

School Mission & Culture

Why does every school need a clear, well-articulated mission?

2
EDITION



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

By identifying ambitious goals that everyone shares, a school can build a framework for better teaching and learning.

**A coherent,
mission-based
culture can
inspire and
unify a school
community.**

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT



01

How can we create schools in which all the design elements work together to advance a core mission and a clear set of goals for student learning?



02

How do students experience their school and their role as learners within it? What norms and expectations are shared by everyone in the school community?



03

How should schools set learning goals and assess student success, during and beyond high school?



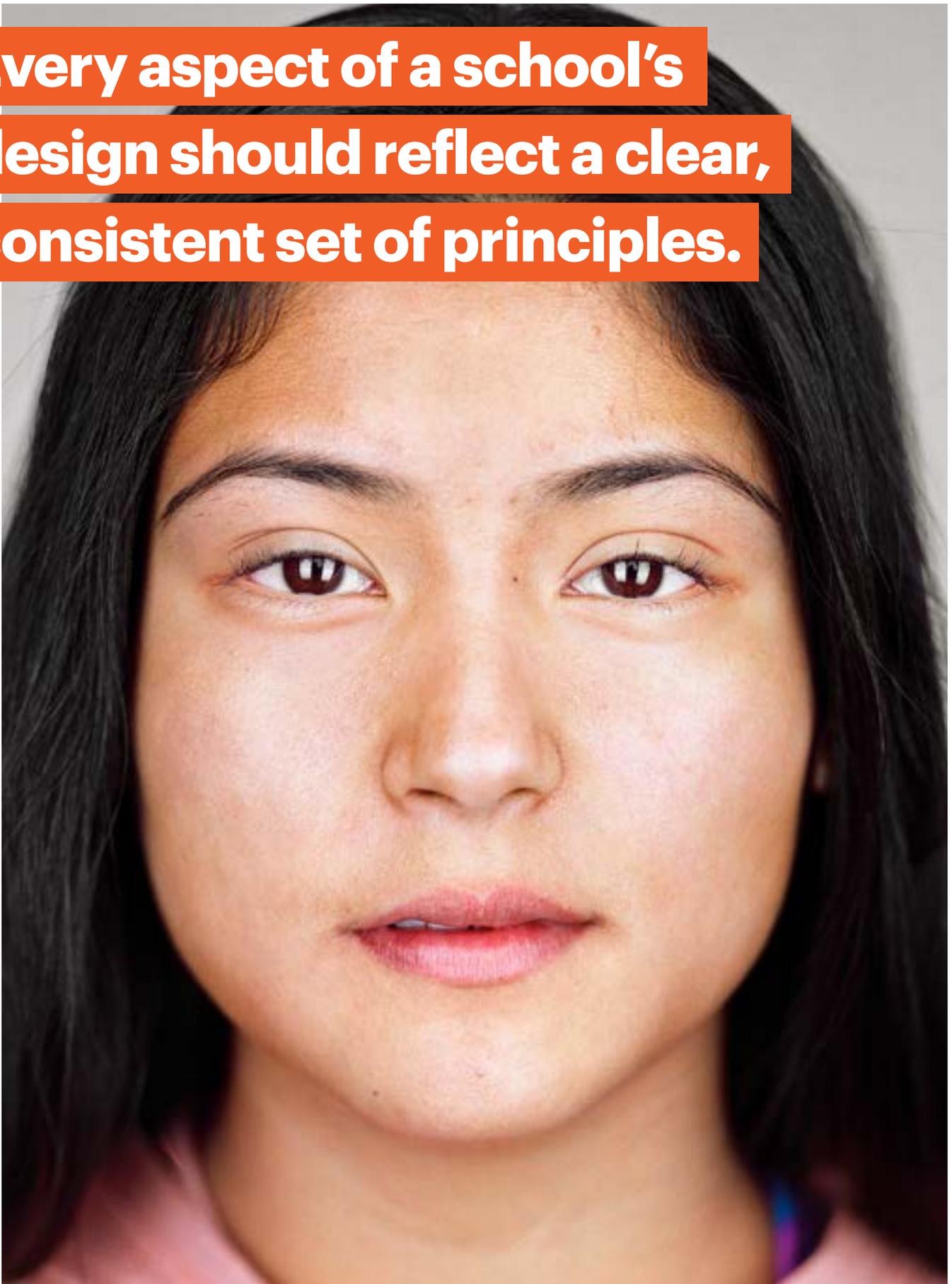
04

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

**DESIGNING
SCHOOLS
WITH A
PURPOSE**

FACT 10

Every aspect of a school's design should reflect a clear, consistent set of principles.



An effective school is grounded in a deep understanding of students and a vision for what they can achieve.

Every effective high school is built on a set of design principles that define how it will operate day to day, how members of the school community will work together, and how everyone in the school will pursue common goals and priorities. Design principles are aspirational, but they're also practical. For example, a school that sees personalized learning as fundamental will also see that the principle is meaningless without high-quality teaching and learning, informative assessments, and the right technology tools in place. Those practical pieces may need to be developed carefully and implemented over time, but the principle helps make personalized learning an ongoing priority.

A school's core principles are encapsulated in its mission statement, which answers a simple but essential question: "Who are we?" A well-crafted mission statement conveys a compelling and clear purpose to both everyone in the school community and external stakeholders such as supporters, allies, community leaders, prospective staff members, and future students and their families. A mission statement is the North Star that keeps the whole school on track and traveling toward a common destination.

The destination toward which any effective school must strive, of course, is students who succeed in all the key dimensions of learning: as masters of all fundamental literacies, holders of foundational knowledge, original thinkers in an uncertain world, generous collaborators for tough problems, and learners for life. We call these the XQ Learner Goals.

Think About →

A mission statement helps a school maintain focus on what really matters. It should be memorable and powerful—and, ideally, short. A simple formula for a mission statement is: We aim for x by doing y. What's yours?



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."

+ Tesla

"To accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy."

+ 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."

10 Design Principles

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



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.



XQ Learner Goals

The XQ Learner Goals cover rigorous academic knowledge and skills, along with the capacities and dispositions young people need for the future, all in an integrated way.



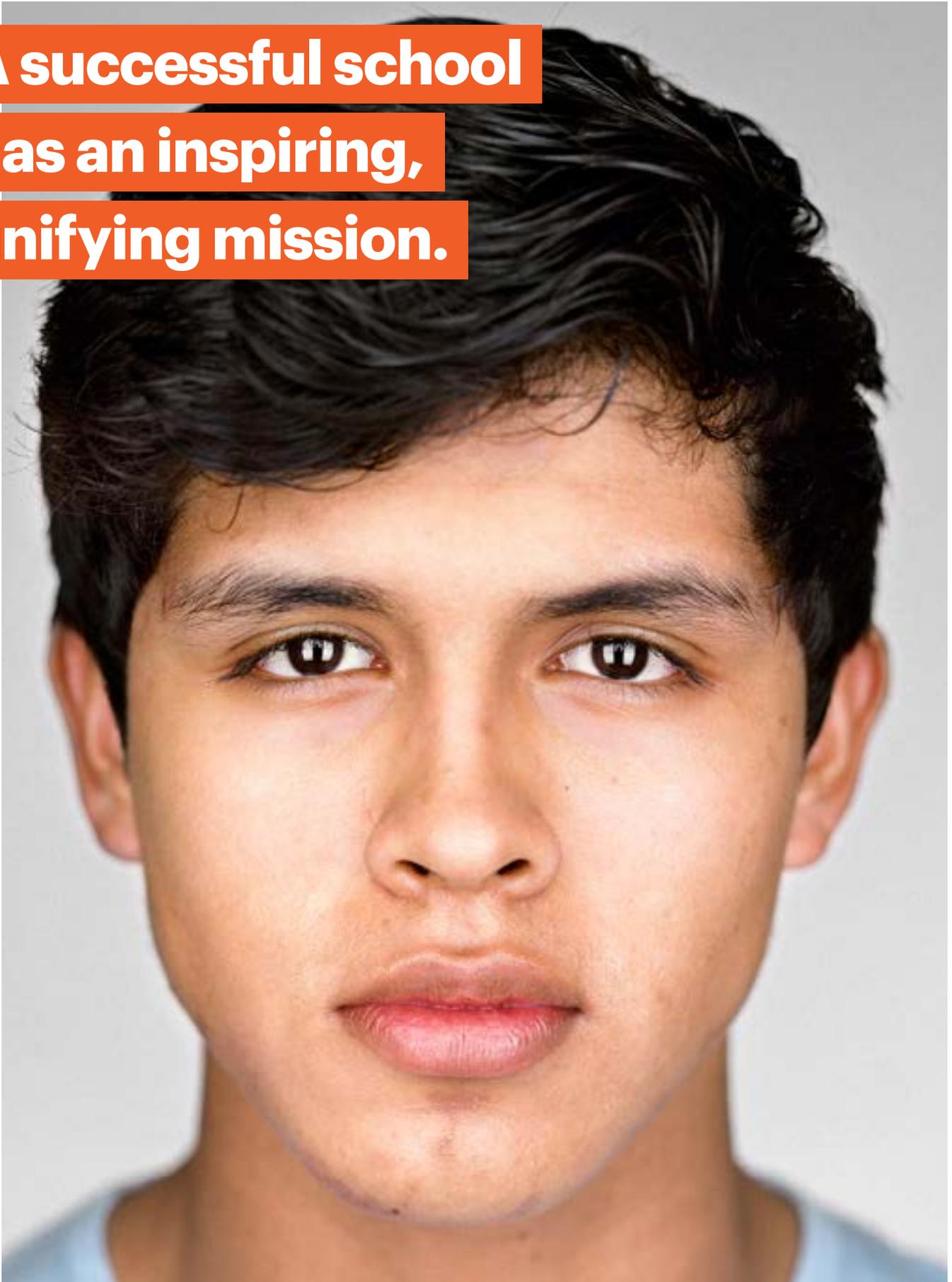
XQ Chat: Mission and Culture

Listen to education experts discuss the importance of school mission and culture, and what they've learned from establishing a shared vision in schools.



FACT 11

**A successful school
has an inspiring,
unifying mission.**



A good mission works all the time, for everybody.

One of the fundamental responsibilities of a principal is to bring a school's mission to life. But not even the most capable leader can accomplish a mission alone. The whole school has to come together to reinforce the purpose and principles through their values and behavior.

Staff members need opportunities to cultivate their shared commitment through professional learning and collaboration. For example, they can analyze student performance data together, develop interventions that help solve problems, or experiment with new curricula and 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—and for everyone.

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

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? Is it making sure every student is prepared to go to college? Does the school want students to feel fulfilled, be civically engaged, and have emotional intelligence?

“Mission becomes a contract with the students, a contract with the families, a contract with the community and stakeholders.”

RON CHALUISAN
Former principal at XQ Expert Series

“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, GE

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. →

Diverse by Design

In this 2017 essay, Nicole Tempel Assisi, CEO of Thrive Public Schools, writes about intentionally creating a culture of diversity. →

Data, Design, and Culture

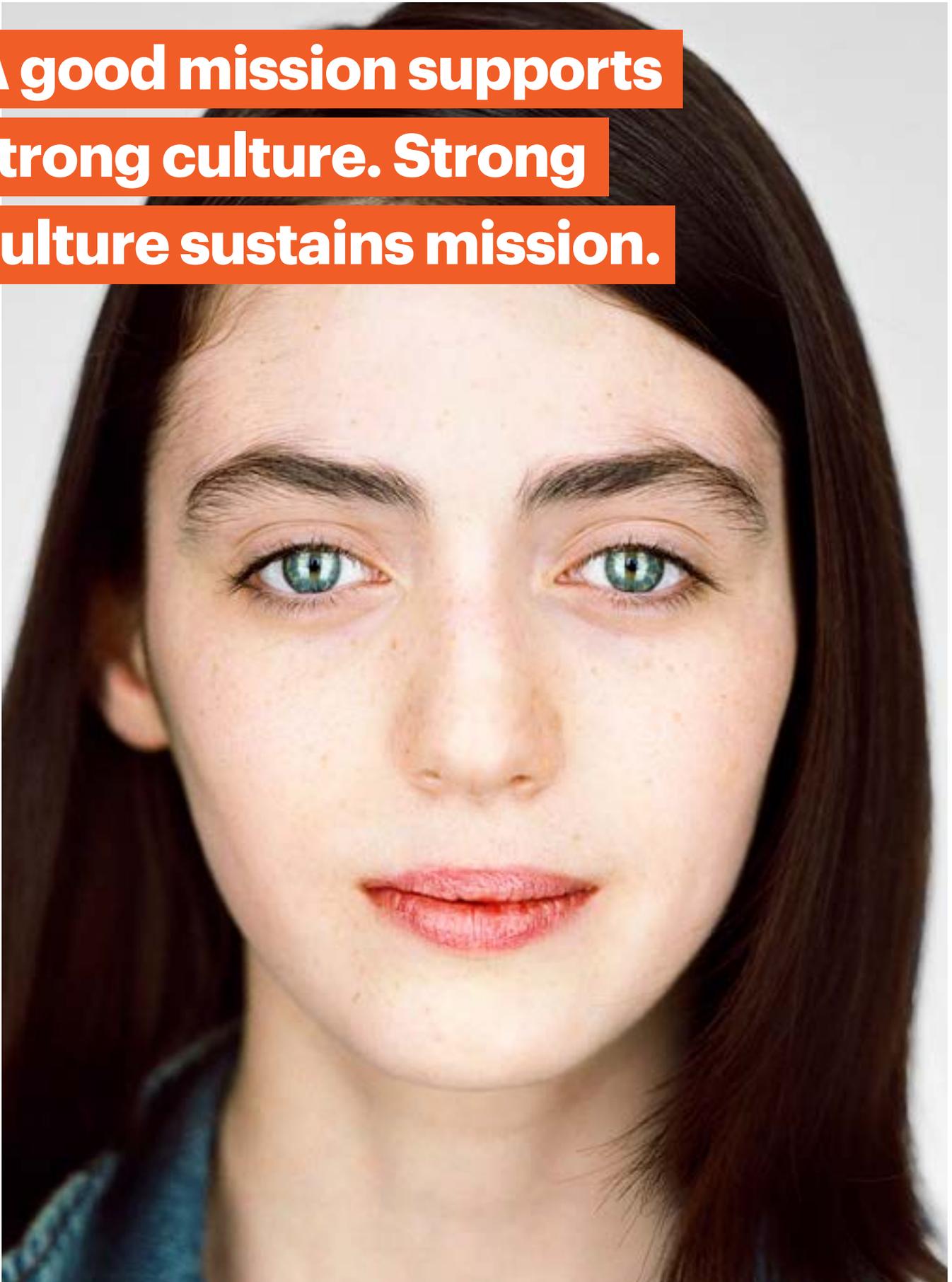
Can a school-wide commitment to design thinking impact student success? A study looks at one New York City high school experimenting with applying design informed by data to teacher-led decision making. →

A Vision for Off-Track Students

This Barr Foundation video features schools that are deeply grounded in an understanding of their students' needs and aspirations. →

FACT 12

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



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

The mission of a school needs to permeate every inch of a high school 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 example of this. Like many public schools after Hurricane Katrina, Cohen became a charter school that struggled 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 [sic] it 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.”

Culture is enacted every day in the routines and rituals that give a school its unique identity. From a warm greeting for students in the morning, to days when teachers wear their own college insignia, to annual senior capstone presentations, these actions build common ground and help turn a school into a community.

Think About →

How do we strengthen connections among teachers, peers, and the rest of the community so that young people have the confidence and resources to push themselves to achieve academically?



“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



What mission, purpose, and core values will animate and unify your school? How can they help you build student engagement, earn the commitment of adults, and rally the support of your community?

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.



A Culture That Fosters Personalization

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



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.



Culture Attracts Talent

XQ Super School Washington Leadership Academy puts its “future-building” mission and culture right on its recruitment flyers.

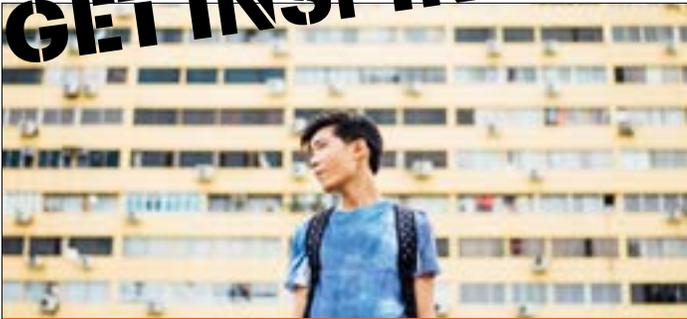


**Goals
+ Values
+ Approach
= Mission**

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 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 and fight for.

GET INSPIRED



Expeditionary Schools

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



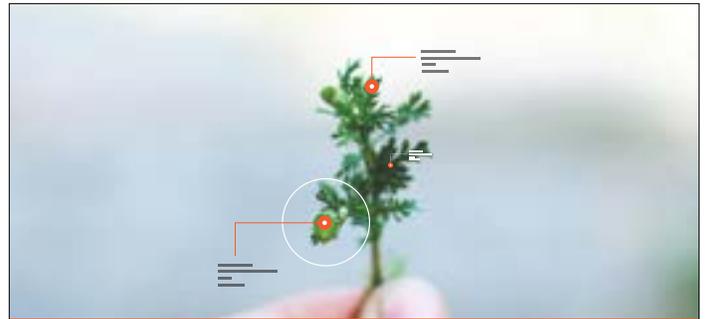
Greenhouse Culture

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



Inspiration from the MET Schools

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



Micro-Schools

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



Intended Impact

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. It includes useful advice on how to develop a mission statement and theory of change.



High Tech High Design Principles

Every High Tech High is based on four design principles that appear in different ways across each school's approach: personalization, adult world connection, common intellectual mission, and teacher as designer.



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