

**WATKINSON SCHOOL**

THE SHAPE  
*of* THINGS  
TO COME

**A FIVE -YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN**



## **WELCOME TO WATKINSON'S FUTURE.**

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Watkinson School, I am very pleased to present *The Shape of Things to Come*, the Strategic Plan that will guide the operations of the school over the next five years. The culmination of eight months of intensive work, the plan represents an exciting point in the school's history and evolution, illustrated by the Board's unanimous endorsement of the plan and its underlying principles.

In creating a Strategic Plan whose implementation will touch every constituency of the school, we knew the importance of an inclusive and transparent process. Thus, the Strategic Planning Core Team comprised 30 members, including faculty, senior administrators, Trustees, friends of the school, current parents, past parents, and two consultants who assisted in guiding the group with best practices. A web portal allowed the Trustees the opportunity to observe the progress of the Core Team's work.

Adopting a strategic plan is a significant undertaking and commitment—and an inspiring one. Our plan provides a road map for the school and a guide for those in leadership positions. Please join the Board of Trustees in its enthusiastic support for creating a Watkinson of the future that is true to our mission, expanding and enhancing the distinctive teaching and learning that make us all proud to be part of the Watkinson community.

Peter Lisi

President, Watkinson Board of Trustees

## DEAR FRIENDS,

Watkinson School has been activating the minds of students for over one hundred and thirty years, launching self-discovery, fostering a wider awareness of the world beyond the walls of the school, and challenging our students to define their intentions and act upon them with courage, confidence, and a sense of purpose. Ours is a school fiercely committed to innovating and personalizing education and at the same time creating a strong and binding sense of what it means to belong to a community. Today, Watkinson is entering a new era of educational excellence.

*The Shape of Things to Come* is the result of a year of thinking and deep consideration of the transformational power of schooling. We have created a plan to guide the next five years in the life of our extraordinary school. The five specific areas of focus, defined as explicit goals in the plan, represent both questions and answers about what educational excellence, sustainability, and true and powerful diversity look, sound, and feel like in our complex world.

Watkinson School has always offered an innovative program of study in a context of deliberate and caring attention not only to what our students learn, but how they learn and the purpose of their endeavors. *The Shape of Things to Come* articulates a vision of our program and operations that builds upon our demonstrated strengths, and addresses challenges we face as we uphold our commitment to developing in our students the power to shape their lives and the world around them.

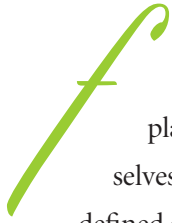
We invite you to not only read the enclosed plan, but to engage in our ongoing dialogue about the ideas and plans contained within these pages. With the articulation of this vision, our exciting work is only just beginning.

Here's to the journey ahead, and to *The Shape of Things to Come*.



Teri Schrader  
Head of School

## INTRODUCTION



From its inception in 1881, Watkinson School has distinguished itself as an exemplary place for students to discover the power and possibility of their intellectual and creative selves. A deliberately small school committed to the principles of Essential schooling, as defined and articulated by Theodore R.Sizer through the Coalition of Essential Schools, Watkinson has always understood that deep learning exists in a setting where young people are given access to excellent teachers committed to knowing their students well and paying close attention to their intellectual, social, and emotional development. Watkinson School is becoming the leading choice for parents seeking a vibrant and vigorous college preparatory program, a school where their students are known, celebrated, challenged, and supported in finding and using their own voices.

In our classrooms and well beyond, Watkinson students understand the value of asking the important questions, of listening carefully, thinking critically, and acting with courage and empathy. Watkinson’s unwavering focus on helping students to grow intellectually and supporting their social and emotional learning is evidenced by the close, caring relationships that characterize the school. These relationships are and always will be at the heart of a Watkinson education, and are developed, fostered, and nourished by the intentional design of the school program and its decision to remain small enough to know each student as a unique individual and large enough to allow the richness of our diverse community to permeate every aspect of our program. Our commitment to learning through each academic discipline as well as the Creative Arts, Global Studies, and individualized Learning Skill programs provide students with unparalleled opportunities for deep learning and to meaningfully apply and connect that learning to the larger world. Though much has changed since its founding as a rural farm school, Watkinson remains Hartford’s premiere independent school and a gathering place for all kinds of minds.

As Watkinson prepares for its next chapter, the school has set about the work of developing a plan for its future. This vision of the next five years serves as an affirmation of the kind of teaching and learning that has always characterized the school, reinforcing our mission “to give students the power to shape their lives and the world around them.” The plan also highlights the importance of articulating and effectively communicating Watkinson’s identity and the distinguishing characteristics of a Watkinson education. *The Shape of Things to Come* emphasizes the need for a focused and compelling communication plan as we seek to fully enroll the school. At the same time, *The Shape of Things to Come* will re-enforce the school’s standing as a joyfully and intentionally diverse Hartford institution with deep, reciprocal relationships with the community in which it

resides. Finally, Watkinson’s plan for the next five years requires that the school investigate, develop, and adopt a financial model that draws together leading thinking about the right size of the school and cultivating new avenues of resources to support the school, its people, and its unique program.

As the world in which we live becomes increasingly complex, this plan centers on Watkinson’s belief in the difference an Essential School makes in the lives of young people as we strive to place that power directly into the capable hands and hearts of every Watkinson graduate.

## THE PROCESS

*i*n approaching the articulation of a plan for Watkinson’s next five years, one thing was clear from the start: the process would be an inclusive one that involved a wide range of voices to ensure that the resulting plan would sound like Watkinson itself. Beginning in spring 2015 and continuing throughout the 2015-2016 school year, the school conducted a broad-based planning process designed to assess Watkinson’s current position and to closely examine the strengths of the school, discern the very real challenges it faces, and create a shared vision of Watkinson, strengthened and enhanced to best support the thriving and creative community it is and has been since 1881.

Every member of the school’s faculty, staff, and Board of Trustees has been invited to think hard and take part in this process. Throughout this year, a team of thirty—composed of faculty, board members, parents, and friends of the school, and working with the help of a professional consultant with expertise in school planning—engaged in a process modeled on the concepts of “design thinking.” The team dedicated the year to extensive research and self-study, learning together from parental input and student reflections collected in the spring of 2015, the school’s most recent NEASC accreditation process, leading educational experts, and data and resources from the Connecticut and National Associations of Independent Schools. This study enabled the group to formulate the areas of focus and priority articulated in this plan.

What follows is an expression of a year of exploration, discussion, intensive research, analysis, critical thinking, honest grappling, and review and revision. As a community, we have thought deeply about the nature of schooling, the promises we as an institution make to our students and families every day, and the resources necessary to carry out Watkinson’s mission of giving students the

power to shape their lives and the world around them. Our commitment to Watkinson's continuing excellence as an Essential School dedicated to helping students learn to use their minds well is at the heart of this plan, and every action implicated by it.

*The Shape of Things to Come* builds upon the school's commitment to the ideals embodied in the Ten Common Principles of Essential Schools and upon the school's demonstrated strengths as a place where every student is known well and is challenged and nurtured to develop their unique qualities and characteristics while engaging in a deliberately and unabashedly diverse community of learners. The five areas of focus delineated in the plan are intended to guide the school's progress in key areas, ensure Watkinson's continued sustainability, and enhance and deepen the very best of an already vibrant school and its signature programs in the Creative Arts, Global Studies, and Learning Skills. *The Shape of Things to Come* sets in motion the school's vision for continued excellence, a school where transformational learning is fostered and guided by transformative teaching.

## EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

### The individual heart of learning

Teaching and learning are at the very center of a Watkinson education, and our commitment to understanding, valuing, and challenging a wide range of students with differing styles and approaches to learning already sets the school apart. In the coming years, Watkinson will deepen and expand its program by developing innovative curricula that emphasizes the relationships between subject areas and seemingly disparate disciplines of study. Students will demonstrate their learning through a wide variety of assessments across essential skill areas.

Our goals in this area are to:

- ▶ **Extend, deepen, and sustain a vibrant intellectual program that places students at the center of their learning by focusing on the development of critical habits and dispositions for learning in and beyond the classroom (e.g. service, athletics, and community leadership).**
- ▶ **Define and articulate essential areas of study**
- ▶ **Create interdisciplinary courses and learning experiences that co-relate subject areas and emphasize inquiry, investigation, research, reflection, and the intentional use of appropriate technology**
- ▶ **Define senior year exit skills and plan backwards to 6th grade to develop a range of performance based assessments and learning experiences that culminate in developmentally appropriate public exhibitions**
- ▶ **Address all learners in an equitable way through a range of programs**
- ▶ **Personalize learning for all students by engaging in teaching approaches in order to meet students where they are and support growth and challenge for all**

## **AN INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY**

### Transformative relationships

*W*atkinson has a long history of modeling and teaching the value of inclusion. One of the school's core beliefs, this is manifest in our admissions and hiring practices, in the content of our curriculum and in our teaching methods. Conversation matters: we talk and listen to each other in affinity groups, advisory groups, faculty meetings large and small, and in our thrice-weekly All School gatherings. We seek to educate every member of our community by taking actions that reflect our common understanding of what an equitable world looks like. We must reach out beyond our walls, bring in those who can teach us anew, and continuously dedicate ourselves to every new generation of educators and learners who join the Watkinson community. We must tend to the inclusive environment tirelessly in order to grow and thrive.

Our goals in this area are to:

- ▶ **Deepen Watkinson's understanding of and commitment to equity and diversity**
- ▶ **Sustain an inclusive environment for students and adults**
- ▶ **Develop and commit to a plan for ongoing learning and reflection around equity and diversity that supports the ethical, intellectual, and civic growth of students and adults**
- ▶ **Develop the capacity to engage in on-going, community-wide, courageous conversations about race, ethnicity, diversity, and privilege, and take the actions necessary to demonstrate our commitments**
- ▶ **Attract and retain a diverse faculty, capable of serving a diverse student body**
- ▶ **Expand and diversify our International program to include students from a variety of countries and continents**



## SCHOOL AS COMMUNITY, COMMUNITY AS SCHOOL

### A stronger, more interconnected world

*a*s Hartford's oldest independent school, Watkinson has demonstrated an enduring commitment to being a part of the city and its surrounding region. In looking to the future, we envision a deepening of the school's current relationships and an expansion of the ways in which Watkinson interacts with the city's neighborhoods and organizations. In addition to our already thriving programs, including our more than 40-year sponsorship of SPHERE, the summer learning program serving Hartford elementary school students, and our community partnerships with the Knox Parks Foundation, Billings Forge, The Mark Twain House, the Hartford Stage Company, and the University of Hartford, we see increasing value in and opportunity for cultivating our relationships within the greater Hartford community. Partnerships that extend beyond the walls of the school provide real-world experiences that simply cannot take place in the classroom, helping to ensure that a Watkinson education is not an insular experience, but rather authentic, experiential learning. Relationships across the city will promote Watkinson's place as a Hartford institution, cultivate future enrollment, and enable us to collaborate within the wider educational and business community. Now, as ever, Watkinson is strengthened by its city presence, and the next five years will see an increased focus on bringing Watkinson into the city and drawing the city to the school.

Our goals in this area are to:

- ▶ **Build upon Watkinson's reciprocal relationship with the city of Hartford and the region by moving learning beyond the school, while simultaneously developing authentic opportunities for the community around us to engage with Watkinson**
- ▶ **Infuse academic and other programming with opportunities for "real world" education**
- ▶ **Create opportunities that integrate Watkinson students into the surrounding community**
- ▶ **Invite the community — e.g. artists, activists, thought leaders, authors, academics — into Watkinson to interact with students and the school community in authentic ways**

## FINANCIAL MODEL

### Outstanding resilience

*i*n order to accomplish the above, the school will focus on the development of new approaches to its finances and the following essential elements of its operation. Over the course of its long history, Watkinson has faced the challenges that are the natural outgrowth of having limited financial resources and variability in enrollment. Watkinson has been a careful steward of every precious tuition dollar, yet operating on a thin margin has required rapid and reactive changes to fluctuations in enrollment. To ensure Watkinson's strong financial future, built on our existing sound financial base, we must acknowledge and unapologetically achieve and sustain our best size, while instilling what essential means in all that we do. We will focus on calibrating our school's operations to both free up resources and invest in essential people, program and plant. We will use how we deploy tuition to build our student population, paying close attention to local competition and the needs of students and families in different grades and we will work hard at generating income of all types. All of this will allow Watkinson to achieve sustained strong financial underpinnings to enable the School to continue to flourish.

Our goals in this area are to:

- ▶ **Over time, discern the appropriate and sustainable enrollment and commensurate staffing levels for the school and leverage and enhance the three primary avenues to financial strength: net tuition, additional revenue, and wise and efficiently managed expenditures. In effectively allocating the school's resources, reflect the school's priorities, advance its mission, and attract and support outstanding faculty**
- ▶ **Aggressively manage revenues and expenditures**
- ▶ **Calibrate and communicate tuition to most advantageously position Watkinson in the marketplace, including exploring and dedicating tuition offsets to generate the greatest possible enrollment**
- ▶ **Develop additional revenue streams**
- ▶ **Cultivate unrestricted philanthropy**

## IDENTITY & COMMUNICATION

### A story that becomes a model

*i*n the same way no two students are alike, every school is a unique community with particular ways of defining and describing itself and its features. The success of *The Shape of Things to Come* relies heavily upon the school's ability to accurately assess and describe the distinctive qualities and benefits of a Watkinson education.

The school must tell its story in new and compelling ways as part of a cohesive, in-depth, and sustained marketing effort. No longer content to be “Hartford’s best kept secret,” Watkinson School will articulate and proclaim with clarity the elements and aspects of a Watkinson education that distinguish it as a school that changes lives.

Our goals in this area are to:

- ▶ **Create and generate an undeniable message about the power, impact, and difference of a Watkinson education in a way that increases both the visibility and understanding of the school and its story**
- ▶ **Articulate the unique place Watkinson inhabits in the independent school world and beyond**
- ▶ **Communicate the identity of the school wisely, with awareness and consistency within the Watkinson community, the region, and to the larger world**
- ▶ **Create the structures and mechanisms for Watkinson to participate in the national conversation about schooling and play a role in the wider discussion about teaching and learning today.**

## STRATEGIC PLAN COMMITTEE

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*Founding Member of the National Center for Independent School Renewal  
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