

Core Question

Scott Wilson challenged leaders to consider a fundamental issue:

Is your school's mission truly guiding decisions, or is it simply language that appears on a website, strategic plan, or admissions brochure?

The session focused on how schools move from mission statements and values to actual behaviors, priorities, resource allocation, and accountability.

Mission Must Be More Than Words

Wilson argued that most schools invest significant effort in crafting mission statements and defining values.

The challenge is not creating a mission.

The challenge is living it.

Many schools struggle because:

- Their mission is overly generic.
- Their mission no longer reflects who they actually are.
- Their mission reflects the past more than the future.
- Their mission exists on paper but not in practice.

The measure of a mission is not whether it sounds inspiring, but whether it actively influences everyday decisions.

The Three Essential Questions

Wilson encouraged leaders to continually evaluate their mission through three questions.

1. Does Our Mission Reflect Our Desired Reality?

A mission should accurately describe who the school intends to be.

If the mission could be copied and pasted onto ten other schools' websites without anyone noticing, it may not be distinctive enough to guide decision-making.

2. Does Our Mission Inspire Our Community?

A mission should resonate with:

- Trustees
- Faculty
- Staff
- Students
- Parents
- Alumni

People should understand it, believe it, and see themselves in it.

3. How Well Do We Move from Mission to Practice?

This is the most important question.

Schools must translate mission and values into:

- Daily decisions
- Operational priorities
- Resource allocation
- Hiring practices
- Accountability systems
- Student experiences

Mission only matters when it influences behavior.

Leadership's Primary Responsibility

Wilson described leadership as:

Translating philosophy, values, and strategic plans into concrete behaviors, priorities, and accountability.

Leaders are responsible not only for articulating mission but also for ensuring that it drives action throughout the organization.

A phrase he emphasized was:

"Leaders are accountable for accountability."

Mission alignment requires leaders to consistently reinforce expectations and ensure that organizational actions match stated values.

Organizational Alignment

Wilson identified organizational alignment as the first pillar of mission-driven leadership.

Every stakeholder group must understand and embrace the school's mission:

- Board members
- Head of school
- Administrators
- Faculty
- Staff
- Students
- Families
- Alumni

When any of these groups become disconnected from the mission, organizational friction emerges.

Mission Misalignment Happens Through People

Wilson noted that mission drift often occurs not because of strategy, but because of people.

Examples include:

Trustees

Trustees may advocate for personal interests or preferences that are unrelated to the school's mission.

Heads of School

Schools sometimes hire leaders with impressive credentials who do not genuinely understand or embrace the school's culture and mission.

Administrators and Faculty

Highly talented educators can still create challenges if their personal philosophy conflicts with institutional priorities.

Parents and Alumni

Parents and alumni often advocate for changes based on personal experience, nostalgia, or individual needs rather than the school's mission and future direction.

The Strategic Refusal Matrix

One of the most practical tools Wilson shared was a decision-making framework he learned from SAIS President Brett Jacobsen.

The framework evaluates opportunities according to two dimensions:

Strategic Importance

How closely does the opportunity align with the school's mission and priorities?

Feasibility

Does the school have the resources, capacity, and timing to execute it successfully?

The matrix creates four categories:

Strategic Importance Feasibility Response

High	High	Prioritize and invest
High	Low	Adjust timeline, scope, or resources
Low	High	Consider carefully, but not a priority
Low	Low	Decline

This framework helps schools avoid pursuing attractive opportunities that do not meaningfully advance their mission.

The Discipline to Say No

A recurring theme was that schools often suffer from initiative overload.

Wilson observed that schools are:

- Very good at adding programs
- Very good at creating new initiatives
- Very poor at stopping activities that no longer support the mission

One of the most important leadership disciplines is asking:

"What should we stop doing?"

Mission alignment requires not only choosing what to pursue but also identifying what should be discontinued.

A Simple Mission Filter

Wilson recommended that schools evaluate major decisions using four questions:

Does It Support Our Mission?

If the answer is no, the conversation should end.

Does It Strengthen Our Culture?

Culture is a critical organizational asset and should be protected intentionally.

Is It the Best Use of Our Resources?

Schools must carefully evaluate time, money, staffing, and organizational energy.

What Should We Stop Doing?

Every new initiative should prompt consideration of what existing work may need to be reduced or eliminated.

Hiring for Mission Alignment

Wilson emphasized that schools should clearly articulate the characteristics and values expected of employees.

Mission alignment should be evaluated before hiring, not after.

Prospective employees should understand:

- What the school believes
- What behaviors are expected
- How success is defined
- What professional standards exist

This helps attract people who fit the culture and discourages those who do not.

Mission as a Decision-Making Compass

Wilson used several examples to illustrate how mission should guide difficult decisions:

- Whether to expand student support services
- Whether to invest in new programs
- Whether to accept restricted donor gifts
- Whether to accept government funding tied to regulatory requirements

The correct answer varies by school.

The process remains the same:

Return to the mission and determine whether the opportunity advances the school's purpose.

Key Takeaway

Wilson's central message was simple but demanding:

Mission should be the primary filter for every significant decision a school makes.

When schools clearly define their mission, align stakeholders around it, hire people who believe in it, and apply it consistently to decisions, mission becomes a living force rather than a statement on a wall.

The strongest schools are not those that pursue every opportunity. They are the schools that have the discipline to pursue only the opportunities that advance their mission.