



# THE Head's LETTER

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FROM YOUR COLLEAGUES

## Reflections after Visiting 150 Schools

Over the past two years, I've interviewed school heads, visited the schools they lead, talked with teachers and students, observed classes, toured campuses, and examined audited financial statements so as to get to know the schools that are pursuing proposals to the Edward E. Ford Foundation. I've visited more than 150 schools in 40 states and what follows is some of what I've seen.

In all of these schools, I was impressed by the talent and commitment of the teachers I have met. Intelligent, interesting and hopeful, they are devoted to their students, love the work they do and are profoundly motivated by what they know to be a demanding, challenging, but immensely gratifying profession. The belief and confidence teachers have in "their" students rings out loudly and sounds a beautiful truth in independent schools throughout the land.

Many schools continue to wrestle with the implications of the *new normal* of the post 2008-09 economic world. Seven years on, some schools now see increased interest and demand, but many more face a less certain and secure future. There is a growing trend among some independent schools to enroll full-pay international students without careful consideration of the short- and long-term implications of this practice.

Some of these phenomena can look more like the Wild West than a sustainable enrollment strategy. Competition for the strongest, most talented students in some areas of the country is producing increases in non-need based "merit aid" awards, a practice that, regrettably, isn't always honestly reflected in the school's official statements concerning aid. This can be especially true in terms of talented student/athletes.

There is a broad, clear and encouraging growth in the commitment to globalism, which I see reflected in curricular developments, partnerships, diploma distinctions, and exchanges. Schools are eager to embrace a more cosmopolitan orientation, less marked than in the past, by a version of American exceptionalism.

Technological tools continue to revolutionize many areas of independent school work and STEM/STEAM programs, maker spaces, and design-thinking initiatives proliferate while entrepreneurial programs connecting schools and their students to the communities outside the schoolhouse walls are as common as computer labs and laptop-carts once were.

There are very exciting developments taking place as the transformative power of a wired world is harnessed by teachers who remain deeply committed to a traditional liberal arts approach and to fostering different ways of knowing. I've come

to think of schools—places where students once came seeking knowledge—as becoming communities where students come to make meaning.

The theme of sustainability—environmental, financial, philosophical—can be found in schools that are thriving as well as those that are struggling. Albeit with exceptions, I have seen a particular pattern that does deeply concern me. Those schools most willing to look courageously and clearly at what it is they do and why, schools that are the most willing to "see things as though they could be otherwise," tend to be the schools that do so out of necessity. They are frequently schools in difficult economic markets, schools faced by a belief that if they don't innovate they will evaporate.

Too many of the strongest schools I've seen, as measured by demand, selectivity, financial resources, and broader reputation, are much more conservative, more wedded to preservation of the past, much of which is certainly worth preserving, but some of which needs to go.

Too many schools carry too much debt. I wish I could halt the facilities arms race. Some building projects are necessary updates to tired facilities or make possible certain programs not conceivable without them, but too often what gets spent on bricks and mortar is money then not spent on teacher salaries and financial aid.

Advances in neuroscience, changes in the way teachers see the importance of social-emotional factors in learning, the growing emphasis on the (poorly named) "non-cognitive" skills are all positive trends that I hope continue apace.

I once thought too much was made of the importance of a school's mission statement. The diversity in the more than 150 schools I have visited reminds me that choice is a good thing. There aren't many universal truths in schools but we do know that one size does not fit all when it comes to education. The best education is tailored to the needs of each individual student.

Finally, what is clear to me as a result of my travels and the thousands of conversations is that good schools are built by good teachers who establish relationships with their students that are more art than science, and allow for the opportunity to make a lasting difference.

The Edward E. Ford Foundation is dedicated to encouraging and improving secondary education by independent schools. Mr. Gulla was appointed executive director in 2013; he is the former head of The Blake School.



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