

# SETTING NEW BENCHMARKS:

A Strategic Vision for the Future

2015-2020



## FRIENDS OF BENCHMARK SCHOOL:

When Benchmark School was founded in 1970, the goal was nothing less than to provide a dynamic, research-based instructional program that would develop thinkers, learners, and problem solvers who were prepared to meet with success in school and life. As we approach a half-century of serving children in the Delaware Valley, the world has changed dramatically, as have the qualities widely considered necessary to thrive in it. Throughout this time, Benchmark has changed, too, continually evolving to stay at the forefront of educational practices that transform students' futures and empower their success.

Benchmark School is resolutely committed to enduring as a leader in the education of bright students who learn differently, and we are excited to have this clear set of guidelines for doing just that. This five-year strategic plan serves as a living document consisting of forward-looking and flexible goals and strategies that enable us to continue at the vanguard of instructional practice, strengthen all facets of the institution to support our mission, and advance the school in the complex and ever-changing world of the 21st century. This plan also commits us to attracting and aligning the necessary resources — human, technological, and financial — to assure its implementation.

To achieve our goals, the entire school community is engaged and collaborating, contributing our collective knowledge and passion to make our vision a reality. We are actively forming new partnerships and strengthening existing connections to extend and enrich our capacity for action. In addition, we are consistently considering new possibilities that will help continue to set new standards for the education of our students. The result of these efforts is that you can hear an elevated level of enthusiasm about Benchmark in the general community and feel a palpable flow of positive energy as soon as you step inside our doors.

We appreciate the opportunity to share this plan with you and look forward to partnering with a wide range of individuals and groups in its implementation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Robert W. Gaskins", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Robert W. Gaskins, Ph.D.  
Head of School





## OUR MISSION

*Benchmark School is committed to helping bright students who learn differently, or have yet to reach their academic potential, develop the confidence, strategies, and knowledge to become lifelong learners, thinkers, and problem-solvers.*



## OUR VISION

*Benchmark School is dedicated to making a profound difference in the lives of bright students who learn differently or have yet to unlock their full academic potential.*

*For nearly half a century, Benchmark has been a recognized leader in innovative education. Setting a course for the future, the school will continue to create dynamic instructional practices and establish new educational standards.*

*Benchmark's pioneering educational model is a proven approach that transforms students' lives by empowering them with the essential strategies, self-knowledge, and confidence not only to succeed but also excel in a complex and ever-changing world.*



# 2015-2020 STRATEGIC VISION

## KEY AREAS OF FOCUS

In June 2015, our Board of Trustees approved this strategic plan to chart Benchmark School's course for the next five years. Driven by a forward-thinking team and based on input from faculty, parents, students, alumni, camp families, professional educators, and other members of the Benchmark community, its purpose is to ensure a future where the school continues to transform students' futures and empower their success.

The key areas of strategic focus are embedded in the following goals:

### GOAL 1:

Serve as leaders in the education of bright children who learn differently.

### GOAL 2:

Develop students who are globally aware and prepared to excel in a complex and ever-changing world.

### GOAL 3:

Nurture the growth of our exceptional educators.

### GOAL 4:

Cultivate a robust and diverse student community.

### GOAL 5:

Expand our community's connections, collaborations, and engagement.

### GOAL 6:

Secure our long-term financial future.

# GOAL 1

## SERVE AS LEADERS IN THE EDUCATION OF BRIGHT CHILDREN WHO LEARN DIFFERENTLY.

In order to provide students with an exceptional educational experience that prepares them for the demands of the 21st century, we need to remain at the forefront of educational practice. We are committed to extending the legacy of developing our students into confident and strategic thinkers and problem solvers who thrive in school and life.

### STRATEGY 1:

Expand our knowledge and implementation of the latest research-based best practices for a diverse population of bright children who learn differently or have yet to reach their full academic potential.

### STRATEGY 2:

Create additional opportunities for teachers to collaborate across departments in order to share effective practices and develop presentations for audiences outside of the school.

### STRATEGY 3:

Continue to infuse the Benchmark Summer Camp with the best of the research-based best practices we use during the school year so that it is firmly established as a leader in summer enrichment camps in our area.

### STRATEGY 4:

Refine our student reporting system based on new insights in the field as well as parent and teacher feedback in order to produce a system that clearly distinguishes students' strengths, challenges, and progress while facilitating dialogue and understanding among teachers, parents, and students.



## OUR PHILOSOPHY

*We believe that each child is a unique individual whose potential has yet to be realized. To help students develop their potential, we endeavor to provide an inclusive and supportive environment that is grounded in an appreciation of who each student is as a learner and individual. Since every child is unique and constantly developing, we tailor our instruction to students' current strengths, challenges, and overall profile as we develop their confidence and competence.*

*From the day students begin at Benchmark School, we help them grow as learners by scaffolding their instruction—providing as much support as is needed but no more than is necessary as they move toward independence.*





## THE SEVEN PILLARS OF BENCHMARK INSTRUCTION

1. *Build Motivation, Confidence, and Engagement*
2. *Cultivate Clarity and Focus*
3. *Foster a Flexible and Inquisitive Mindset*
4. *Teach Strategies for Thinking and Problem Solving*
5. *Establish a Well-Structured and Generative Knowledge Base*
6. *Advance Social and Emotional Understanding*
7. *Develop Executive Functioning and Self-Regulation*



# GOAL 2

## DEVELOP STUDENTS WHO ARE GLOBALLY AWARE AND PREPARED TO EXCEL IN A COMPLEX AND EVER-CHANGING WORLD.

Benchmark is dedicated to helping students develop the knowledge, strategies, and characteristics that will empower success in the midst of change, such as critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, creativity, communication, mindfulness, and resilience.

### STRATEGY 1:

Provide students with the framework and skill set to advocate and take charge of their learning, thinking, and problem solving both within and beyond their school experience, guided by *The Seven Pillars of Benchmark Instruction* (see page 7).

### STRATEGY 2:

Expand opportunities for experiential learning that include an emphasis on science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) skills.

### STRATEGY 3:

Educate students to be adaptive and resilient teammates, leaders and community builders, while increasing their awareness of and engagement in the world around them.

### STRATEGY 4:

Expand activities and experiences for students to develop the social and emotional intelligence to become confident, self-aware, and effective self-advocates.

# GOAL 3

## NURTURE THE GROWTH OF OUR EXCEPTIONAL EDUCATORS.

Benchmark will continue to recruit, develop, and retain the profession's finest faculty and staff with a commitment to excellence and innovation designed to inspire students and advance Benchmark School as a recognized leader in education.

### STRATEGY 1:

Employ recruitment strategies that attract talented faculty and staff applicants with a diverse range of backgrounds.

### STRATEGY 2:

Evaluate and revise our compensation and benefits strategy in order to support our continuing effort to attract and retain the best and brightest faculty and staff.

### STRATEGY 3:

Provide faculty and staff with a rich array of professional opportunities to increase their skills and qualifications, energize their classrooms and inspire their students.

### STRATEGY 4:

Refine our individualized professional development plans to optimize each teacher's growth as an exceptional educator committed to excellence and innovation.



“When people ask me what is the best school I have seen in action, my go-to school is Benchmark. It is incredible and without peer.”

— **Steve Graham, Ed.D.**, Currey Ingram Professor of Special Education and Literacy, Vanderbilt University,  
Recipient of Career Research Awards from the Council for Exceptional Children and the American Educational  
Research Association





“Benchmark has perfected its instructional model over a 45-year period and yet continues to refine it and extend it. All struggling learners should be taught so well and so intensively.”

— **Dick Allington**, Ph.D., Professor of Literacy Studies, University of Tennessee; Member, International Literacy Association’s Hall of Fame

# GOAL 4

## CULTIVATE A ROBUST AND DIVERSE STUDENT COMMUNITY.

Benchmark was founded to help as many mission-appropriate students as possible develop into learners, thinkers, and problem solvers who meet with success. Toward that end, we want to share what we do more broadly, create ways to make the school more accessible to a greater number of students, and continue to refine all aspects of the school experience to make it transformative for those who attend.

### STRATEGY 1:

Increase Benchmark's visibility across the Delaware Valley so that more mission-appropriate students have an opportunity to receive a Benchmark education.

### STRATEGY 2:

Support a tuition assistance program that makes a Benchmark education accessible to an even greater number of qualified students.

### STRATEGY 3:

Continue to refine the school's admissions process so that it presents the school dynamically and provides thoughtful support for prospective parents and students making this important family decision.

### STRATEGY 4:

Enhance the student and parent experience through the establishment of a tradition of school-wide team building and community outreach activities as well as additional student activities that develop individual interests and talents.

# GOAL 5

## EXPAND OUR COMMUNITY'S CONNECTIONS, COLLABORATIONS, AND ENGAGEMENT.

Through establishing and strengthening relationships with a wide variety of individuals and organizations, we seek to introduce new possibilities that will enhance the school community.

### STRATEGY 1:

Increase engagement with alumni and their families in order to promote stronger relationships that serve both graduates and the school community.

### STRATEGY 2:

Expand and strengthen relationships with psychologists, learning specialists, educators, and business leaders within the tri-state area that will benefit our students and school.

### STRATEGY 3:

Share our expertise and become a resource for other professionals.

### STRATEGY 4:

Use digital technology and communications strategies to inform the school's constituency and local community about Benchmark events and foster their engagement.





“Benchmark School offers education at its best. The instruction in reading and writing provided to students in all grades is exemplary. The curriculum is research-based and follows best practices recommended by the National Reading Panel. Teachers and staff at Benchmark have worked with scientists in cognition, language, and education to perfect their teaching techniques. Students who are lucky enough to attend this school will have a decided edge in their academic background, capabilities, and motivation to learn and achieve.”

— **Linnea C. Ehri, Ph.D.**, *Distinguished Professor, Educational Psychology and Speech Language and Hearing Sciences, Graduate Center of the City University of New York*



“Through small classes, individualized instruction, supportive relationships, and ongoing assessment of students’ needs and abilities, Benchmark teachers foster students’ development of self-confidence and learning strategies essential for academic success. Through participation in continuous professional development, teachers employ current, research-based pedagogical methods designed to support their students’ learning.”

— **Richard Beach**, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota; Former President, Literacy Research Association

# GOAL 6

## SECURE OUR LONG-TERM FINANCIAL FUTURE.

Benchmark will create a flexible and sustainable financial model to ensure the legacy of Benchmark's mission and vision for generations to come.

### STRATEGY 1:

Review and refine the school's business and financial model, incorporating current best practices.

### STRATEGY 2:

Develop a campus master plan that appropriately guides our actions related to the maintenance and development of our facilities and the accomplishment of our strategic objectives.

### STRATEGY 3:

Establish a culture of giving in which those who have recognized or experienced the value of a Benchmark education embrace the opportunity to enable a new generation of students to benefit from a Benchmark education.

### STRATEGY 4:

Expand the school's endowment funds to support Benchmark's long-term strategic priorities, including but not limited to, tuition assistance, professional development, and facilities needs.



## STRATEGIC PLANNING STEERING COMMITTEE

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Rick Gaskins  
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Colleen O'Hara  
Ruth Payne  
Kristina Reisinger  
Ben Rogers '95  
Mark Thorburn

## STRATEGIC PLANNING RETREAT PARTICIPANTS

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*\*Term ended June 2015*

*^Term began June 2015*



“Benchmark is the absolute best model of how instruction and research are integrated. Teachers routinely reflect on their practice and how it benefits students. The staff works together for the benefit of students.”

— **Diane Barone**, Ed.D., Professor of Literacy, University of Nevada, Reno; President of the International Literacy Association (2015-2016)



# BenchmarkSCHOOL

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