



# SCHOOL MISSION & CULTURE

**What's the mission  
of the school you want  
to build?**



**The  
Super School  
Project**

**A school's mission  
is grounded  
in values and  
beliefs about  
what constitutes  
effective  
education.**

**By identifying  
goals and  
developing a  
shared mindset  
we can build a  
framework for  
better teaching  
and learning.**

**How will you  
develop a culture  
that guides the  
direction of  
your school?**

# THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

You will be designing a school from the ground up. What goals for student learning will define and motivate your school's community?  
How will you assess student success?

These goals should also establish how your school creates high expectations for learning and behavior, and for students' success beyond high school.

How will you cultivate consistent, productive, respectful relationships among students and adults? How will you establish an inclusive and supportive community and a sense of belonging among students, teachers, parents, and others?

# DESIGNING SCHOOLS WITH A PURPOSE



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**FACT: An effective  
XQ school has  
clearly articulated  
learning goals.**

A close-up portrait of a young woman with long, dark, wavy hair and brown eyes. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The text is overlaid on the top left of the image.



# Maintain focus on what really matters.

To deliver on your mission, you will need the support of a diverse range of leaders, supporters, community groups, and institutions at all stages of the journey. To do this, we recommend using three tools.

**Mission Statement:** A short, memorable, powerful statement that defines the animating purpose of your school. **Intended Impact:** A statement capturing your point of view on two simple questions: Who does this benefit? What will these benefits deliver to them? **Theory of Change:** A set of beliefs about how your design will deliver the intended impact.

Let's look at the original 2004 design for Harlem Children's Zone.

**Mission Statement:** "To improve the lives of poor children in America's most devastated communities."

**Intended Impact:** Harlem Children's Zone's objective will be to equip the greatest possible number of children in the HCZ project to make a successful transition to an independent, healthy adulthood, reflected in demographic and achievement profiles consistent with those in an average middle-class community."

**Theory of Change:** "First; Critical mass: Success in raising healthy children entails rebuilding the institutions of a normal, healthy community, something that has been undermined in central Harlem by years of neglect, disinvestments, and demographic upheaval. Building such a community requires the participation of a critical mass of parents and children in common undertakings, including both effective child rearing and community building. Second; Early and Progressive Intervention: Effective early intervention pays long-term benefits by making later interventions less necessary for many young people, and by making those interventions more likely to succeed when they are needed."

## THINK ABOUT

A very simple formula for a mission statement is:  
We aim for x by doing y.

What might yours be?  
How will you articulate your intended impact and theory of change?

## Notable Mission Statements

- + AARP: "We enhance quality of life for all as we age. We champion positive social change and deliver value through advocacy, information, and service."
- + Starbucks: "To inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time."
- + The Humane Society: "Celebrating Animals, Confronting Cruelty."
- + NAACP: "To ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination."

"We tend to think we can separate strategy from culture, but we fail to notice that strategic thinking is deeply colored by tacit assumptions about who they are and what their mission is."

EDGAR SCHEIN  
Professor, MIT Sloan School of Management

## 10 DESIGN PRINCIPLES

These 10 core design principles from Carnegie Corporation are crucial to the development of a school where students thrive.

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## SMALL SCHOOLS MISSION AND CULTURE

How did the NYC Small Schools of Choice program raise graduation rates for all students? MDRC found that creating tight-knit, student-centered schools, each united around a single mission, really works.

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## INTENDED IMPACT

In an era of declining resources, a well-defined intended impact is more important than ever. Learn more about what intended impact is and how to design yours in this article from Nan Stone, Susan Colby, and Paul Carttar at Bridgespan. Includes useful advice on how to develop a mission statement and theory of change, using the Harlem Children's Zone as a model.

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## HIGH TECH HIGH DESIGN PRINCIPLES

High Tech High's projects are all based on carefully crafted design principles. Scroll through them and check out how they appear across the school approach.

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**Fact: A successful  
XQ school has an  
inspiring mission.**





# A good mission works all the time, for everybody.

Articulating a strong and coherent mission is first and foremost the responsibility of the school's founders. One of the responsibilities of a principal is to bring the mission to life. But not even the most capable leader can accomplish a mission alone. The whole school has to come together and reinforce the purpose and principles through their values and behavior. The staff must be able to cultivate their commitment to the culture through professional learning and collaboration opportunities. They can analyze student performance data together, for example, and develop interventions that help solve identified problems. They can experiment with new programs that align with the mission. Students also need opportunities to understand and build a peer culture that aligns with the mission and identity of their school. Common goals and practices should be established to support a shared vision of what success means for students.

Michael Fullan of the University of Toronto found that truly effective high school principals encourage their schools to organize around mission. These principals demonstrate emotional intelligence and the ability "to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment and implement the reforms necessary for sustained improvement in student achievement."

Mission alignment is always a priority. Schools need an organizing principle around which their adults and kids can rally every day.

## THINK ABOUT

What constitutes an effective education? Is it all students graduating with mastery of certain subjects? Is it all students achieving a minimum score on SAT or ACT tests? What percentage of your graduates need to go to college? Do you want them to feel fulfilled, be civically engaged, and have emotional intelligence? These goals are going to help you articulate your mission statement.



"The role of a creative leader is not to have all the ideas; it's to create a culture where everyone can have ideas and feel that they're valued."

SIR KEN ROBINSON

Author, speaker, and advisor on education



"No company, small or large, can win over the long run without energized employees who believe in the mission and understand how to achieve it."

JACK WELCH

Former CEO, General Electric

## A CULTURE OF STUDENT SUPPORT

Strong school culture doesn't just support teachers and staff. Robert Balfanz writes for City Year about how a supportive school culture can help students overcome the challenges of poverty and prepare them for success.

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## GREENHOUSE CULTURE

TNTP (formerly The New Teacher Project) shares how schools can grow a *greenhouse* culture, where teaching and learning can grow and thrive.

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## MICRO-SCHOOLS

What does it mean to go micro? Education Next summarizes the micro-school culture and three examples of operating micro-schools in the United States.

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## THE RESET FOUNDATION

The Reset Foundation, a group innovating on schools for formerly incarcerated individuals with live-in campuses cheaper than prison, has a unique mission and five pillar approach to educating their students.

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**FACT: A good mission supports strong culture. Strong culture sustains mission.**





# Everything that embodies a school—relationships, behaviors, roles, and curriculum—must reflect the mission.

In XQ schools, everyone plays a role in demonstrating the mission. The mission of a school needs to permeate every inch of a high school—its halls, classrooms, auditorium, library, cafeteria, and playing fields—and every relationship within it. Once established, it survives staffing and structural changes and creates a lasting cultural legacy.

Cohen College Prep in New Orleans is an excellent example of this. Like many public schools after the hurricane, Cohen became a charter school and was struggling to keep its doors open amidst the collective loss experienced by the community. Recognizing that high schools are an extension of the community, and acknowledging the importance of cultural icons like sports games and Mardi Gras, Principal Rahel Wondwossen made it a priority to hire a respected band teacher. “Historically, Cohen has always had an amazing band, so that was really important that we get that right,” she says. “That was the very first and most visible way that we tried to honor the legacy of the school.”

## THINK ABOUT

What is needed to establish a mission in a school? And how will you know if it's being fostered? Where do you see a mission in action?

“Leaders who build enduring greatness are not high-profile, flashy performers but rather individuals who blend extreme humility with intense professional will. Sustainability depends on many leaders—the quality of leadership must be attainable by many, not just a few... Organizations must set their sights on continual improvement at all levels, and for that they must nurture, cultivate, and appoint successive leaders who are moving in a sustained direction.”

MICHAEL FULLAN

Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto

## THE SCHOOL LEADER AS A MISSION AMBASSADOR

Michael Fullan explains how principals can foster a strong school culture that is both mission-driven and student-centered.

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## BRINGING CULTURE BACK TO A NEW ORLEANS HIGH SCHOOL

Watch a video about how Principal Rahel Wondwossen of Cohen College Prep in New Orleans revitalized the school's culture after Hurricane Katrina.

WATCH ▶

## A CULTURE THAT FOSTERS PERSONALIZATION

Getting Smart summarizes the idea of advisories, where each student is matched with an adult dedicated to student's personal development and pathways to adulthood.

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## A MISSION TO DEVELOP AFRICAN LEADERS

The African Leadership Academy has one mission: to transform the continent of Africa by molding the next generation of leaders. Check out the multitude of ways they do this, from their staff to their curriculum, and from their funding model to their student recruitment.

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# Goals + Values + Approach = Mission.

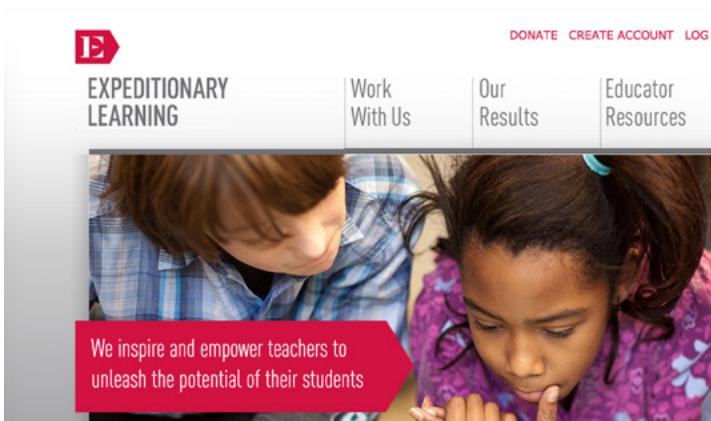
**As Carmen Fariña, chancellor of the New York City Department of Education, once said: “Schools are extraordinarily complex organizations, and it is not always easy to see the how the pieces fit together.”**

In looking at schools that have achieved strong outcomes for their students, research points to a simple truth: Schools function best when their stakeholders share a cohesive culture and a common set of beliefs about what they’re trying to achieve.

To design and build truly effective schools for the future, we need to think about, talk about, and ultimately agree on the educational principles we want to work for and fight for.



# GET INSPIRED



## EXPEDITIONARY SCHOOLS

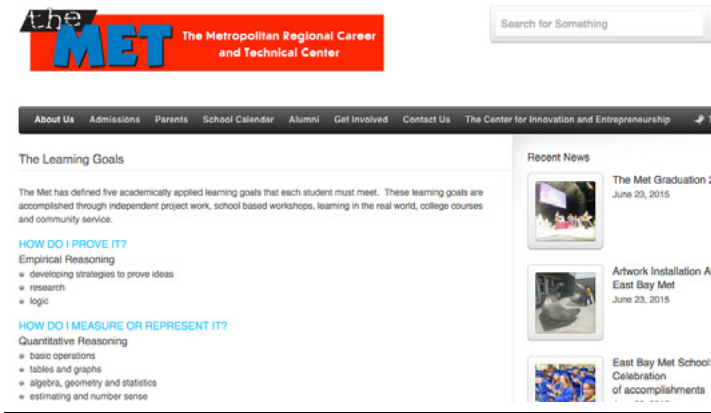
The 10 design principles of Expeditionary Learning schools include self-discovery, diversity and inclusion, and empathy.

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## AN NYC SCHOOL WITH A CULTURE OF DESIGN

Can a school-wide commitment to design thinking impact student success? A study looks at one New York City high school experimenting with applying design informed by data to its decision-making processes.

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## INSPIRATION FROM THE MET SCHOOLS

Check out the deep-learning goals that the MET Schools are designed around, which students must meet to succeed.

[EXPLORE](#) ▶



## BUILDING A NONPROFIT BRAND

Like other nonprofits, a school can cultivate a distinctive brand and use it to increase social impact, serve its mission, and stay true to its values and culture. The Stanford Social Innovation Review shares how.

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# GET CREATIVE



## DESIGNING A SUPER SCHOOL.

with Keith Yamashita

**WATCH** ▶

KEITH YAMASHITA,  
Chairman and  
Founder, SYPartners

**LET'S BUILD  
AN AMAZING  
SCHOOL  
COMMUNITY.**