

Leading With Value

An Interview With Gordon School's Head of School Dr. Noni Thomas López

Leading a school can be a challenging endeavor during even the best of times. Compound these challenges with events such as those we have experienced in 2020, and heads of school find themselves leading with their values. Reflecting inward can be a powerful way to navigate the many facets of leading, engaging, and uniting a school community. In an interview with EMA, **Dr. Noni Thomas López**, Head of School at Gordon School (RI), shares her insights and reflections about value-based leadership.



Heads of school face significant challenges in 2020. Can you talk about how this moment in global history is shaping how you approach leading the Gordon School community? What has been your process, philosophy, and/or approach to guiding the school in these unsettled times?

NTL: While this crisis is certainly like nothing I have faced in my leadership journey, I don't know that it has significantly shifted how I lead. If anything, it has affirmed for me how important it is for me to trust in my leadership gifts and not be tempted to shift too far into management mode. This is a challenge because this moment is requiring all school leaders to be on top of every detail of the school experience and get more in the weeds than many of us would like. Our communities, however, still need us to calm, to inspire, to be decisive, to communicate transparently, to foster collaboration and innovation, to set a positive and optimistic tone.

Effective leadership is not about checking off a list of tasks; it's about creating a culture of trust, safety, and belonging. That was true before COVID-19; it's true now; it will be true after. I try to follow what I call the Mufasa Principle: in times of crisis, remember who you are.

Gordon School has been a longtime leader in offering a progressive education. When considering the challenges our children are facing today, how would you describe the ways in which a progressive education is best preparing them to navigate these challenges? What kind of feedback have you received from current and prospective families who have purposefully sought a progressive education for their children as a response to current situations?

NTL: We know that children do not come into school as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge by adults. Children, of all ages, come into school with important understandings, relationships, values, and experiences. A progressive pedagogy honors and centers the voices of children, so children are empowered to ask questions, take risks, pursue their passions, and consider how their knowledge and gifts can be used to do good in the world. In order to address the challenges of today, we need young people who are not only critical thinkers and creative problem solvers, but also measure their success by the good they do in the world.

What we hear most often from parents about why they have chosen Gordon is that they want their children to love learning and they want them to be good people. They believe a strong academic program is important, but they want their children to be motivated by more than a desire for good grades. Our families want a meaningful and purposeful education for their child.

How has leading with your values shaped and benefited enrollment at your school?

NTL: One important thing to know about Gordon is that a key principle of our Family Individualized Tuition (FIT) model is that we do not negotiate our tuition prices. Affordability is an important decision-making metric for families, so what does this mean for Gordon when one of our peer schools can offer a family a lower tuition price? Our commitment to equitable tuition practices requires us to come up with powerful ways to make the case for investing in a Gordon education. That means making sure that families see that we consistently "walk our talk."

Our commitment to racial and socioeconomic diversity, for example, requires us to put stakes in the ground in enrollment management conversations. If lowering tuition is not a lever we are willing to pull, what do we lean on? The answer is doing what we say we're going to do. When families see transparency in their admissions journey, observe our follow through on our commitment to diversity in the 44% students of color, and experience a deep sense of community when they step on campus, then they can feel confident that their child will get the education they are paying for. And they will know that it is worth it.

Continued on page 42

Leading With Value *(continued)*

This past spring, stay-at-home orders were issued to combat the fast-moving outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This created an immediate need for both public and private schools to transition to remote learning. How (if at all) has this impacted enrollment at Gordon School? Many independent schools have been receiving an increase in inquiries from public school families. How do you see this affecting enrollment practices (both short- and long-term) for independent schools such as Gordon?

NTL: Gordon has received many inquiries and applications for this fall, and I am thrilled that we have seen our enrollment increase for the second year in a row. We always welcome interest from new families, but we have not and are not planning on making big changes to our enrollment practices. Yes, we will make more use of video and have plans for virtual tours, but I believe the most exciting opportunity for independent schools right now exists in the fact that more and more families are seeking out schools with a mission-driven, purpose-driven approach to educating children.

In the midst of a pandemic and a historic racial justice movement, I believe families are asking themselves what's really important, and I don't think it's makerspaces or a stronger remote learning program than their local public school. The families that have inquired about Gordon this summer and have signed on the dotted line have been seeking connection and community. I believe our enrollment success over the past two years can be attributed to the fact that we have focused on and become even more adept at relating our "why."

Can you describe how Gordon School educates and prepares faculty to apply multicultural practice in the classroom? How do you believe this professional development has best prepared teachers (at Gordon School and beyond) to incorporate social justice teaching in the classroom?

NTL: I am proud to say that Gordon has been committed to multicultural curriculum practice for more than twenty-five years. Grounded in courageous leadership from our former head of school and boards of trustees, Gordon avoided "one-offs" and provided consistent and ongoing professional development to faculty and staff so that we were growing a cadre of experts in this work from early childhood through middle school. Early on, this included hiring Enid Lee, one of the "founding mothers" of the antiracist, multicultural movement in education, as a consultant to the school. Gordon also provides spaces for faculty, staff, students, and parents to participate in race-based affinity groups so that we can engage in the important personal and interpersonal work necessary for developing a truly antiracist community.

Can you offer action steps and/or resources for other school leaders who would like to begin the important work dismantling the systemic racism that may exist within their schools?

NTL: I think the essential first step in this work is understanding the history of race in America. Bryan Stevenson says that we must talk about the ills of our past and their connection to today if we're to have any hope for truth and reconciliation. At Gordon, we are doing an all-school read of *Stamped from the Beginning* by Ibram X. Kendi and the young adult version by Jason Reynolds. Understanding the historical context of institutional racism in this country is an essential part of the Undoing Racism® workshops conducted by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, which is another great resource.

This historical conversation is foundational to antiracist work because it's important to understand that systems of racial oppression were constructed intentionally for a specific purpose. The hopeful news is that systems that were built can be dismantled. This is the hard and sacred work, and it must begin with an acknowledgment of and reckoning with our past.

What is your philosophy when it comes to talking to children — especially diverse groups of very young children, such as your community at Gordon — about racism and racial oppression?

NTL: Our philosophy is twofold. One, we believe that no child should feel as though they have to leave any parts of their identity outside of the school house doors in order to “fit in” at Gordon. Children learn best when they feel a deep sense of belonging. If that is a core belief, then we must develop a curriculum that reflects a child’s multiple identities and experiences and a curriculum that provides insight into the identities and experiences of others. This is the concept of “mirror and windows” developed by the National SEED Project.

Second, we believe that conversations about racial identity and racism should begin at an early age. We know that young children notice race. We also know that they take in societal messages about race, whether implicit or explicit. It is developmentally appropriate for children to categorize people by the color of their skin. The problem comes when they begin to associate negative attributes with skin color. Those messages must be interrupted in developmentally appropriate ways by thoughtful, caring adults inside and outside of the classroom.

The curriculum of a school is where its mission lives. If your school values inclusion, equity, and belonging, then conversations about race cannot live in assemblies, after-school clubs, and elective courses. They must be a part of the lifeblood of the classroom.

As we begin the 2020–2021 academic year, what do you consider to be the most essential principles, processes, and philosophies for a successful school year?

NTL: I have been thinking a lot lately about the tension between individual and collective needs in a community. This country and, if we’re honest with ourselves, independent schools place a high value on individual freedoms, expression, opinions, identities, and more. This is not a bad thing at all. Schools should be a place where all students learn to find their voice and should expect that they are respected and celebrated in the fullness of who they are. However, I worry that we are in a moment where many folks are seeing themselves as the whole, rather than a piece of the whole.

In the context of the pandemic and the fight for racial justice, our lives literally depend on each of us understanding the powerful relationship between the individual and the collective, between “me” and “we.” This is why we say “all lives can’t matter until Black lives matter.” Transcending our present circumstances will require us to embody the spirit of the South African concept of *ubuntu*: I am because you are.

My goal this year is to continue to foster a culture where we recognize, as President Barack Obama said in 2018, “that we are all bound together in ways that can be invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us.”

Dr. Noni Thomas López is the Head of School at The Gordon School (RI), a racially diverse nursery through eighth grade coeducational independent school in East Providence, Rhode Island. Child by child, The Gordon School community cultivates successful students by inspiring joyful learning, encouraging intellectual leadership, fostering an empathic spirit, and stimulating a drive for positive societal impact.

