

Dear Watershed Community,

I was in St. Louis last week at the National Association of Independent School (NAIS) Annual Conference and I noticed an exciting sense of change in the air. A sense that we need to rethink the role of independent schools in the challenging world we live in. A sense that to meet this moment, schools need to think big about purpose.

NAIS President Debra Wilson, J.D., opened the conference with a challenge – suggesting that we need to have hard conversations about the purpose of independent schools. The opening keynote speaker, Michael Sandel, Ph.D. (author of [The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?](#)) began with the understatement, “Things aren’t going very well in our civic life.” He then moved on to talk about the deepening gap between winners and losers in our society, and the role that our societal focus on meritocracy has played in this. He noted that we often talk about distributive justice (distributing financial rewards more broadly), but too rarely talk about “*contributive* justice” – valuing all contributions to our society – and ensuring that we all have the opportunity to make important contributions to society. After Sandel’s talk, Morva McDonald, Ph.D., NAIS VP of Leadership and Governance, posed this simple, and challenging, question to the thousands of educators and school leaders in the audience: “What is our responsibility to the common good?”

It was particularly exciting to hear this focus on purpose and the common good, because it aligned with the presentation I did together with Sara Mierke (of Anchor Education) and Ross Peters (of Explo Elevate and a member of the NAIS board): “Expanding our Purpose: Leveraging Independent School Resources for the Common Good.” We shared our premise: that independent schools have an opportunity, and indeed a responsibility, to look beyond themselves and work to improve our communities. We also argued that leveraging resources (intellectual resources, financial resources, and facilities resources) for the common good is not only a benefit for our broader communities, it is better for student learning and better for institutional sustainability. Many of you have heard me talk about these ideas before. Following the conference, I’m more energized than ever about this, because more and more educational leaders and educators are thinking in this direction. And I’m even more convinced of the value of Watershed’s leadership in this arena.

Thanks for reading!

Warmly,
Tim