

Connecting Values to Resources

Jake Becker

I am a recovering idealistic Christian school teacher. When I began, I wanted my leadership to help all my fellow teachers; I would improve systems and empower teachers to serve our students in amazingly caring and insightful ways. I was going to serve people and leadership was going to be simple.

But leadership is not simple. Over a decade after taking the job, my biggest challenge as head of school remains navigating the maze of competing interests and timelines with perpetually limited resources. My desire to empower staff to serve children well is still there, but leadership feels like it is the opposite of simple, especially where the budget is concerned. Sometimes, it feels like I'm hardly serving anyone well.

By God's grace, in the last six years at The City School, enrollment has grown by nearly 30%; we've also merged schools across denominational lines, added two campuses, changed our name, and are looking to more than double in size in the next 10 years. Children are indeed being transformed in partnership with their families. Philadelphia needs more good schools, and we want all children to experience the peace only Jesus can provide.

Moving out of the morass and complexity of leadership to create healthy change takes clarity. Your job description probably could run on for pages, but my core responsibilities are exactly the same as yours: *Leaders connect values to resources.*

Your role as a school leader is to connect clear and actionable values with the people and money that align with and support those values.

From casting a vision to teacher morale to daily tough decisions, you are always connecting values to resources. In fact, *your primary financial responsibility is to clarify what your school values.* Once you are clear about what you care about, you can make decisions to advance your values. Your budget should change as a result. Clarity is a collective effort that starts by asking the right question for your context. The process is probably more harrowing and more critical than the answers themselves.

What do you value at your school? How do you figure it out? I have found greater clarity by considering how our school engages with the following five core commitments, which I think are universal aspects of a school following Jesus. I have provided brief commentary from The City School's perspective to help you get started:

- 1. Jesus**—How will a stranger know you follow Jesus at your school? How does following Jesus inform your curriculum and your budget? At The City School, the only reason we charge tuition instead of being a publicly funded charter school is because we desire to be a catalyst for a personal and communal relationship with Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. People should know we follow Jesus at The City School by our love for each other and our faithful testimony.
- 2. Shalom**—What does peace and wholeness look like at your school? What impact do you want to have on your students and in your community? My constant prayer is that His kingdom come and His will be done among us as it is in heaven. It is a fairly fuzzy prayer, but I pray it so that I am constantly pleading with God for the impact of our school to be bigger than the school itself. We regularly say that the mission of The City School is about more than just The City School because we are explicitly and primarily pursuing *shalom*—not for school sustainability but for its own sake.
- 3. The City (i.e., Your Community)**—How do you define your community? Do you emphasize your assets or dwell on your community's perceived deficits? At The City School, we try to be very conscientious not to perpetuate the dehumanizing stereotypes cast about cities. We affirm the deep beauty of the city. We acknowledge the pain and places of deepest poverty. We are a school for all the city: a rich, diverse tapestry of amazing people.

4. Excellence—Whom do you compare yourselves to? How do you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? With such a jargon-laden word in schooling, we are pursuing excellence at The City School through the 1 Corinthians 13:1–3 framework of embracing the skills and gifts of our children through love. We care about excellence because we want the best for our children and want them to give the best of themselves to others.

5. Accessibility—Whom do you accept into your school community? What barriers do you choose to create or tear down? Bringing clarity here is particularly difficult. Every school, public or private, is created to be more accessible to some and less to others. Your tuition and financial aid structures are a key part of that intentional community, but not nearly all of it. Your admissions and pedagogy regarding academic ability and faith are others. Your geography, leadership, and unwritten codes of acceptable culture are among several others. Be honest about the access you have, the access you want, and how that invites certain people and inhibits others.

We all need leaders who are confident *and* humble.

Now that your wheels are turning, remember that this value clarity is important because it is your job to connect resources to advance those values. All the resources you will ever have access to will either be in the form of people or money, by God's grace, over time. Therefore, your role as a school leader is to connect clear and actionable values with the people and money that align with and support those values.

Your people are your most important resource. You must align the efforts and gifts of the people at the school to clarify and advance its values. Servant leadership is certainly a part of this, but so is some initial clarity on your part. We all need leaders who are confident *and* humble. These are impossible attributes to live out fully, but the best approximation will always come from more clarity on your values, not less. Your role is particularly critical, as this alignment must come across board, parents, staff, community members, donors, and alumni.

All must be aligned as much as possible and have a role in informing what you value. No one else can do that in the way you can as a school leader.

In God's grace, money follows good ideas and leadership, not the other way around.

Your budget is a spiritual document, just as powerful as pedagogy. To effectively leverage your money, you must clarify and align it just as much as you do with your values and your people. At The City School, we clarify our budget

along three paths: operating funds to pay the bills, strategic funds to advance the mission and attract greater resources, and capital funds for building and infrastructure.

Your budget is a spiritual document.

Within your operating budget, you have four main levers to support your values: tuition and fund-raising on the revenue side, and personnel and nonpersonnel on the expense side. At The City School, we try to grow our tuition and fund-raising revenue incrementally by increasing our enrollment and fostering transparent relationships with donors. We devote as much of our operating expenses to personnel as possible (currently 80%). Strategic and capital projects are developed almost exclusively to further strengthen our values and solidify our operating budget.

Your role is to connect values to resources. It is as simple and impossible as that. As we do this together, I can't wait to know more how God brings His *shalom* on earth as it is in heaven, to His glory and our joy.

Jake Becker (MBA) serves as head of school at The City School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He and his wife, Jessica, are the proud parents of two City School students, Caleb and Maggie.




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