MCDS STRATEGIC PLAN 2012

THE ARC OF ALIGNMENT:
MINDFUL STEPS
INTRODUCTION

Five years into the life of Marin Country Day School, the school song debuted, celebrating “A spirit always surging, with learning ever there, a school with moving purpose…” This lyric is as apt today as it was in 1962. As we embark upon the next five years of our school’s life—and the attendant strategic planning—we must look forward with purpose. But we must also look back and acknowledge the steady path our school has followed for the past 57 years.

In recent years, we have made great strides in a number of critical areas:

Program: We have mapped and reviewed our curriculum across grade levels and disciplines, begun to integrate principles of education for sustainability and design thinking, enhanced technology, and increased our team-oriented approach to professional development. Structural changes (reconfiguring the school into two divisions—Upper and Lower) and programmatic ones (grade-level team-based approach to teaching) have made MCDS a more dynamic institution.

Community: Our efforts through Community Connections 365 to acknowledge, understand, and embrace diversity in all forms resulted in a Statement of Community and Inclusion adopted by the Board in 2010. The CC365 initiative provides multiple avenues for engagement. Our 10-year-old Indexed Tuition program has provided access to an MCDS education to a wide range of families.

Financial Sustainability: Our successful $19.5 million Step Forward Campaign supported campus improvements that reflect our values and will serve the school for decades.

With such significant progress, MCDS is in an evolutionary, not a revolutionary, period. This reflects the enduring value of our Mission and Guiding Principles, which are as relevant today as they ever were. While their roots were planted in Strategic Plans 2000 and 2006, Innovation and Creativity, Community Connections 365 and our quest for Financial Sustainability are works in progress — initiatives that are at differing stages of development. Our goal with this Plan is to align these initiatives with one another to
ensure that our Program, Community, and Financial Sustainability goals are integrated and attainable. Through these alignment efforts, we will look forward with moving purpose, mindful of our past and prepared to meet the future.

**Strategic Plan 2012 rests on some key assumptions:**

- *The foundation of our curriculum remains the core of an MCDS education.* MCDS blends the traditional and progressive to great success.
- *Academic excellence, balanced with strong arts and athletics, is the bedrock of our school.*
- *MCDS students must develop skills and competencies that will prepare them for a changing, globally connected world.*
- *While understanding and respecting our past, we will pursue our future through innovation, creativity, community engagement and institutional advancement.*

Some elements of the 25-year Master Plan (with regard to physical campus improvements) have not been completed. While building remains to be done, Strategic Plan 2012 will not focus on capital improvements. The community feedback regarding physical improvements (from the 2011 Strategic Plan Survey) will be incorporated and reconciled with the Master Plan for future implementation.
THE ARC OF ALIGNMENT

During this past year, Head of School Lucinda Lee Katz spoke about the school’s history in terms of “arcs.” In the early years we walked an Arc of Sacrifice and Scarcity as parents, students, administrators, and faculty founded, built, and nurtured this school to life. Once on a firm foundation and against a backdrop of booming growth in our local and national economies, we walked an Arc of Care and Abundance as our community grew and took on new ideas and challenges. Now, with 50+ years of learning, building, and fundraising in pursuit and support of our mission and guiding principles, we embark on an Arc of Balance and Moderation—an Arc of Alignment.

As we seek to integrate and align our goals around academic programs, community, and stewardship, we begin by reviewing past plans and asking what has succeeded and what could be improved. MCDS is skilled at blending rigor with fun. Our students develop strong foundations in language, writing, math, science, and the arts, and learn how to use these tools to analyze and solve problems in age-appropriate ways. Our past strategic plans have stressed the importance of rigorous academics. Recent neuroscience now teaches that learning to apply these traditional skills to real-world problems is equally essential. The future is always unknown. However, when equipped with skills to extrapolate from what they know and apply this knowledge to solve new mysteries, our children will be prepared for what may lie ahead.

We describe the practical skills that help students apply what they know as “habits of mind.” MCDS has a long tradition of teaching habits of mind. In particular, MCDS has always recognized the importance of mindfulness. Being mindful means deliberately and non-judgmentally paying attention to the present moment, our surroundings, and the presence of others. We can be mindful at rest or mindful in motion. What matters is that we give ourselves the time and space to make

Susan Smalley, PhD & Diana Watson, Fully Present Ideas for Exploration and Alignment

By applying mindfulness, you can...learn to take an ordinary experience, give it your present moment attention, and experience it as extraordinary. ... With many moments of life taking on extraordinary qualities, you are likely to feel more ‘alive.’ Sometimes sights and sounds seem stronger, more varied and textured. Spicing up life with mindfulness can change the way you approach your ordinary activities and bring you new enthusiasm and joy.

Susan Smalley, PhD & Diana Watson, Fully Present Ideas for Exploration and Alignment

Art Costa: Summary of Evidence Supporting Habits of Mind
connections among ideas and experiences; time to patiently inhabit the gap where epiphanies and “aha!” moments are born. Mindfulness is characterized by curiosity, openness, intentionality, and acceptance—characteristics long valued at MCDS.

Our commitment to living in the present has enabled MCDS to nurture and celebrate childhood by embracing children as they are. Being present in the moment has also allowed our children to learn with the same spirit of inquiry and joy, whether in tents or in LEED-certified buildings. But the art of mindfulness is not just for our children; it is an essential skill for all members of our community to learn and to practice. In these uncertain times, when economic volatility plays out against rapid and continuous technological change, mindfulness is an anchor. We must practice it consistently, conscientiously, and in age-appropriate ways.

The Arc of Alignment—and this strategic plan—take their place as the next in a progression of steps in the evolution of MCDS. We have stepped up, stepped forward, stepped boldly. Our goal now is to take mindful steps as we ask what is essential to our program, community, and finances—and then weave these elements into a cohesive whole. The Arc of Alignment builds our path toward a sustainable future and the principle of “mindfulness” will bring us there.
PROGRAM: Where *Traditional* meets *Progressive*

When we say that our path is evolutionary rather than revolutionary, we affirm that we will continue to blend traditional and progressive approaches to education. To this blend, we propose to further integrate critical and creative thinking skills.

Within the construct of design thinking, students build their skills and deepen their understanding. Creativity and innovation provide our students with multiple and natural opportunities to effectively engage their traditional skills. We want classrooms filled with curious and engaged students working with teachers to apply skills that are directly linked to action.

**Design Thinking, Innovation, and Creativity:** Design thinking is an iterative, intuitive and deductive process that students use to analyze a problem, determine possible solutions, and assess the likelihood of success between options. As students build skills and understanding, research the needs of a situation, and recreate their designs to meet those needs, the process deepens.

**Mindfulness:** MCDS has a rich tradition of teaching mindfulness, beginning with Energy Time in kindergarten. We want students in every grade to continue to practice deliberate awareness of their relationship to others, mastery of their own energy, and conscious connection to the natural world.
Critical and creative thinking skills help MCDS students deepen their engagement with ideas and concepts—as well as with one another—in order to:

- Make meaningful connections among ideas.
- Work collaboratively and cooperatively.

Mindfulness reinforces our blending of critical and creative thinking into the mix of traditional and progressive approaches. Mindfulness has also grown in importance as a balance to the sensory stimulation and accelerated pace that technology creates. The lure of technology affects us all, and the expectation of instant information has become ubiquitous. While students must master technology as a tool, they must also understand that much information is just noise. By learning and practicing mindfulness they will discover their own insights. They will come to recognize what they know and understand what they don’t—and be curious and resilient enough to take risks despite the possibility of failure.

Jon Kabat-Zinn on Mindfulness
Alignment Goals:

- Continue the Education for Sustainability (EfS) curricular integration work from Strategic Plan 2006. As EfS encompasses significantly more than recycling and resource preservation, it is a critical component of our program. EfS is learning that links knowledge, inquiry, and action to help students build a healthy future for their communities and the planet.

- Develop an integrated STEM program, K-8, to strengthen core skills while simultaneously building the capacity for innovation and creativity.

- Review and enhance the depth and reach of our visual and performing arts program.

- Explore ways to integrate the arts with STEM in order to strengthen both and further promote transdisciplinary skills.

- Refine our program so that it integrates traditional academic skills with the habits of mind that will inspire our students to apply their skills to action.

- Consider an enhanced after-school program that extends the learning day for students, particularly in grades K-5, and which might provide opportunities for them to hone their creative, arts, STEM, and design thinking skills.

- Allow students and teachers time to cultivate and practice mindfulness.

- Provide ample professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to bring these ideas to life in their classrooms.
COMMUNITY

The evolution and continued success of our Program cannot be realized without a broadly diverse community. Research shows that groups of diverse thinkers are better at solving problems than homogeneous groups—better even than groups comprised of individuals with higher ability. Students cannot develop thoughtful perspectives and a diversity of skills if everyone in the room has the same story.

The vision of a community that respects and values each of its members underlies every strategic priority in this plan. MCDS is a community that lives its values year-round, not just when school is in session. The CC-365 initiative recognizes that within any community, people will have multiple and complex social identities that both connect them to and distinguish them from others. Each of us has something to teach and something to learn. By understanding and embracing multiple perspectives, our community members can communicate across a range of human differences. We are enriched when diverse people, ideas, and perspectives are part of our daily lives. To realize our mission and values, each of us must build and cultivate our community by developing and practicing cultural competency: the will and ability to create, nurture, and sustain authentic relationships across differences.

We are an intentionally diverse community and seek to grow stronger by focusing on recruitment and retention of a broad and diverse range of faculty, staff, families, and students. Part of that effort will include shoring up our support for differences as a school and as a community. In support of this, the curriculum for all grades should reflect multicultural values. Faculty and students need support to develop the skills to seek out different viewpoints, include missing voices, and acquire cultural competency. We must also continue to explore ways in which an enhanced and vibrant after-school program can promote MCDS as a neighborhood and a community accessible to all types of families.
In addition, our parents, students, faculty, and staff must model volunteerism as a way in which each of us can contribute to the life of the school. While each of our personal situations differs, a commitment, particularly by parents, to use their skills, talents, time, and resources to benefit the whole community demonstrates that each of us can make a difference.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, we understand that communication is essential to building and sustaining community. Whether adult to adult, adult to student, or student to student, any form of communication requires us to acknowledge that some conversations will be harder than others. The willingness to engage in difficult conversations while maintaining respectful openness to the concerns of others is essential to our success as a community. Like our core values of respect, responsibility, and compassion, cultural competency skills can be taught, modeled, and practiced. We must all work to forge and maintain a strong home-school connection as well as connections among all the adults within our community. We must continually reassess and improve our overall communication strategy for disseminating all sorts of information in timely and accessible ways.
Alignment Goals:

- Support all members of the MCDS community to honor and value multiple ideas and experiences, seek missing voices, and embrace each other’s stories.
- Enable our students to understand that they cannot achieve individual success without maintaining the health of the relationships and resources upon which our lives depend.
- Develop and cultivate cultural competency skills, K-8, that will help us communicate effectively across a range of human experience and difference.
- Establish the environment and methods for honing these skills in the classrooms, on the playing fields, and outside of the school.
- Continue to ensure that our K-8 Service Learning program is linked to our goals for Program and Community.
- Continue to explore ways to utilize an enhanced, vibrant, and accessible after-school program to promote MCDS as a community.
- Examine our communication tools, strategy, and content in order to discover how to effectively communicate all types of messages.
FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY  Our aspirations for Program and Community cannot be realized without adequate funding. Our financial choices directly impact the scope of our program and the composition of our community.

Fiscal responsibility has long been a hallmark of MCDS. We continue to operate with a balanced annual budget, have built our endowment to $17 million, and have established significant operating reserves, despite an unpredictable economic environment. Fundraising remains exemplary. One hundred percent of our faculty and staff and nearly 100 percent of our families participate in the Annual Fund each year. We raised $19.5 million to improve our learning and community spaces. As we align our thinking across curricular and community initiatives, we must revisit our financial assumptions to ensure that they reflect our mission and goals. Financial accessibility and financial sustainability cannot be mutually exclusive.

The next five years will present a range of decisions about MCDS’ finances. We must make intentional choices about the remaining debt repayment associated with the Step Forward campus improvements, while simultaneously understanding the impact these choices have on the overall accessibility of our program. We must also examine other assumptions underlying our financial model to assess their effects on creating and nurturing the community we seek.
Most independent schools like MCDS depend on tuition payments to fund the majority of their activities. MCDS is committed to a tuition model that is transparent, fair, and best suited to enhancing the economic diversity of our student community. MCDS’ current tuition model includes a “gap” between the amount charged for tuition and the actual cost of educating each student. Moreover, other costs such as after-school programs and tutoring are often billed separately to families. We will evaluate this model, as well as reexamine both the goals and the design of our Indexed Tuition model, to ensure that our financial plans and assumptions are aligned with our goals for program and community.

MCDS is committed to thinking broadly and creatively about every aspect of our operating model. We will look for new revenue opportunities beyond tuition, philanthropy, and endowment, which would both improve our finances and expand our mission. Leveraging the use of our campus and our unique programs and curriculum are natural areas to explore for revenue enhancement.

Alignment Goals:

- Recognize the importance and inherent challenges of balancing and prioritizing our financial resources in direct connection to our programmatic and community goals.

- Examine the history, goals, and possibilities for adjustment and growth of our Indexed Tuition program and endowment.

- Continue to provide the resources necessary to attract and retain exceptional faculty and staff.

- Evaluate proposals from the Community and Program implementation committees with regard to financial impacts. Included will be issues related to the continuation and possible enhancement of our pilot after-school programs.

- Explore ways in which we can nurture a diverse and inclusive community while ensuring a financially healthy future.
CONCLUSION

Building on the work accomplished by our community in implementing Strategic Plans 2000 and 2006, the next five years will continue to establish MCDS as an academically and socially vibrant place for children, families, faculty, and staff. The past two strategic plans each built on the school’s rich traditions to reinforce the excellence of its curriculum while connecting the community more deeply to the greater world. With this plan, our community takes mindful steps to align the elements that define a sustainable, responsible institution providing a distinctive education: program, community, and financial sustainability.

As we have successfully blended the best of the progressive and traditional educational models, we now aspire with moving purpose to blend the best of our past with the needs of our future. Strategic Plan 2012 begins with academic excellence realized through a broadly diverse and inclusive community. Our students’ academic achievement will be enhanced by learning to communicate across differences, to master technology, to practice mindfulness and to bring academic ideas to life through problem-solving and action. Thus equipped, MCDS students can use their unique perspectives to work collaboratively, to design and innovate, and to envision, create, and sustain a better world.

There are all kinds of rooms in all kinds of places. Every space is what you make it. But in the end, building a good life isn’t about where you are. It’s about how you decide to think and live. Place your index finger on your temple and tap twice. It’s all in there.

—William Powers, Hamlet’s Blackberry
THE PLANNING PROCESS

Our work on this plan began with the Board of Trustees’ annual retreat in October 2011. There the Board agreed that the likely areas of focus would be Community, Innovation and Creativity, and Financial Sustainability. A Strategic Planning Implementation Committee was formed to develop a process and sequence for collecting community input, crafting the plan itself, and developing a companion piece of action steps for implementation.

A subcommittee of the Implementation Committee created a survey administered to all parents and faculty/staff in winter 2011-12. In tandem, the CC365 Leadership Committee sent out a survey as part of the NAIS Assessment of Inclusion and Multiculturalism (AIM) process (this included student and young alumni components). Two Town Hall meetings were held to report on the results of each survey and collect additional feedback from the community. We enlisted the help of an outside consultant, Mary Stayne of Kielty Goldsmith, to compile and report on the results of the community survey to protect confidentiality. The AIM survey results were also compiled by a third party, InsightLink. The results of both surveys were complementary and consistent in identifying areas of strength and challenge as well as priorities and aspirations.

A small committee of Trustees was charged with drafting (and redrafting) the plan, which was then reviewed by school administrators and a team of 14 volunteer faculty/staff readers. After incorporating their input, the plan was presented and ratified by the Board in December 2012.

We are grateful to the many community members whose hands and minds critiqued, shaped, and refined the plan and whose hands will bring it to life.
APPENDIX

Education for Sustainability: The Fish Game
http://bit.ly/TBSi8r

A Call for Design Thinking: Tim Brown on TED.com

STEM Challenge

California STEM Summit 2012