

**St. James Forum**  
**Episcopal Schools: Touching Hearts, Empowering Minds**  
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Developing “eyes to see” is a recurring gospel theme, as in the story of Jesus healing the sight of Bartimaeus while on the road to Jericho. It echoes in our secular lives as well. We talk about the “vision” of an organization or its leader. And, of course, we use the phrase “Oh, I see!” by which we mean “I now understand as I did not before.”

When I first became a teacher and taught high school history, ideas were all that really mattered. But the more I worked with young people, the more I discovered -- well, I came to see - that in fact the mind was not all that mattered. I was taken aback when great intellect did not come with a warm heart or a clear moral compass. I saw other students crippled or even paralyzed by sadness in their lives, or worry, or anxiety or anger that made learning a shadowy process. Slowly, I came to see not merely their minds but the totality of who they were...and who they were becoming.

I noticed that by the time they were eighteen or sixteen or even thirteen, many young people were in some ways already “going blind”-- blind in their ability to see where they fit in the world, to know their true heart, to view their neighbor as themselves, to catch a glimpse of still, small voice within. Perhaps never to find their true self, or know strength after sorrow, or redemption, or their own reasons for being.

Over and over Jesus tries to teach us that there is more than our human eyes can see or our minds alone can comprehend. The educational vision of an Episcopal school is one informed by grace and faith as well as by math and English. Drawing upon the great Quaker educator Parker Palmer, Lucy Nazro, a legendary Episcopal School head of Saint Andrew's in Austin TX, put it this way:

With the mind's eye we see a world of fact and reason. It is a cold and mechanical place, but we have built our lives there because it seemed predictable and safe .... (But) we open the eye of the heart and we see another sight: a world warmed and transformed by the power of love, a vision of community beyond the mind's capacity to see. We cannot forsake our hearts, and yet we cannot abandon our minds. How shall we use both eyes not to create a blurry double image, but one world, in all its dimensions, healed and made whole?

Episcopal schools are places that teach students to use both eyes: the mind's eye and the eye of the heart: a wholeness of spirit, a connection to others, a life graced by joy and purpose. In Episcopal schools, ideas matter and spirit matters. We strive for equity and justice not because it's trendy but because it is our gospel call. Students give service not to build a resume but because it's the right thing to do. This is what led me to and holds so many of us fast to Episcopal schools.

Sight and recognition have another meaning, one that Episcopal school students and alumni speak of so often when they return, inevitably to visit: I was known. My teachers knew me. My peers knew me. Sometime too well! This affirmation, validation and recognition is far too absent in too many children's lives.

Educational literature today is filled with talk about testing and core standards, and sadly also about police presence in schools and lock down drills. But it is also filled with ideas about small schools, community building, values, and a moral education. And at the heart of this reform movement is really a very simple idea: to create schools where each person is valued, honored, and held in human dignity. There are intangible qualities that exemplary schools all share: academic excellence undergirded by a sense of purpose, and a sense of belonging. Of course there remains challenge and struggle, the questioning and self-doubt, the hard work and uphill battles that each of us must confront. But to navigate all of the struggles and joys of what it means to be a human being and to do it in a place that ultimately says, "I know you, I love you, you are important. "This is a gift. In the Book of Isaiah it reads, "I have called you by name, and you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you...because you are precious in my sight."

This is the incarnational ministry of Episcopal schools: to be authentic communities that see children; that offers them a journey towards themselves in which their eye can be open to all of the possibilities of what it means to be fully human; that encourages them to ask the questions which "burn in their hearts and which provide a spiritual vocabulary – a special sight – eyes that see.

Tom Sergioivanni, a professor at Trinity University in Austin Texas has written about moral leadership in schools. He sees the task of school reform, private well as public, to transform schools from organizations into communities - for communities, says Sergioivanni, speak in a moral voice and lay claim to their members. Only in this way can true learning, true excellence, come alive. Most importantly only in this way can children become grounded, centered, strong and yet compassionate.

Yes, he says, school is a sacred enterprise. And here we are, on this small block in a big city, a city that strives and yet struggles to serve all of its children well.

**But it's a secular world out there, I hear you say. Who wants this kind of education?**

It is true that more Americans are increasingly secular. According to the Pew Forum on Religion in American Life, one-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling. This large and growing group of Americans is less religious on many conventional measures, including how frequently they attend religious services.

However, a new Pew survey also finds that many of these 46 million unaffiliated adults remain religious or spiritual in some way. They persist in their belief in God, they seek a spiritual life, and they believe that religion can be a positive force for good in society.

Will they come to church? Maybe. Maybe not. Will they choose a school for their children that is both educationally excellent *and* speaks to spiritual longing, a belief in the common good, and a belief that religion – and churches – are forces of good in the world? Experience tells me: yes.

Just about 1,200 Episcopal schools serve approximately 160,000 students throughout the provinces of the Episcopal Church. Almost 500 of these schools are elementary and middle parish day schools. They serve children of all faiths and no faith at all. They serve kids from rich families and middle class families and families that struggle to make ends meet, if at all. Although a few Episcopal schools date from the early years of the American republic (such as Episcopal Academy, founded in 1785) it was in the second half of the nineteenth century that Episcopal schools grew in meaningful numbers and size. Many were influenced by the work of Episcopal clergyman and educator William Augustus Muhlenberg (1796-1877).

Muhlenberg's emphasis on moral education influenced many Episcopal schools, including St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, and Groton School in Groton, Massachusetts.

But the most significant phase of Episcopal school growth was the parish day school movement that burst forth just after World War II with the rise of the middle class and the baby boom. It was here that the Episcopal Church developed a strong and enduring emphasis on serving children and adolescents.

We are now in a third stage in the history of Episcopal schools, of which St. James is an important part.

Today, the Episcopal Church has a deep-seated commitment to a more just and equitable society.

Episcopal schools of all kinds have significantly strengthened their commitment to these goals as well by increasing educational access for all families; expanding the racial, cultural, and socio-economic diversity of the school community; and making community service, service-learning, and the study of social issues central to the school's curriculum.

In addition, a small but growing number of Episcopal schools are using non-traditional financial models to establish new schools in historically under-served communities. These schools were and continue to be founded by visionary Episcopal educators and clergy moved to fill a pressing educational need, and by parishes or dioceses seeking to make a significant difference in their cities and towns. St James is part of this new generation of Episcopal schools.

Like St. James, most use a tuition-free model that relies on donations, grants, and in-kind services to sustain the school financially. Others have a sliding scale fee structure or meet the school's operating costs through a combination of low fees and charitable contributions. Located across the United States, there are single sex schools and coeducational schools. Some, like Epiphany School in Dorchester

Massachusetts and St. James, have been inspired by the Nativity Miguel model, primarily Catholic, tuition-free middle schools across the country that adhere to extended days, year-round school, and comprehensive services for students and their families.

In 2009, the National Association of Episcopal Schools (NAES) created the Episcopal Urban School Alliance to bring these schools together for common purpose and mutual support.

**Let's take a look. (video)**

**Some people may ask: what impact can we possibly have if we only serve 20 students, or 100, or 200?**

For 12 years I headed a small PK – 8 Episcopal parish school and during that time I came to “see” that the impact of this kind of education is not linear but exponential. Each life touched is like a pebble in a pond. In the student who goes on to be a student leader; in the young person who develops a lifelong capacity for compassion; in the trajectory of an entire family forever changed by a quality education; in the hundreds of graduates over the lifetime of the school who bring a sense of community, purpose, and inner strength to whatever they do.

**Another great fear is “Can it be done?” “Is it sustainable?”** Again, my answer is yes.

As Christian communities, we are called to live out gospel values: to love our neighbor as ourselves and to “serve Christ in all persons.” Together with the many other public and private educational initiatives, the schools of the Episcopal Urban School Alliance are extending the Episcopal Church’s commitment to equal educational access and excellence for all children, perhaps one of the greatest civil rights issues of our time.

But it's hard work that requires planning, budgets, facilities, a strong program and a clear mission. It demands hours, weeks, and years of hard work, a long-haul attitude, and a mature ability to weather good times and bad.

**So why do this hard work?** Because young people desperately need great schools -- public and private. Episcopal schools are one of the Church's most vibrant and relevant ministries today, one that embraces all children, regardless of religious tradition—be they believers or doubters, cynical or secure in faiths of many varieties and all of the in-betweens as each young person slowly comes to see in who they are, who they shall become, and how they shall be in the world.

Episcopal schools are called to show our children the richness which is in and all around them. To give them strength, courage, security, not to live as islands unto themselves, not to be trapped in the egocentrism embodied today in the idolatry of false wealth, but to live in relation to others with generosity, love, and endurance. To not shrink away from all that God calls us to be but instead embrace "the life that is really life."

And so I find myself with you today at St. James School and I am reminded of some words from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's wonderful poem Ulysses: "Come, my friends, 'tis not too late to seek a newer world and follow knowledge like a sinking star."

New worlds and possibilities. This is why Episcopal schools like St. James are so important. Because here we listen for the echo of God's voice, because we know there is more than our human eye can see, our human hands can shape, our minds can predict. Isaiah tell us, "to break in pieces the doors of bronze

and cut through the bars of iron” to find “riches hidden in secret places”: the beauty of the mind, a wholeness of spirit, possibilities greater than any we could imagine, and perhaps even the hand of God.

“I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you

I will say to the north “give them up” and to the south “do not withhold”

Bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth.

Let them bring their witnesses to justify them and hear and say it is true.” (Isaiah Chapter 43)

Today, let us stand together and affirm this sacred covenant: to serve God and children, head and heart, body and soul. I ask a blessing upon St. James School that it become, in its fullness, what it already is today: a refuge and a strength, and a sacred community of learning for all God’s children.