbursement accounts, and other options under employer-provided healthcare, which the school would like to continue. “We have to remain competitive with county schools for hiring teachers,” Talmadge said.

Being mindful of possible threats to any aspect of a school’s plan for growth and success shows responsible governance. It can be easy to get caught up in the excitement of a new brand launch or funds pouring into a campaign, but a cautious celebration is prudent before all is truly said and done. “We have two more years remaining in our campaign and we can’t lose sight of the goal. We must make sure we continue to tell the story to new members of the community,” said Dr. Glyn Cowlshaw, head of **Providence Day School** in Charlotte, NC, which to date has met 77% of its \$27 million campaign goal. “Our biggest challenge is resting on our laurels.”

And that is true of any school, in campaign season or in ordinary time. An economic downturn, shrinking populations, or a natural disaster can quickly alter an independent school’s plans. Strong leadership and smart strategy sustain independent school education, year after year. With vision, there is provision.

Thank you to the SAIS Member Schools that participated in this project.





What people are saying about the
SAIS Institute for the Head's Assistant:

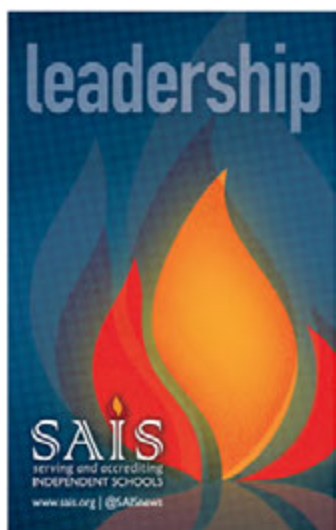
*"This was the best professional opportunity
I will attend all year."*

*"We rarely have an opportunity to share with (or hear
from) others who are wearing the same shoes."*

*"It was enlightening — and even therapeutic — to
mingle with peers who face
similar demands and experiences."*

June 20-21, 2017
Atlanta

www.sais.org/IHA
#saisIHA



October, 2012



October, 2013



October, 2014



October, 2015

sais.org/Booklets



opportunities to lead
sais.org/events

