

# THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

By Donna Davis

New independent school models smash traditional boundaries as their veteran leaders incorporate the practices that remain relevant and leave many others behind.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

- New schools downplay or forgo campuses, sports and other big-budget items for sharper focus on academics, fewer financial strains.
- By appealing to investors, for-profit entities may find faster access to capital and less pressure to raise funds.
- Starting from scratch allows for zero-based curriculum planning based on best practices globally.



See [netassets.org](http://netassets.org) for more about emerging school models, including perspectives from two leading change agents on "what innovation looks like" in independent schools today.

Photo courtesy of Avenues:  
The World School

**T**hey're the pioneers of the new independent school frontier — seasoned administrators and educators from established schools who are bringing their experience and expertise to a new breed of private education. From the sector's financial and educational challenges has emerged an atmosphere of innovation and outright disruption as diverse as the change-makers themselves, producing micro schools, online schools, personalized learning schools and global schools; for-profit and not-for-profit schools; startups and established schools. Some charge lower-than-market average tuition, others match or exceed their markets in cost. Some enroll hundreds of students, others feature a model that matches a student with a single teacher.

Net Assets talked with a few of these veterans to examine what they have learned and unlearned, what they have kept and discarded, what established schools can learn from the new models, and where they think the independent school of the future is headed.

"Now is not the time to hang onto the status quo and traditions of the past," said NBOA President and CEO Jeff Shields. "One of the key values of independent education is its ability to experiment and innovate, constantly stretching and breaking boundaries. This ability is critically important today, perhaps more than ever."

was forming with the goal of creating an international school.

Three years later, in the fall of 2012, the \$65 million for-profit startup opened its first campus in New York City. It now has 1,400 students and charges tuition of \$43,000 a year. The goal: Teach students to become world citizens and promote that mission by opening campuses in major cities worldwide. Avenues will open a second campus in São Paulo in 2018, with plans for more as part of its global network.

"After a few months I realized it was more than just fun," explained Tingley, now Avenues' chief academic officer, of his decision to stay. "It was an opportunity to effect a new design of a school. If you become head at Exeter, it's a wonderful opportunity, but it's also a school that has been around 200 years. A lot is locked in place, so you are involved in incremental changes to do something that is good."

In his current position, Tingley feels he has tapped into an "entrepreneurial spirit that I probably knew I had but not as directly as a school head." Part of that spirit involved creating a new curriculum. "It's very difficult in a well-established, highly successful school to do zero-based curriculum planning and put everything aside to look at what's best around the world."

At Exeter, Tingley's talent as a story-teller helped him connect with donors in the not-for-profit world; he

helped raised \$352 million for a capital campaign, a record amount for an independent secondary school. The same skill transferred to Avenues' startup environment and its appeals to investors. "When you are dealing with a brand-new school, everything is a story," he said. "You have to get people excited about the vision of what the school can do."

He added, though, that many challenges are universal almost regardless of a school's provenance or reputation, such as achieving growth while attracting a diverse enrollment. Financial aid for a startup like Avenues presents a bigger challenge than at a school like Exeter, with a \$1 billion-plus endowment. "It has resources we don't have access to," he said. "But we have a good financial aid program and are confident we can handle that."

Photos courtesy of Avenues: The World School



## AVENUES: THE WORLD SCHOOL

Global network

Tuition: \$43,000

New York City

Nursery-12th grade, 1,400 students

For-profit

[avenues.org](http://avenues.org)



TY TINGLEY

When Ty Tingley retired from Phillips Exeter Academy in 2009 after 12 years as principal, he was "ready to do what every retiring head plans to do — write a book and work on my fly fishing and do a bit of consulting." Then he got a call from a friend, asking him to join a think tank that education entrepreneur Chris Whittle







Blyth-Templeton Academy rents rooms in the historic Hill Center and largely considers the city its campus. Top right: Temp Keller, co-founder, and Lee Palmer, head of school.

## BLYTH-TEMPLETON ACADEMY

Experiential learning/micro-school

Tuition: \$15,520

Washington, D.C.

Grades 9-12, 21 students

For-profit

[blythtempleton.org](http://blythtempleton.org)

Before becoming head of school at Blyth-Templeton Academy in Washington, D.C., veteran educator Lee Palmer had been troubled by some of the issues she believed faced independent schools.

“Number one to me was student learning, but also environmental sustainability, financial sustainability and how to provide the best possible education to the highest number of people in terms of keeping costs down,” said Palmer, head of school at BTA and

formerly the upper school principal at Sidwell Friends School. “All those things that we are trying to do here had been on my mind for a long time.”

When she learned of the opportunity to head a new school co-founded by Temp Keller, of U.S. based Templeton Learning, and Sam Blyth, of Canada’s Blyth Academy, which has 14 other schools, she was intrigued. “It was a very appealing match to the things I had been thinking about that would be interesting to put into action.”

BTA opened in 2015 in the historic Hill Center in Washington’s Capitol Hill neighborhood, and a New York City school is tentatively scheduled to start classes in fall 2018. The goal is student-centered, global experiential education at an accessible price — full-time, four-term tuition is \$15,520 (and yes, financial aid is available).

Palmer faced a steep learning curve in establishing BTA, but she found many aspects of the process enjoyable. “I was doing everything associated with starting a school,” including finding a location and gaining accreditation.

She also had to unlearn “some of the things that go along with having a structure in place that you have to fit into, rather than what we were doing, which was creating our structure from scratch.” This flipped scenario provided a “wow” moment. “We don’t have to follow a particular tradition or culture... We said what this is going to be is the best program we can offer to students in Washington, D.C.”

Among other distinctions from most independent schools, BTA follows a block schedule and has an average class size of eight. The goal is to allow students to engage in deeper learning by spending



several hours a day on just two subjects, Palmer said. With limited classroom space and no “campus” to speak of, students also take full advantage of the nation’s capital as a learning resource; visits to the city’s cultural and historical offerings are the norm, rather than the rare field trip. “You can literally go anywhere in the city and come back and do something meaningful,” she said. “When you are planning a field trip at a traditional school, you have to think about the impact on the other classes. We don’t have those challenges.”

The nimble business model also attracted Palmer. Tuition is well below the D.C. standard of \$30,000 or more. That’s partly because all administrative and financial functions are handled out of Blyth Academy’s corporate headquarters in Toronto. Another factor: BTA has no expensive campus maintenance expenses. Instead, the school rents classroom and office spaces in the high-ceilinged Hill Center, which was constructed under Abraham Lincoln as a naval hospital and functions today also as an art gallery and community space. “We do these things not only because they are educationally valid, but also because it doesn’t take anything from our budget,” Palmer said.

That accessibility has attracted a wide range of families and students — some who live in the neighborhood, others who are looking for a small school, lower tuition or individualized learning. “There are students for whom this model would not work because they want the football team and a lot of the things that are very expensive,” Palmer said. “For all the students who come here, it has been their decision. They have visited and they have fallen in love with the school.”

Sue Belcher is director of Lakeside School’s micro-school. Scheduled to open in fall 2018, the new school will operate out of a leased facility.

## LAKESIDE SCHOOL

Micro-school branch of established school

Expected tuition: around \$17,000

Seattle

Grades 9-12, 160 students (maximum)

Not-for-profit

[lakesideschool.org](http://lakesideschool.org)



BERNIE NOE

Lakeside School holds a top spot as one of Seattle’s premier independent schools — think famous alumni like Bill Gates and Paul Allen. But with tuition of \$33,280 and an acceptance rate of just 18 percent, school leaders knew they were missing the chance to reach many students. They decided to create a micro-school.

In reaching this decision, Lakeside Head of School Bernie Noe spent 18 months learning about new education models in the United States and abroad, and he took a close look at Seattle-area demographics and the cost of private school education — something many middle- and upper-middle-class families could not afford. The forthcoming micro-school, to be located near the Seattle Center entertainment area, is scheduled to open in fall 2018 with 80 freshmen and sophomores. The goal is to grow by 40 students per year until it reaches full enrollment of 160 students in grades 9 through 12.

“With Lakeside School’s history of an increasing number of applications and our generous endowment, I believe there will always be a role for Lakeside School as it currently exists,” Noe wrote

## MAKING SCHOOL PROFITABLE

Many of the schools highlighted in this article are for-profit, breaking in tradition from the not-for-profit independent school model.

This tax status motivation is controversial, for sure. Detractors say some for-profit school models emphasize money over mission.

Recent news has scrutinized for-profit higher education institutions that have closed, left students burdened with loan debt or provided less-than-promised instruction.

But a growing chorus of others say the for-profit K-12 model offers unique advantages to students. Proponents counter:

- Mission and students remain the center. “What could/should education look like in the 21st century is schooling that begins with a focus on the ‘learning to be’ component,” said Temp Keller, co-founder of Blyth-Templeton Academy.
- It helps create new schools faster. Ty Tingley: “We thought about starting Avenues as a not-for-profit, but given the capital costs of what we are trying to do none of us would live long enough to raise the money. If you find investors interested in education and show them a prudent business plan, you start with a much higher probability of success.”
- Leaders can concentrate on education. Kate Cicchelli of Bennett Day School: “It allows me to focus on working with parents and teachers and building the program, observing and giving feedback, and I don’t have to focus on fundraising where the head of school is often spending time.”
- A greater emphasis on fiscal discipline can keep tuition costs down, increasing accessibility. BASIS founders Michael and Olga Block started with charter schools in 1998. “They learned how you operate some of the very best schools in America and the world on an incredibly tight budget,” Mark Reford of BASIS Independent Schools said, noting that the average state payment today for Arizona schools is \$6,109 per student.
- It’s here (and abroad) to stay. Reford: “Clearly the for-profit private school model dominates in the rest of the world, and the reason is simple: A lot of capital is required to set up a new school. Those that are struggling and lack large endowments are not going to be able to compete for good teachers and managers, or provide the learning culture a good for-profit school can provide.”





## INFINITE POSSIBILITIES?

It can be difficult to neatly categorize every new independent school. Some blur the lines or include features of several models, like Blyth-Templeton Academy with its micro-school size and experiential outlook. Here are a few broad examples of paths schools are taking.

### Micro-school: the one-room schoolhouse of the 21st century

Micro-schools usually have fewer than 150 students — sometimes as few as six — but generally strive to personalize education while keeping costs down. Two established players in this space are AltSchool, whose network has six campuses so far, and Acton Academy, founded in 2009 in Austin, Texas, and now with 10 schools and plans for more through its franchise program.

### Diploma-granting online school: born in higher ed

Several universities, including Stanford, began launching these in the early 2000s primarily for high school-age elite athletes and performers, but their offerings have expanded to attract a broader range of students. Other examples include brick-and-mortar Oaks Christian School, in Westlake Village, California, which in 2011 started an online high school program targeting home-schooled students as well as other students seeking a Christian education and flexible schedule.

### Personalized learning: one student, one teacher, one topic

The Fusion Education Group has opened more than 40 Fusion Academy campuses for grades 6 through 12. The model appeals to gifted learners as well as students with learning differences or who are transitioning

from boarding schools or treatment programs. Full-time tuition tops \$40,000.

### Global school: spanning the globe

These schools support a worldwide network of campuses where students share their learning and educators can share best practices. The curriculum emphasizes global knowledge. Avenues: The World School, for example, immerses students in Spanish or Mandarin instruction. GEMS Education, founded in Dubai in 1959, is an international education company with schools in 14 countries.

### Progressive: learning by doing

Based on the vision of the 20th-century educational reformer John Dewey, the model has many adherents. Bennett Day School in Chicago says its students are “engaging in activities and lessons which help them develop the problem solving and critical thinking skills that are essential to participation in a modern democratic society.”

### Experiential: a hands-on approach

As at Blyth-Templeton Academy, students take advantage of their surroundings. The Association of Experiential Education describes student-led, student-centered learning in which “experiences are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results.”

centralizing business, communications and development functions on the Lakeside campus.

The new school will also go about hiring differently. “In many independent schools, you are either a teacher or administrator,” Belcher noted. “What if teachers had the opportunity to do both? We are looking for innovative people who will embrace the opportunity to develop this new model and school in its early stages.”

The curriculum will be recognizable as Lakeside’s, but with unique elements that come from the new school’s size and location — including using the city as a “lab,” teaching students how to learn and helping them acquire “skills to be successful in jobs we don’t even know exist yet,” Belcher said.

For more about Lakeside’s micro-school, see [goo.gl/4UQDRU](http://goo.gl/4UQDRU).

## BENNETT DAY SCHOOL

Progressive

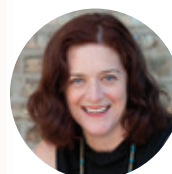
Tuition: \$19,554-\$26,644

Chicago (two locations)

PreK-2 (additional grades through upper school planned), 102 students

For-profit

[bennettday.org](http://bennettday.org)



KATE CICCHELLI

Kate Cicchelli has always been part of a progressive educational environment, both as an alumna and teacher leader at Frances

Parker School. Now she has taken that perspective and experience to another Chicago school — Bennett Day School — as co-founder, principal and chief academic officer.

Working with co-founder Cameron Smith, Cicchelli opened Bennett Day’s first campus for preK students in 2014. Two years later, the school added a second campus for senior kindergarten through second grade. Most recently, in February, Bennett Day announced it would add an upper school in 2019 in response to demand. Tuition is \$19,554 for preK and \$26,644 for the older students.

The atmosphere at Bennett Day is “unabashedly progressive,” Cicchelli said, both in its pedagogy and outlook.

about the micro-school. “Our model preserves the essence of Lakeside’s academic education by providing world-class academic courses, vibrant student-faculty relationships, a diverse body of students and adults, and clubs and activities based on student interest.”

Sue Belcher, micro-school director, said the project has been a lesson both in pedagogy and economics. Rather than a multi-acre campus with all the classroom and athletics facilities that Lakeside School enjoys, the micro-school will

exist in an economical leased space.

“Our decisions about real estate are grounded in the foundational vision for the micro-school,” Belcher said. “What makes a great school is talented teachers and a world-class curriculum, not a fancy building.”

Trustees designated \$300,000 for research and development and another \$1 million for startup costs. In addition to leasing space, the micro-school will realize cost savings by not offering sports or on-campus arts programs and by

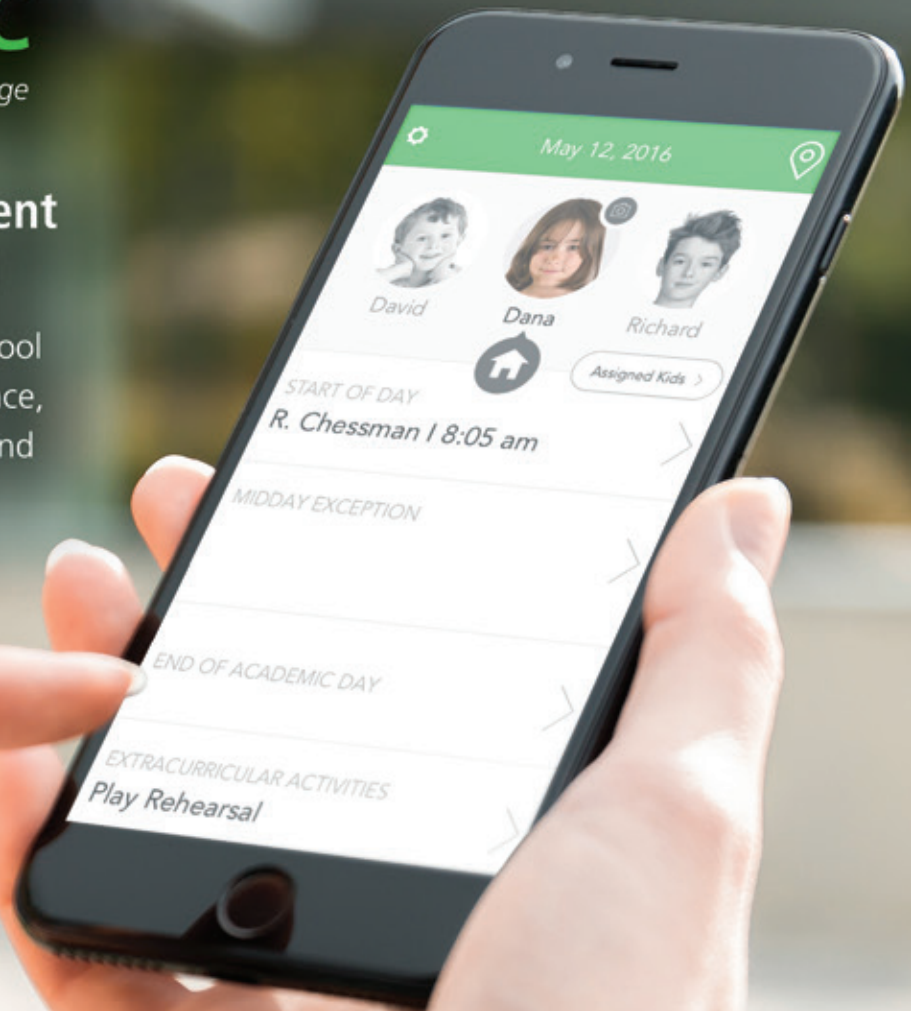




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Under the Reggio Emilia approach, questioning and willingness to change are imperative. “In a new school, we constantly have to look at what we are doing and how it will lead to skill-building,” she said. “We have a set of developmental milestones, but we don’t have a fixed curriculum we repeat every year. It’s a lot of work because you are constantly reinventing but it means you are constantly responding to the people in the room.”

But even the most progressive established schools can become complacent, something Bennett Day plans to guard against. “You have a lot of freedom, but things quickly become traditions, even after you have done them for the first time, for faculty, students, parents and alumni. Those very ‘traditions’ that began as progressive and responsive can actually become an obstacle to progressive learning,” Cicchelli said.

Bennett’s for-profit model is “a new way of thinking about education” for Cicchelli. She said she has not had to make program decisions based on finances. Instead, the main decision-maker is simply developing programs, asking, “Is this in the best interest of kids?” She clarified, though, “that we are disciplined in what we add and take away. Mission can be diluted by adding too much new programming before evaluating what you have or what you need. Our greatest outcome is the development of whole human beings.”

Photo courtesy of BASIS Independent Schools



## BASIS INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

### National network

Tuition: \$24,000-\$29,500, depending on location and grade

Brooklyn, Manhattan, Silicon Valley, McLean (Va.), Fremont (Calif.)

Grades and enrollment vary by school

For-profit

[basisindependent.com](http://basisindependent.com)



MARK REFOR

After some two decades as a teacher and administrator in established independent schools, Mark Reford concluded that the traditional stand-alone private school model had become obsolete. “Business officers at traditional private schools, heads and chairs of boards have been talking since the ‘90s of the unsustainability and their anxiety about the unhealthily privileged and limited social culture that their tuition levels have created,” he said. “But like the U.S. auto industry of the 1970s, it’s all talk and no action. Meanwhile, the world moves on... People like us offer something that’s better and a better value.”

Reford, who had been a teacher and administrator at Georgetown Day and Sidwell Friends schools, joined BASIS Independent Schools in 2013, when the company (founded in 1998) decided to expand beyond its top-ranked and academically rigorous charter schools into the independent school world. The move was designed to bring the BASIS mission to metropolitan areas where opening public charter schools would be difficult due to restrictive regulations, and at a tuition level more families could afford.

“It’s not that hard to run one really good school if you’re halfway competent,” he said. “But what is much more interesting and challenging is how do you offer 20,000 kids or more a high-quality education? I was interested in learning how to manage that scale and how to sustain and develop quality and innovation across the whole network of schools.”

Coming into the new world of BASIS independent schools was both “exactly what I wanted” and “a real shock” to Reford. Suddenly, he found himself

“working with people who were very entrepreneurial and who took for granted we would be opening two, three, four new schools a year.” In many cases, his colleagues also believed “the conventional wisdom is actually more often than not unhelpful.”

BASIS Independent Schools rejects the “culture of more” that Reford said typifies many standalone schools. “One of the things we are careful about is not to spend ourselves onto a tuition escalator that you cannot get off.” For example, independent school facilities are often world-class, but that’s not necessarily the same as putting teaching first.

Many established schools that ignored BASIS Independent Schools when it entered their markets are now paying attention, Reford said. “Our schools are filling to capacity and we are very excited about what the next five years hold. Why do you need to charge \$45,000 to \$50,000 and spend so much time and moral capital on raising money from rich donors, when a school like BASIS Independent McLean can offer a much higher academic standard at 60 percent of the price?” **N**



**Donna Davis** is a freelance writer based in Boulder, Colorado. A contributor to Net Assets since 2008, she specializes in education-related topics.

## RECOMMENDED READING

**Unschooling Rules: 55 Ways to Unlearn What We Know about Schools and Rediscover Education**, by Clark Aldrich

**Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns**, by Clayton Christensen, Michael Horn and Curtis Johnson

**Seeing What’s Next: Using the Theories of Innovation to Predict Industry Change**, by Clayton Christensen, Scott Anthony and Erik Roth

**How Stella Saved the Farm: a Tale about Making Innovation Happen**, by Vijay Govindarajan, Chris Trimble and Keny Widjaja

**The Other Side of Innovation: Solving the Execution Challenge**, by Vijay Govindarajan and Chris Trimble

**Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That’s Transforming Education**, by Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica