CORE VALUES: HOW DO YOU BUILD A MEANINGFUL VISION OF EDUCATION FOR SCHOOL?
BUILDING A MEANINGFUL VISION BASED ON CORE VALUES
The Science Leadership Academy (SLA) in Philadelphia has gained a national reputation for being a model of inquiry-driven, project-based learning. Since SLA opened its doors in 2006 as a partnership between the School District of Philadelphia and The Franklin Institute, founding Principal Chris Lehmann has seen the school thrive. More than 95% of its graduates pursue some form of post-secondary education, and SLA has won many awards and honors. The two SLA campuses, one in center city Philadelphia and one in northeast Philadelphia, serve a total of 750 students, each of whom is issued a Dell Chromebook 11 for a 1:1 digital learning environment. Admission is by holistic evaluation that includes an interview conducted by teacher-student teams.

This whitepaper series presents the nuts and bolts of SLA’s vision, and describes why their commitment to their core values is so important to the success of their school. The goal of this whitepaper series is to provide the details needed to help other schools scale SLA’s success.

The first whitepaper in this series, A New Model for Teaching and Learning, reviewed how SLA’s core values of inquiry, research, collaboration, presentation, and reflection are emphasized in all classes through student-centered, project-based, and backward-designed curriculum. This second whitepaper details how these core values inform the vision of the school, and how a model of distributed leadership is a key component to realizing these goals.

WHERE DO YOU START?
Founding Principal Chris Lehmann, who recently won the Harold W. McGraw Prize in Education, says any school or district looking to define their vision needs to start with one question: What do you actually believe as a community?

“People don’t always know how to answer that question,” Lehmann says. “We say we believe in ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘developing the whole child’ and these kinds of fluffy statements. Of course we believe in lifelong learning, and we believe in educating the whole child. But you have to ask the next question: What does that mean? What does that look like? And what needs to happen to realize this vision?”

He identified the following ways to begin the conversation of building a meaningful vision of education for schools:

• **Focus on your school or district’s core values.** What values will serve as the framework for your vision? What do you hope school will be for your children? What do you hope school will become? “Everything you do should reflect these core values,” says Lehmann.

• **Identify and involve your stakeholders and get their buy-in.** Invite parents, teachers, students, and staff to meet as a community. When you meet, break into groups and discuss: what will this vision look like in practice?

• **Define a common school or district language.** This common language is used in everything you do. At SLA, the use of a common vocabulary serves two purposes. First, it helps everyone understand exactly what the school is about, and two, it binds everyone together and to a shared purpose.

• **Create a culture of distributed leadership:** To build a sustainable, meaningful vision that reflects a school’s core values, school administrators must embrace a shared leadership model that encourages a culture of trust and shared responsibility. SLA’s vision could not work in a top-down decision making culture.
Larissa Pahomov, SLA English teacher and author of Authentic Learning in the Digital Age, (ASCD, 2014), says that the school’s core values should always be at the heart of a school’s vision. Pahomov points out that what’s notable about the five core values are that they are not just qualities, they are processes.

“The core values are not character traits. They’re based on the scientific method,” says Pahomov. “It’s not that you couldn’t have other ones, but if you are interested in implementing a curriculum that is true to the scientific process and the nature of inquiry, you need all of them. What’s beautiful about SLA’s core values is that when you enact each value, you are using a useful process that applies to both what teachers do—in professional development and in their planning—and what happens in the classroom. You literally live the core values.

“This is not to make these values sound rigid,” she continues. “They’re not prescriptive. They’re a framework into which you can place any lesson, any activity—anything you are doing already—you can transform it by using the framework.”

**WHAT DOES THIS VISION OF EDUCATION LOOK LIKE EVERY DAY?**

In Dell’s last whitepaper, we learned how the core values of inquiry, research, collaboration, presentation and reflection are emphasized in all SLA classes. In this paper, we explore how SLA’s staff and administration also embrace these core values in their work as school leaders.

One of the best examples of this vision in action is in the school’s weekly “common planning” meetings. Each Wednesday afternoon, all staff members meet to review issues that are scheduled by the committee leaders on a semester-by-semester basis using a shared Google Doc. These weekly meetings become regular opportunities to ensure the school attends to its vision by focusing on its core values in the following ways:

• **INQUIRY:** Staff members begin each conversation by identifying relevant topics to pursue, conducting research related to those topics, and piecing together the solution. The staff discusses the facts of the topics, works to solve new or existing problems, and develops theories related to possible solutions. For example, in a recent blog post, Lehmann noted that as awed as he was by the project-based work he sees in their classes, he wondered if the day-to-day work could embody the core values and the ideas of student voice and choice more deeply. This inspired a week of planning where all staff crafted daily lesson plans, answering inquiry-based prompts designed to get them to unpack the decisions they make every day.

• **RESEARCH:** Staff members analyze conflicting data to synthesize and apply their findings as knowledge in context of what they knew before. For example, at each meeting, SLA staff presents comments related to their inquiry research projects.

• **COLLABORATION:** The staff forms partnerships to take advantage of one another’s skills and resources to build knowledge on a topic. They explore data jointly, share information, discuss their findings, determine relevance, evaluate one another’s ideas, monitor each other’s efforts, and present what they’ve learned together. For example, most administrative tasks are assigned to two people. The partners can create a division of labor that suits their personal strengths and how those strengths can best inform the program. They then present their work during their scheduled time at the weekly meetings. “It’s really nice, as a math teacher, to get an English teacher’s perspective, because it’s more focused on the pedagogy, as opposed to the content,” says Brad Latimer, a math teacher at SLA (above, top) who chairs the Academic Standards Committee and works closely with the Professional Learning Committee chair, and author of the book, Thrive, Meenoo Rami (above, bottom), to plan and support professional development at the school. “I feel like too often teachers exist on an island in their classroom. The door closes, and it’s them and 32 students. I think that the things that we can learn by observing each other are extremely powerful.”
• **PRESENTATION:** Each committee member presents knowledge about a specific topic or inquiry during the meeting. They need to determine how they present this information so that others will understand, learn from, and derive value from it. “In class, I get up and think: What do I want to accomplish with my students today?” says Rami. “How will I go from a unit plan to a daily plan? We’ll talk about these kinds of things on Wednesdays. I think what’s interesting about how the core values apply to the time that we spend together as teachers is that we actually experience them ourselves during these meetings.”

• **REFLECTION:** Staff members review the ideas and data they encounter and contemplate their value to the problem or inquiry they are exploring. They may find conflicting information, ideas that contradict what they hypothesized initially, or data that isn’t appropriate to the situation. They have to analyze the information and apply what they think is relevant. In the process, they have to examine how they are evaluating the information to make sure they view it accurately. For example, at the end of each year, SLA staff members have what they call a “brain dump.” “Everybody just takes a little time to discuss any loose ends,” says Pahomov. “We decided not to reflect then, but just put them in the box. When we get back to school in the fall, we were able to reflect on those comments, sort through them, and look at where the trends were.”

“**How do we create enough structure to be effective without becoming so rigid that we can’t innovate?”**

Diana Laufenberg on “Building Systems and Structures for Modern Learning”

“**We are the administration,”** says Pahomov. “Almost everybody on staff holds one or more administrative title. For example, I manage community events. I’m also on the diversity committee and I also manage alumni. Each year, I’m paying attention to the routine of what we understand those responsibilities to entail based on the previous year. But, I’m also paying attention to what might be different this year.”

When the school decided to formalize the distributed leadership model several years ago, they started by creating committees. In this committee-based model, all staff members play a direct role in shaping the school culture, and establishing formal structures within the school that help to steer the direction of the school.

“**I feel like I and other staff members play a role in determining what we do as a staff as opposed to being told what to do as a staff,”** says teacher Brad Latimer. “This adds a lot of power to the work that we do with students and with each other.”
This culture of distributed leadership does not just apply to staff. Students are also given opportunities to be school leaders. For example, at SLA’s annual Educon conference (http://2015.educonphilly.org)—an event that brings together some of the most innovative school thought leaders from around the country—SLA students help plan and implement all of the conference logistics. From tech support to food service to coat check, SLA students manage all of the event logistics for the entire event.

“We start about a month and a half before the event by sending out a Google Form to all students,” says this year’s co-chair, Julian Makarechi, a senior at SLA who co-chairs the event with senior Alisha Rothwell. “Then Alisha and I choose what each student does on each day.”

They create a schedule for the volunteers and make sure no one is “slacking off.” They have no problem finding volunteers—they have 62 students already signed up for this year’s event on January 23-25. “It takes a lot patience and organization,” says Julian. “Our job is to make sure the conference runs smoothly. Then the staff doesn’t have to worry about it and they can enjoy the conference.”

Julian and Alisha were selected as co-chairs at the beginning of the year by Lehmann and the teachers on the EduCon committee. “I had volunteered for Educon before,” says Julian. “But never in a leadership position. It really meant a lot to me that Mr. Lehmann and the teachers have that trust in me as a leader—especially because I know how important Educon is to SLA.”

“I really appreciate the position,” says Alisha. “You have a lot to do—helping not just the teachers and students, but all of the other people who come to Educon. This job has helped me develop my leadership skills.”

And the student involvement in the operation of SLA doesn’t stop at Educon. Students are also involved in interviewing candidates for SLA, and many of the senior Capstone projects involve community service.

“There are endless opportunities to lead at SLA,” says. “This really brings us together as a community.”

Lehman agrees. “You have to create the space for everybody to have skin in the game,” he says. “If you don’t do that, you’ve created one more top-down initiative. The trick is to build a shared vision, and then build the systems and structures to support shared responsibility. That also changes leadership’s role, because now leadership’s role is not to be keeper of the big picture. You have to understand that you’re going to ask people to own this vision in major ways, that there will be moments where people do things differently than the way you would have, and that’s OK. Your job is to make sure that everything aligns with the vision. Your job is not to make sure everybody does it the exact way you would do it. You’re always in that moment of saying: ‘This thing we’re doing needs to align with our best ideas.’ That never ends because reflection’s a core value. It’s built into that iterative process.”
Some schools may look at the SLA vision and wonder if it would scale to different kinds of school cultures. SLA is a very specific kind of school. They started from scratch. They select their students. They have a student-teacher ratio of 20:1. They can fit their entire staff into one room. Would the framework of their vision work in a large public school district? A rural school district?

SLA believes the answer is yes, and they have partnered with Dell and The Franklin Institute to form the new “Center of Excellence in Learning” to back up that belief. Supported by grants and technology from Dell, the Center enables SLA to share the model of inquiry-driven learning with schools around the country through real-time and online professional development opportunities.

The Chester A. Arthur School
One example is the Chester A. Arthur School, a K-8 school in south Philadelphia. Last year, the school became a “receiving school,” which meant that they received students from one of the 30 schools that were closed in the district due to cuts in the School District of Philadelphia. This added 100 new students in a school that had just 200 students the year before. They also brought in a new principal, Kimberly Newman.

Over the summer, the school set aside some funds for a weeklong workshop with Diana Laufenberg, co-founder (along with Chris Lehmann) of Inquiry Schools (http://inquiryschools.org), a new non-profit working to create and support learning environments that are inquiry driven, project based and utilizing modern technology. During this workshop, the school redesign team began to develop a vision that could be vetted by their staff, students, community members, and families. Tim Boyle, a middle school teacher, was on this school redesign team.

“We used the deeper learning process to help figure out where we are and where we wanted to be,” says Boyle. “We teased out some ideas and thought, ‘Why do we need to reinvent the wheel? We can just take SLA’s core values and adopt them here.’”

They did make some modifications, specifically related to the vocabulary of the core values of inquiry, research, collaboration, presentation, and reflection. As the team reflected on the common language they wanted to use in their school’s vision, they decided they needed to adjust this language to words that would be more meaningful to very young students.

“We realized that we can still adopt these factual values, but develop our own common language that change the vocabulary so that our youngsters can access those words. The meaning and the emphasis behind those words are the same, but we just used a language that made sense for our school.”

Another goal of this revised vision was to shift away from a scripted curriculum and move towards a project-based curriculum. But they also recognized that they needed to incorporate the culture of their school communities in their vision.

“We needed to anchor ourselves in the idea that we’re a neighborhood school that serves a very specific place in Philadelphia,” says Boyle. “We serve a racially and socioeconomically diverse group of people. And, that’s really important and valuable to us.”

This year, the staff will spend time planning and fine-tuning this vision with the goal of implementing this revised vision next fall. “Version 1.5 of this vision will bring in local and national experts to answer questions like: What does it look like to plan backwards? What does it look like to do units instead of day-to-day planning? How does assessment change when the paradigm changes?” says Boyle.

“I helped write this plan and went to all these meetings,” Boyle says. “And that was on top of being a classroom teacher. As taxing as that was, I’m finding the outcome to be all well worth it.”
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THE SLA BEEBER CAMPUS

Another example of following SLA’s lead in building a meaningful vision of education for school is their new Beeber campus, which opened its doors on September 9, 2013 with its inaugural freshman class. Like their sister campus in center city, Beeber students also use the Dell Chromebook 11s in a 1:1 digital learning environment.

“We were lucky that we had a model so we didn’t have to build everything from scratch,” says Marybeth Hertz, technology coordinator at the Beeber campus. “SLA had done the hard work. Our job was to look at those core values and figure out what they meant for us.” Hertz worked with Diana Laufenberg, Beeber Principal Chris Johnson, and other staff members to review these core values and use them to shape their campus’ unique vision.

“We realized that it was OK to do things differently,” says Hertz, “because underlying this work was still this framework of core values. You need to look at what makes your school great. You don’t want to lose a sense of self or identity.”

Shaping Beeber’s unique vision came down to a lot of discussions. One important question for this conversation was, “Is it different or is it better?”

“We asked this question a lot,” Hertz says. “Especially when we were pushing back.”

One important source of feedback for their vision was the school’s Advisory program. SLA’s parent guide states, “Advisory is the soul of SLA.” The program matches one teacher with a group of 20 students and their parents, and the group meets twice per week for 40 minutes. Advisory is an opportunity for students and staff members to have meaningful discussions about the school, give input, and reflect on school culture. Each Advisory is a support network for students and it is often through Advisory that important discussions happen.

“A lot of times, through our Advisory work with students, they help transform our decisions,” Hertz says. “We’re building the plane while flying it. We’re in a constant state of revisiting what we’re doing.”