

On Strategy and Vision

Introduction

In February 2019 we released a document entitled 'Blundell's 2025'. It set out the vision for the school and it has been the overarching Strategic Development Plan which has guided our thinking, planning and decision-making over the past 5 years.

In that document we stated that our vision for a Blundell's education is as follows:

"A school community that is more thoughtful in understanding its pupils, and innovative in developing their potential, than any other in Britain."

Before we unpack what that means and how that has guided us over the past few years, it may be worth reflecting on what that strategy is.

Parental Survey

In our recent Parent Survey, a few parents asked about the school's strategy and vision. Some suggested there was a lack of clarity of purpose, and that they would like to know what the school's strategy is.

From the survey, it was not clear whether the reference was to the vision or strategy from an educational perspective or from a business model perspective, or more specifically, how the school was going to invest in capital development projects. All of those are part of a vision and strategy for the school, but they are distinct.

Different people will look at this very differently. As an educator, I would lead with an educational philosophy, and the business strategy serves to deliver a vision for education that is based on values that we believe in.

If you are a person more inclined to view a school as a business operation, then perhaps the strategy is focused on healthy cash flow, building a strong balance sheet and growing revenue. If you were to lead with that perspective, then the educational philosophy becomes much more pragmatic because the education the school will offer will be whatever it is that puts 'bums on seats' and ensures a healthy financial position at the end of the school year.

Of course, the school is a business, but we are a 'not for profit' organisation. We do not have shareholders who are expecting a financial return, but we do have stakeholders who are deeply invested and who do want to see a 'return' on that investment. There is a transaction and with that there are expectations.

Definitions

Schools are complex businesses with a variety of stakeholders. A school like Blundell's would be considered a medium sized co-educational boarding and day school. We educate just under 900 pupils from the age of 3 to 18, we employ around 400 employees of whom approximately 30% are teachers. We also employ accountants, chefs, engineers, cleaners, horticulturalists, counsellors, medical staff, and a variety of others. Our annual revenue is around £20m and most of that comes from fee income. A disproportionate amount comes from boarding and Full and Weekly Boarding makes up approximately 25% of the pupil community (with the Prep School having no boarding at all). A small proportion (approximately £600k) is generated by lettings in the holidays.

As well as being operationally complex, there is also complexity in the variety of stakeholders who have, at times, differing expectations. Employees are an important stakeholder, but even within that

body there are very different expectations. Parents are the clients, but not the consumers. Pupils are the consumers, but not the clients. Old Blundellians hold a valuable and relevant stake too.

Outside of the organisation we have stakeholders ranging from the local community all the way through to the national government. Despite our independent status, we are still subject to many of the regulations that the state sector is subject to. We are inspected by the Independent School Inspectorate who, in turn, are commissioned by the Department for Education.

The complexity goes on when one looks at what happens within the school day – from boarding and catering to a wide variety of subjects to a vast array of sporting and cultural activities, as well as pastoral care, and the logistics of transport, pitch allocations, timetabling, catering, etc.

In his masterful tome on strategy, Martin Freedman says *“Having a strategy suggests an ability to look up from the short term and the trivial to view the long term and the essential, to address causes rather than symptoms, to see woods rather than trees.”* (Freedman, 2013, ix)

The challenge of managing the complexity of a school like Blundell’s is to bring coherence of thought and action to the institution. Coherence suggests alignment and it is about all the different elements that make up the school pulling in one direction without conflict or contradiction. It is a hard task, but if you were to ask me what my ambition for strategy is, it would simply be to bring coherence to all that we do. The role of leadership is to bring coherence.

Michael E. Porter in an essay in the Harvard Business Review refers to strategy as “creating fit amongst a company’s activities.” He explains that it is not the activities themselves that give a strategic advantage over rivals, but it is the fit between the activities that is often difficult to replicate. Often the fit lies in the coherence and how different activities complement each other. Fit also often has to do with culture – something less tangible but nonetheless essential for the effective operation of any institution. Culture is the lubricant that allows different activities and elements of the offering to rub together in a frictionless manner.

Porter goes on to say *“the strategic agenda is the right place for defining a unique position, making clear trade-offs, and tightening fit. The strategic agenda demands discipline and continuity; its enemies are distraction and compromise.”* One of the really challenging aspects that Porter emphasises is the needs to make trade-offs. Any organisation has limited resources – whether that is time, space, cash, or something else – and therefore trade-offs are inevitable. Blundell’s is no different. We cannot do all things equally well, nor can we spend without consequences. We are constantly making choices, and those choices are led by our strategy.

The role of leadership is to have clarity on strategy and then to make the difficult choices to move the institution a little further forward towards those strategic objectives.

One example of such a trade-off is evident in the decision we made to appoint specialist heads of sports in hockey, netball, cricket and rugby. Many parents have identified the need for investment in sporting facilities. We decided that sport mattered a great deal to us as a school, but that to be aligned with our vision for what a Blundell’s education ought to be, world class coaching was more important than world class facilities. We have appointed four outstanding coaches who will, over time, bring about a culture of coaching and training that will move all pupils at all levels of sports forward. Shiny new facilities will follow, but we chose to have good coaching structures in place first.

Mission, Vision and Strategy

Education is a peculiar product. For some, the impact of their education is immediate and almost tangible, yet for others their educational experience is more of a slow burn. It may be after decades that the full impact is realised. Perhaps so much time will have passed to the extent that the effects of

a school education have become so diffused that it becomes impossible to detect. Realistically, unless education is simply measured by grades – which is not a school of thought I subscribe to – it is almost impossible to measure the outcomes of an education. Bearing this in mind, the following must be viewed through that foggy lens.

The mission of this school is to develop young men and women of consequence. People who are willing and able to make a difference in their environment: to their families, their communities and their nations. Our lofty objective is to make the world a better place through the virtues of a Blundell's education.

Our vision is to be a school that is more thoughtful and innovative in developing the potential of its pupils. That includes all aspects of school life, not just the academic. It is about developing their athletic, musical, interpersonal, mathematical, linguistic, spiritual potential amongst many other things that make up the whole self.

Our strategy is comprehensive, and it falls into four areas:

1. The culture of the school
2. The school's philosophy about education
3. The school's philosophy about thriving
4. The business model, including capital development.

A bit more theory: the Hedgehog Concept

Jim Collins, in his seminal work 'Good to Great' sets out the characteristics of firms that have experienced extraordinary and sustained success over decades. These were not institutions who went through a purple patch, but rather ones that experienced success considerably above the trend in their industry over a multi-generational time period. In other words, the success was not down to an individual leader nor a particularly successful product. The success ran much deeper than that. One characteristic that Collins emphasised was that these supersonic firms had something that he called a 'Hedgehog Concept'.

It is based on the parable of the fox and the hedgehog by Isaiah Berlin, the Russian-British philosopher. Berlin tells the story of the sly and cunning fox who devised endless schemes and strategies to catch the hedgehog, but whatever plan the fox devised, the hedgehog just rolled up into a ball and the fox was powerless to overcome the hedgehog's prickly spikes. Like the hedgehog, brilliant firms must have that one concept that makes them undefeatable – regardless of the cunning and sly manoeuvres of the foxes out there.

In education, finding that hedgehog concept is particularly difficult because what we are trying to do at Blundell's is not especially unique. Most schools set out with very similar intentions. However, one thing that struck me is Collins' emphasis that a Hedgehog Concept is something that must emerge naturally and is not something that can be created around a boardroom table. To approach that sense of uniqueness it has to be authentic and relevant.

Blundell's is an institution that is over 400 years old and that has to be honoured. But more importantly, we have to pay attention to what has allowed it to survive for over four centuries.

When I go into more detail in describing the school's strategy, I want you to bear in mind the idea of an emergent Hedgehog Concept. Everything we have designed and developed is based on what we already are and on what the school already is. Our efforts are to bring coherence to all that Blundell's is and to translate that coherence into purpose and direction.

Strategy Part I – The Culture of the School

At the start of each term my message to pupils is and always had been the same. When I say ‘always’ I refer to the very short period in which I have been the Head. My headship makes up less than 2% of the school’s history! Culture runs a bit deeper than that, and it can not be comprehensively analysed in a few words.

My message is this: It is our extraordinary privilege and good fortune to attend a school like Blundell’s and it is therefore beholden on us to make the most of our time here and to take full advantage of the opportunities made available to us.

An appropriate response to this good fortune we enjoy is to show our appreciation by working hard and showing appropriate dedication and commitment to all that we do.

I repeatedly tell pupils that grades matter but that character matters more. I would go further to say that our attitude to our studies and our time at school reflects our character and positive character enhances our chances of success in all that we do.

I hasten to clarify that failure of any sort is not a reflection of character. However, I would argue that a strong character responds to failure differently to someone with a weaker character and hence the person with the stronger character is likely to experience more success – and perhaps more failure, particularly if we see failure as an integral part of success.

If I were to reflect on the success we have enjoyed over the past few years in different areas of school life, there are some constant themes that run through the staff and pupil body, which I would describe as being part of the Blundell’s culture.

Pupils work tremendously hard. There will be some pupils who are not working as hard as they could or should be working, and there are also a few who are probably working at a level that is not sustainable. However, overall, most pupils are working very hard. Working hard is the norm. Working hard is respected, being lazy is not.

Teachers are ambitious and have high expectations of themselves and of their pupils. One way in which this ambition is evident is in the three volumes of the Blundell’s Research Journal. All teachers are expected to do an action-based piece of research as part of their Professional Development Cycle. That piece of research can be classroom based, pastoral, or on any other aspect of school life. The purpose is to ensure that teachers are constantly reflecting on their practice and are seeking ways to improve. That culture of learning and wanting to improve is very much part of the Common Room culture.

That ambition is also evident in specific areas of school life. Not many schools take on Mozart’s Requiem as our Chamber Choir did two years ago. The number of Gold Medals in the various Science and Maths Olympiads keeps going up. No other school has as many teams entering the Ten Tors Challenge every year. Few schools can match the number of boys’ and girls’ teams that go to Rosslyn Park. This is not just about creating magnificent opportunities for our pupils; it is also about raising their aspirations and being ambitious to compete at the highest level.

When people think of a medium sized independent school in Devon, it may be easy to assume that it is a laidback and easy-going place – it is to some extent – but it belies the burning ambition and self-belief of our staff and pupils.

And whilst ambition and hard work have perhaps been growing steadily over recent years, the cornerstone of Blundell’s culture remains intact. Authenticity, humility and a strong community make Blundell’s what it is and I dare say that it always has.

Fundamentally, Blundellians remain grounded and are free from **affectation** – they are personable, friendly and polite, sometimes understated, and often with a good sense of humour.

Culture is not something one imposes on an institution. It is something that emerges through its history, but like an age-old bonsai tree, it can be directed, shaped and formed. It takes patience and consistency, and clarity of thought. I believe that this is where we have made good progress over recent years in that we have communicated expectations clearly and consistently, and after years of repetition, the message is now becoming increasingly ingrained in the character of the school.

Strategy Part 2 – The Schools’ Philosophy about Education

Education is our bread and butter. Whilst a liberal and broad education is what we strive for, practically, at the forefront of our education is an academic one. Whilst we may rage against exams – and I do believe that the road is running out for GCSEs in their current form – there is a place for them and currently it is the most common form of assessment in the British education system. It is not the case all around the world, but a rigorous exam system gives confidence that standards are measured and upheld. There is a place for exams and as a school we recognise that success in public exams remains a fundamental measure of the school’s success.

Two comments on that:

Firstly, grades matter – not because they define us – but because they are the keys that unlock doors of opportunity. The tragedy of exams is that often a pupil self-defines their intelligence or potential based on their exam experience, but the reality is that the better your grades, the greater the opportunities available to you. It is therefore worth doing as well as you can.

Secondly, success in exams is a relative matter. One person achieving straight A*s would be an unequivocal success. However, a pupil who was expected to get three Cs but ended up with three Bs has undoubtedly been very successful.

Our educational philosophy is focused on how we can help pupils to become good at learning and how they become good learners.

We know that two significant contributors to getting good grades are hard work and excellent teaching. I think those are both imperative. In an environment like Blundell’s, where generally pupils work hard and teachers teach well, there are still many other variables that determine the success of pupils. We have thought hard about what it is that helps pupils to succeed in their studies, beyond hard work and good teaching. We refer to these as the six levers for learning success. These six areas have been inspired by educational thinkers like the New Zealander John Hattie (*Visible Learning*), Barak Rosenshine (*Principles of Instruction*) and Howard Gardner (*Multiple Intelligence Theory*) but they have been enhanced by our own experience and understanding, taking into account Blundell’s culture and environment.

Many parents will have heard me speak about these things at school events.

I. Self-Efficacy

In his research recorded in the book *Visible Learning*, John Hattie tried to measure the effects of different interventions on the outcomes of learning for pupils. Self-efficacy ranked very near the top of the list. Pupils with greater self-efficacy outperformed those with a lower self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy can be described as many things, but the way we use it is in the context of how pupils perceive difficult tasks. A pupil with high self-efficacy believes that with effort they will be able to overcome something difficult. Someone with lower self-efficacy does not have that same belief that effort will ultimately lead to success and therefore trying is pointless.

We try to instil the link between effort and success in all aspects of school life whether that is on the sport pitches, in the science labs, in our boarding houses or in outdoor pursuits. Effort matters and makes a difference.

Self-efficacy is about our relationship with struggle. Is struggle something we avoid, or do we embrace it as a necessary part of success?

We know that the pupil who is willing and able to struggle for longer with a problem is more likely to succeed in the end.

2. Staff Endorsement

As parents we may well sometimes hear our child tell us that a teacher does not like them. According to Hattie's research, there is evidence to suggest that the feeling of not being liked by a teacher is enough to cause a negative impact on learning. Conversely, feeling liked and endorsed by a teacher has a positive effect on learning.

This is more complicated than it sounds because, of course, this is about perception and not necessarily about facts. A pupil can feel that a teacher does not like them, or they may perceive an injustice that was not intended. Nonetheless, as educators we should strive to ensure that all our pupils feel that we care and are invested in their success.

Staff endorsement does not mean hollow praise. It does not mean selling an unrealistic dream to the D-grade chemist who has aspirations to become a neurosurgeon. What it does mean is that each pupil feels that there is at least one member of staff who they feel is walking the road with them, encouraging them, listening to them, supporting them and believing in them. This is not just about believing in them as athletes, or scientists, or musicians – but believing in them as valued, unique individuals.

It is easier said than done, but that is the intention of the tutoring programme, and I believe that much of the time this is done very well. However, there are over 600 pupils at school and over a 100 staff so that equates to more than 60,000 potential individual interactions. If 99% of those interactions were positive that still leaves 600 negative interactions!

Positive relationships between staff and pupils is something we believe is a strength of the school, and I believe it is one of the reasons why pupils continue to be successful in their studies.

3. Metacognitive Skills

In its simplest form, metacognitive skills refer to a pupil's ability to think and regulate their own thinking processes. In other words, it is about teaching pupils to think about how they think and learn.

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that we all have our own preferred learning style, and we learn in different ways. The Covid period highlighted how many older pupils flourished when they were left to decide for themselves how to organise their work schedules. Some pupils preferred doing 30 minutes of Maths every day, others chose to do 3 hours of Maths all in one morning. Different strategies work for different pupils.

When younger years write internal exams, we encourage them to experiment with different revision strategies and to reflect on what worked and what didn't. Learning about our own preferences is about taking responsibility for our own learning, in itself a critical aspect of learning success.

A few years ago, we changed the schools marking policy from marking little and often to marking less frequently but with more detailed feedback. The intention behind that was to ensure that pupils have feedback to react to, rather than a book full of ticks that don't say much about the process -meaningful feedback that pupils respond to immediately.

Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction describe the steps towards pupil independent learning. Metacognitive skills are central to that.

4. Executive Functions

Executive function refers to the mental processes involved with setting and accomplishing goals. We are all on a spectrum of sorts when it comes to executive functions. Some of us are ruthlessly efficient in identifying what needs to be done and then doing it, whereas for others the journey is a bit more of an ordeal! It may involve indecision and hesitancy to commit to a task. It may mean that someone finds it difficult to start a task or to organise an appropriate sequence of activities. It may mean that someone gets distracted and loses momentum towards that goal.

Those pupils (and adults) who have strong executive function skills have a significant learning advantage in terms of efficiency. They may not be more intelligent and someone with lower executive function skills may have a tremendous aptitude for a particular area of study, but their progress is hampered by weak executive functioning.

By focusing on executive function skills, we try to elevate the efficiency of all our pupils in their learning.

I can give various examples of how we work to improve these skills.

The first is through our Learning Support department. Much of the work done in Learning Support is to develop executive functions. The second method that is used more widely is a 'coaching style' of teaching. We use coaching in the classroom, in tutoring, as well as in specific one-to-one sessions.

The formal introduction of BYOD this year is in part to improve the executive functioning of pupils across the spectrum. We are still in the programme's infancy, but we believe that using devices, and more significantly, having a universal method of storing information and tracking work will level the playing field for the diverse range of executive functions found amongst our pupils.

Inevitably we are all on a steep learning curve and the use of devices absorbs a certain amount of working memory, but as we become used to systems and structures, the processes become automated and more working memory is available for actual learning.

In the past, when pupils sat down to prepare for exams, some pupils spent most of the first few hours trying to figure out what was in their files, what pages were missing, what order things were meant to be in, etc. It was a herculean task simply to get ready to start revising. We hope that with an efficient BYOD programme those obstacles will be mitigated for.

5. Collaboration

I remember attending a workshop some ten years ago on boys' education. As an aside, there are some very good books out there that focus on boys in the classroom with titles like 'Boys don't try' (Pinkett and Roberts) and 'The Boy Question' (Roberts). Both start out on the premise that boys are struggling in the classroom and are more disruptive than girls.

At Blundell's our data indicates that girls achieve a higher Value Added than boys at GCSEs, but that it is reversed at A-Levels. I have my theories about that, but that is not the point of this essay. What I do find interesting is that generally speaking, it has often been assumed that girls are better at collaborating and that boys respond better to competition.

At this workshop the presenter made a comment that has stuck with me: "Boys don't like competition, they like winning!" How true. No one likes starting a contest knowing that you have zero chance of winning. I don't imagine that that is any different for girls.

There is a place for competition and used sensibly it can raise performance and engagement. It is also often fun. There is a reason why most of us enjoy competitive sport, and whilst we may not be as active in competitive sport in middle age, many of us nonetheless vociferously support our favourite teams in any number of sports. Imagine a Rugby World Cup where medals were only handed out for participation, or an Olympic Games where everyone's a winner! Where would the fun be in that!

So, unequivocally, there is a place for competition in learning, BUT so much more learning takes place through collaboration, and our obsession with competition often undermines the learning that happens collaboratively.

The most productive teams in science, in business and in leadership are teams that have learnt to collaborate. They support each other and support each other's successes. Collaboration means that pupils are invested in the progress of their peers, not just in their own at the expense of others. Competition is a zero-sum game. If I win, you lose. In a collaborative environment pupils will take more risks, will ask more questions, will be less fearful of making mistakes and will learn more quickly.

6. Resourcefulness

This last one we added to the original five after Covid. We learnt some important lessons from the period of lockdown when children had to learn in isolation at home. One of the things we recognised and have since built on, is that some children were instinctively more resourceful than others. The resourceful ones were more effective learners than those who were less resourceful.

It is important here to distinguish between access to many resources and the skill of resourcefulness. Clearly, having access to resources is an advantage over those who don't, but that is not something we can always control. Suffice it to say, pupils at Blundell's have more access to resources than most children of their age around the world.

The skill of resourcefulness is more about how we overcome challenges. A resourceful pupil will find a way whereas a less resourceful one will get stuck. Resourcefulness is therefore tied into creativity and out-of-the-box thinking. Resourceful pupils also instinctively understand how to use the resources at their disposal.

A whole new world which we are rapidly having to educate ourselves about is that of generative artificial intelligence. Mr List is writing a separate paper on that topic, but suffice it to say, our children will have to live in a world where AI is ever present. We cannot shut the door on this, and our children will have to become savvy in how to use AI to aid their learning.

AI carries threats but also undoubted opportunities in the learning environment. Just ask your children how they currently use ChatGPT. I am aware of many pupils who use it as an aid to revision and as a revision companion. Of course, the cynic will assume that Chat GPT is writing essays for pupils, but in my experience, whilst some will try to use it to take shortcuts, most of our pupils want to learn and will use it to support their studies.

Some examples of resourcefulness include writing a practice essay for History and asking ChatGPT to fact check it. In Science a pupil can ask ChatGPT to generate questions or to explain a concept in a different style.

We should be encouraging our pupils to be creative problem solvers. AI is one option, but it is essential that it becomes just one tool in their toolbox and that they do not become overly reliant on it.

Summary

We believe that if we make marginal gains in each of these six areas then the impact on learning becomes significant. When we articulated this academic philosophy about how to help pupils become

good at learning we had no idea how profoundly successful we would be with it. Between 2010 and 2019 the average A*-B at A-Level was around 68%. Then we had Covid, and exams didn't happen. In the summer of 2023, we returned to 'normal' A-Level results and the press forecast an overall drop in grades. That year, for the first time, we achieved +80% A*-B. We were delighted but we knew that year's cohort was a strong one. When in the summer of 2024 – with a weaker cohort – we again achieved +80% A*-B we started to believe that what we had set out to do 6 years previously was perhaps working. We have not become more selective, but our results have increased by more than 10% and our value-added scores are almost a grade per subject per pupil higher than the national average for independent schools (Mr List will write a paper on value added). In terms of value added we are ranked right at or near the top of all independent schools in the UK.

We still have much to learn, and there is still much that we could do better, but we are confident that we are on the right track.

Strategy Part 3 – The School's Philosophy about Thriving

When I meet parents for the first time, I often ask them what it is that they are looking for in a school. Different families will prioritise different things. Broadly speaking, the majority want a stimulating and rigorous academic programme and a wide range of co-curricular activities. However, what is almost universal is that parents want their children to be happy.

It is interesting how the pursuit of happiness has become so preeminent in our hierarchy of needs. Speaking as a parent, I appreciate that no parent likes to see their child unhappy or in pain. Suffering is deeply uncomfortable – by definition – and it is understandable that we instinctively avoid it and protect our children from it. Happiness is one of those things that eludes us the more we focus on it. It has a tendency to sneak up on us at moments we might least expect it – and it tends to be fleeting. Those moments ought to be savoured, but the hope that they will be permanent is unhelpful and such expectations usually leads to disillusionment and disappointment. Perhaps it is society's sense of entitlement in its relationship with happiness that is, in part, to blame for the mental health crisis.

Having said all that, I know that most parents get that and are realistic about life's ups and downs. What parents want it for their children to thrive and flourish. They want children who are resilient and who, in Rudyard Kipling's words, "can meet Triumph and Disaster, and treat those two impostors just the same."

In his important book simply called 'Flourish', Martin Seligman sets out a model for flourishing which I believe holds a lot of merit. Seligman is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and is credited as being the founder of the 'Positive Psychology' movement. His take on positive psychology is similar to the case of physical health. We can get ahead of the mental health game and build up mental health and fitness as a way of warding off poor mental health in the same manner in which we would sleep, eat and exercise as a way of building physical strength and good health.

We have adapted Seligman's model and focus on four areas which we believe will result in our pupils learning how to live life well, or in modern parlance, which will help them to flourish and thrive.

I. Good Relationships

We want all pupils to understand and experience healthy relationships. Relationships with their peers, with significant adults, with older pupils, and with younger pupils. We want pupils to be compassionate and empathetic. We want them to show resilience in their relationships. We want them to learn to forgive and to say sorry. We want them to learn how to fallout and how to make up afterwards.

We want pupils to have the emotional resilience, not to become overly reliant on one or two relationships, and we want our pupils to have a strong sense of themselves, and not to rely on what is reflected back to them by those around them.

Relationships are usually the greatest source of joy and fulfilment and of the greatest pain and grief. Helping our pupils to navigate their way through relationships is both immensely challenging and important.

2. Achievement

We want each pupil to have a sense of personal worth and to have healthy self-esteem. For that to happen we want each pupil to have a sense of accomplishment and achievement. We want them to feel that they are good at something. We encourage pupils to find something that they are proud of and we discourage them from comparing themselves to others. Not everyone can be the top goals scorer for the hockey team or the soloist in the choir. Helping pupils to find things that they are proud of is key to their happiness.

That might be getting a lead part in a play or making the B team for rugby. It might mean improving your Maths test score from 55% to 65% or achieving your Grade 6 in the violin. We need to help pupils celebrate their achievements without casting an envious glance at the pupil who has achieved more.

Part of achievement is learning to savour successes. When a child wins 3rd prize in the photography competition, enjoy it and celebrate it. Do not begin by saying, 'next time let's win it!'. Yes, that may be a reasonable ambition, but we should take the time to savour achievements so that our children learn to focus on themselves and not on the achievements of others.

This is not a philosophy of 'everyone is a winner', but it is recognition that each pupil's journey is unique, and we need to help them mark steps along their route.

3. Meaning

The debate around the purpose of education is an interesting one, and depending on your perspective on that argument, what defines a 'meaningful' education may vary. Leaders of industry may refer to work-readiness as the purpose of education. Those in the world of science may believe that STEAM subjects, including computer programming, are the skills most needed for a progressive economy. Social scientists may say that the greatest purpose of education is to develop a social conscience, and that principles of justice and fairness should be taught at school. If you were to ask a politician what the purpose of education is, the answer would vary from one politician to another depending on where we are in the election cycle and what will win them most votes!

Education is expected to deliver on so many different fronts and that is not just challenging for school leaders, but it is also confusing for children. What we set out to do is to help pupils find meaning for themselves. What matters to them? What do they care about? What are they passionate about? What the answer is will vary considerably, and that is healthy and appropriate.

What matters most to me is that each pupil finds something that matters to them, something that they are passionate about. It may be something that will direct the rest of their lives, or it may be a passion that burns out within years or even months. That is okay too. What matters is that our pupils have things that they care deeply about. The breadth of opportunities at a school like Blundell's are designed to stimulate interest and pupils will hopefully find something that floats their proverbial boat. That may be in Outdoor Pursuits and the CCF and for those pupils a career in the military may be an option or they may become qualified as an outdoor education instructor. For others, they may explore

aspects of faith and spirituality at school and that may well shape and define their lives. Others may find their passion in sport or music or art or animal welfare or human rights or philosophy or psychology. It is one of the great privileges and joys to help pupils find their passion. We hope that the vast majority of pupils will find something at school, although my experience tells me that for some that does not happen until after school.

4. Engagement or Enjoyment

We want our pupils to enjoy being at school and to have a lot of fun. We want them to have many happy memories. Some of those will be spectacular highlights like singing Evensong in Westminster Abbey, but it may also be time laughing and chatting after lights out in the dormitory. We want our children to have a lot of fun at school – and to really want to be here.

There is nothing complicated about it. School should be a positive and enjoyable experience. We are in the business of making memories.

Strategy Part 4 – The Business Model, including Capital Development

In the few years that I have been Head of Blundell's, the one thing that I have learnt is that when people talk about vision and strategy it is often code for what new buildings are going to be built. For many non-educators, the question about strategy is one about business. How will we raise revenue, manage expenses, and grow the balance sheet? How will we invest in facilities and what new things can we afford to buy?

I understand that – and it is a challenge I embrace enthusiastically – but the educational vision leads the business model. The business model has a direct impact on what we can achieve, but without an articulated educational vision, there would be no coherence to the business model.

I will write a separate paper on the finances of the school, but for the purposes of this essay, it is worth noting that the business element of the school has suffered unprecedented challenges in recent years. These have included meteoric and unprecedented increases in Employers' Contribution to the Teachers' Pension Scheme, a global pandemic, high levels of inflation, an energy cost shock, above inflation increases in the National Living Wage, the removal of Business Rates relief and the introduction of VAT on school fees. Each one of these is significant, but the aggregated effect is massive. There will be many schools on the brink.

We are in a position of relative strength:

- a. Pupil numbers remain robust
- b. Our long-term borrowing is low
- c. We have invested in maintenance – especially in energy saving measures – meaning that there is less pressure on maintenance and cost saving measures.
- d. Our cash position is relatively healthy.

Under more benign circumstances we may well have invested more in facilities, but due to the circumstances of the past few years, Governors have been understandably prudent.

Having said that, there has been a considerable amount that has been done over the past few years. I will set this out in more detail in the Finance paper.

In January 2026, a large proportion of our long-term loan will be paid off. This means that less cash goes out annually to service the debt, and our capacity to borrow is greater. This may mean that there will be more opportunities to invest in facilities in the coming years.

We have clear principles that guide our capital investments:

- It should be focused on enhancing the educational experience of pupils
- It should ideally benefit the Prep and Senior Schools
- It should generate revenue for the school.

We do have a plan, a 'strategy' for developing the site, but due to the various setbacks we have had in recent times, we are not going to advertise our plans until we are very confident that we can deliver. We do not want to raise expectations only for another setback to undermine our best intentions.

We had, for example, done a lot of work in securing planning permission for a sports facility (including a swimming pool) before Covid struck. Not only did the school's cash position change because of that event, but we also had significant inflation caused by post pandemic and post Brexit supply chain issues which caused the cost of the project to triple in the 2 years post securing planning permission. The numbers just did not add up.

As Mike Tyson famously said: "Everyone has a plan 'til they get punched in the mouth!"

Conclusion

We are mindful that we are operating in a very fluid environment. The former US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, famously said: "There are known knowns, things we know that we know; and there are known unknowns, things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns, things we do not know we don't know."

The introduction of VAT and the removal of business rate relief are two known unknowns. We know what they are, but we do not yet know how they will play out. We do not fully know how Blundell's parents will react, nor do we know how parents at other schools will react, or for that matter how other schools are placed to react. These next 6 to 18 months will be very revealing in that regard.

And then there are of course the 'unknown unknowns', the things we just do not know which await us around the next corner.

As such, strategy needs to hold a tension between being steadfast and flexible. Our vision for the school, I believe, is robust and there is a high degree of buy in. However, interpreting what that looks like in practice will evolve over time and will evolve with changes in leadership. That is appropriate and not something to be unduly concerned about.

Dexterity, deftness and responsiveness, are all valuable assets in an environment which has seen so much change in such a short space of time. We take pride in not being black and white about our strategy and we are comfortable with a degree of grey.

However, the work we have done around strategy in recent years has given us a strong sense of direction and purpose and we have created enough momentum to have steered through some difficult times. I would not want a strategy that is more rigid than what we have because it would have made these last few years harder to navigate.

At the end of the day a strategy is about making the institution fit for purpose. I am confident that our strategy achieves that.