

Twenty-Five Factors Great Schools Have in Common

BY PATRICK F. BASSETT

Jim Collins, former Stanford Graduate School of Business professor and current best-selling author (*Built to Last*, *Good to Great*, *How the Mighty Fall*, and now *Great by Choice*), keynoted at the 2007 NAIS Annual Conference in Denver just after he had published *Good to Great* (and the nonprofit supplement, *Good to Great for the Social Sector*). No one who heard him speak, or read *Good to Great*, would forget the power of his teaching analogies, especially his “hedgehog concept” (being great at one big thing), “technology accelerators” (pioneering the right technology for your hedgehog concept), and most saliently for all organizations, the notion of getting “the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats.” Five years later, I keep hearing myself reciting this latter point, and keep hearing others say it as well.

With all the fanfare and attention to his six principles that propel corporations to greatness, the most important takeaway for schools appeared in the social sector monograph: without profit as a demonstrable metric by which to measure greatness, the social sector must invent its own proxies for profit — in effect, define “greatness” in its own terms. One of the salient examples he uses is the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, with its focus on artistic excellence (its hedgehog concept). How does one measure something as subjective as artistic excellence? For the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, it means tracking a variety of indicators: the number of standing ovations, the demand for tickets, the sold-out performances, the invitations to prestigious festivals, the debut performances in Cleveland, and comparisons in the press to the world’s great orchestras. Such measures of greatness give us a sense of how we can best define greatness — find our own proxies for profit — in the independent school universe.

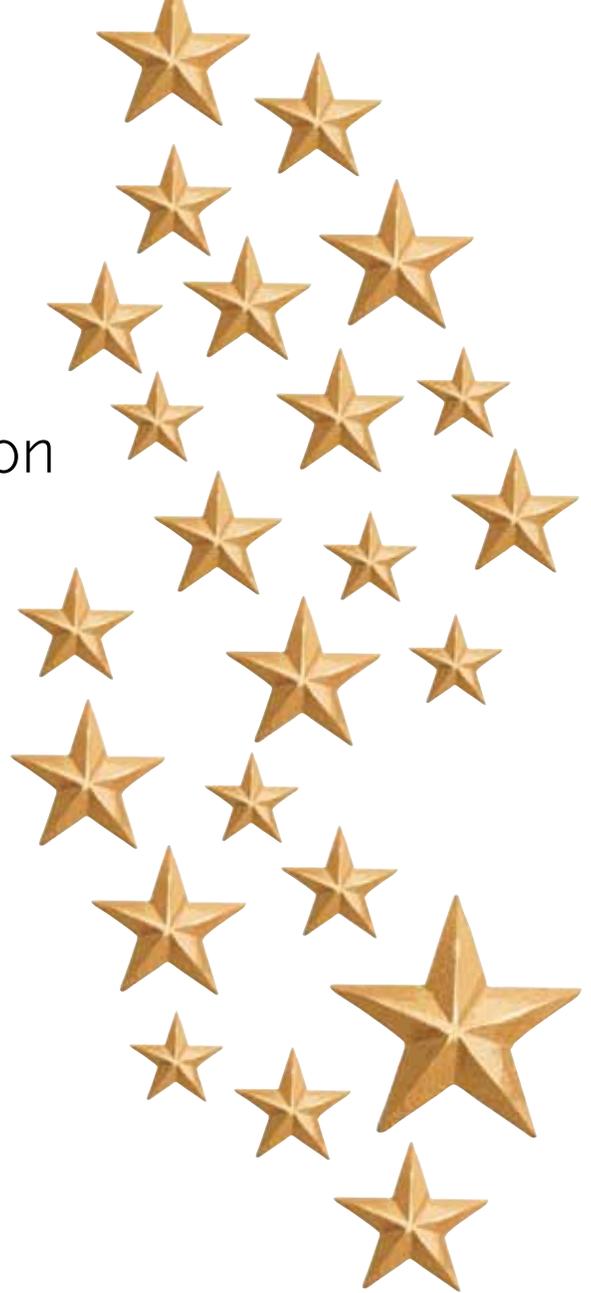
What indicators of greatness do independent schools have in common? In my 42 years in the business of independent schools as teacher/coach, administrator, head of school, and association executive, I’ve managed to visit and get to know hundreds of schools throughout the country and the world. I’ve seen the

unique ways in which each school finds its path to greatness — bringing to life its distinct mission, philosophy, and ethos. But I’ve also observed the qualities that great schools share.

What follows, then, are 25 measures that strike me as central to great independent schools. Given the wide variety of independent schools, certain elements may resonate more strongly than others. Some elements may not apply at all, while others not listed might jockey for our attention. But I hope this list will help fuel the conversation within schools about how we think about our work, and how we strive over the years for continued excellence.

Accordingly, in my humble opinion, great schools do the following:

1. **Create and perpetuate an intentional culture** shaped by the adults, rooted in universal values of honesty and caring, and relentlessly oriented toward achievement.



2. **Eclectically capitalize on the best ideas about what works in schools**, those gleaned from the past as well as those deemed best for the future.
3. **Manifest a coherent philosophy of learning for students**, be it constructivist, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, Montessori, strengths-based, progressive, traditional, I:1, or whatever — so long as it remains open to ongoing discussion, testing, and constant refinement.
4. **Make a substantial commitment to professional development for faculty**, expecting teachers to grow as learners themselves and to develop mastery in the art and science of teaching.
5. **Develop collegial means to professionalize the profession**, such as rounds, lesson study, digital faculty portfolios, and the like, adopting professional development strategies that are prevalent in high-performing schools and countries around the world.
6. **Adopt a big vision**, one that continually refreshes itself in order to sustain the enterprise along the five most strategic continua: demographic, environmental, global, financial, and programmatic.
7. **Define the school's "playground" in expansive ways**, beyond the school's borders into the local community, the region, and the world.
8. **Demonstrate the public purpose of private education** locally, nationally, and globally through a variety of means, including modeling experimentation to improve schooling and partnering with the public sector at the school and university levels.
9. **Embrace stewardship of the school and its resources**, renewing and growing the school's physical, financial, and human resources to achieve financial equilibrium.
10. **Enable constituents to donate their time and treasure consistently** by providing the metrics on school volunteerism, financing, and eleemosynary benchmarks, and by telling the school's story in powerfully moving ways.
11. **Pay it forward** by building endowment and thereby sustaining intergenerational equity so that the next generation of families will be at least as well served by this generation as the current generation of families has been by its predecessors.
12. **Commit to diversity of all kinds and at all levels** to create the conditions and school culture so that students learn how to appreciate and map differences, then navigate and ride the waves of demographic change.
13. **Redefine the ideal classroom setting as one of intimate environment**, not small classes, since the former can occur in schools or classes of any size and even online, and the latter can miss the point of intimacy.
14. **Create a financially sustainable future by means other than persistently large annual tuition increases**, recognizing that being the best value, rather than the highest price in town, offers the strongest value proposition.
15. **Achieve extraordinary parent and alumni participation in annual giving**, reflecting superb volunteer organization and execution and a grateful constituent base.
16. **Adopt and fund "3 Rs" talent strategies that position the school to recruit, retain, and reward** the best and brightest teachers, school leaders, and board members.
17. **Compensate staff members fairly and competitively related to performance and contributions** to the well-being of the school and in acknowledgment of the staff's tremendous responsibility for and impact on students.
18. **Provide leadership paths for teachers** wishing to stay in teaching, rather than jump to administration, by creating a host of academic and task-force leadership roles.
19. **Track student outcomes over time**, beyond the years in one's own school, seeking data on how well the school prepared its students for the next legs of their life journeys — be it the next levels of education or life beyond.
20. **Seek data to make data-rich (not opinion-rich) decisions**, embracing former Education Secretary Margaret Spellings's observation, "In God we trust; all others, bring data."
21. **To avoid unnecessary distractions, educate the board and parents thoroughly** about how schools work, and about what student and parent needs a school can and cannot meet.
22. **Market their schools with "sticky messages"** that tell a compelling story.
23. **Know their priorities when making difficult decisions**, ranking first "what's best for the school," then "what's best for the student," then "what's best for all other interests."
24. **Know that one's mission-match with a prospective student (on the intake) and matriculating students (on the outtake) is the controlling factor** in admissions and secondary school or college placement.
25. **Find the right balance for the drivers of financial aid to achieve school goals** of diversifying the school, managing enrollment, and attracting a talented class of students.

All schools have the capacity to become great schools. All they need is the focus and leadership to create the proper conditions for the board, school leadership team, staff, and constituents to do so.

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