

A WHITE PAPER FROM GLOBAL SERVICES IN EDUCATION

Vision and Mission Integrity

*A framework for aligning purpose and practice in
international schools*

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Executive Summary

In the evolving landscape of global education, the credibility and effectiveness of a school depend not only on academic results but on the authenticity with which it lives its stated vision and mission. Vision and Mission Integrity applies a half-century of organisational scholarship on the gap between stated and enacted values to the specific realities of schools. It asserts that the most successful schools are those where vision and mission statements are not ornamental phrases but actionable guides that manifest through daily, tangible, and consistent experiences. This paper calls these lived realities Signature Experiences.

This paper explores how schools can ensure alignment between purpose and practice, making their values visible and real. Accreditation bodies such as the Council of International Schools place purpose and direction at the head of their evaluation frameworks, and instruments exist for measuring school climate and satisfaction; yet no sector-wide standard exists for measuring whether a school's mission specifically is visible in daily practice. That gap is precisely where credibility is won or lost. The paper also confronts the tension investors feel most sharply: what happens when premium positioning, profit, and espoused internationalism collide, and why the mission, taken seriously, changes the economics rather than losing to them.

THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

- Schools lose integrity when promise and practice diverge.
- Signature Experiences are the evidence of lived values.
- Vision and Mission Integrity drives trust, performance, and sustainability.
- A three-tier audit, grown from field practice, makes alignment measurable.
- When mission meets money, integrity is decided where budgets are set.

Introduction: Why Vision and Mission Often Fall Short

Many schools boast eloquent vision and mission statements, yet too often these declarations fail to shape day-to-day decisions, behaviours, and learning experiences. This disconnect can undermine a school's credibility and confuse stakeholders. Without a deliberate strategy to bridge the gap between what is promised and what is practised, schools risk operating without integrity. This paper names it the Promise–Practice Divide, a dangerous gap that destroys trust when what is stated is not what is experienced.

The phenomenon itself is well documented. Argyris and Schön (1974) showed fifty years ago that organisations hold espoused theories that routinely diverge from the theories-in-use actually governing behaviour, usually without anyone noticing. The Promise–Practice Divide names the school-sector expression of that gap, where it plays out in front of the most attentive audience any organisation faces: children, parents, and teachers who live inside the institution every day.

Recent sector practice underscores the point. The Council of International Schools places “purpose and direction” at the head of its accreditation framework: schools are evaluated not on whether they have a mission, but on whether their practices demonstrably align with it (CIS, 2024). Yet while accreditors formally assess enactment, no sector-wide standard or dataset exists for measuring mission alignment across international schools. The Promise–Practice Divide is therefore not only a cultural risk; it is a measurement gap. Schools routinely quantify academic results, enrolment, and finance, but few can produce evidence of whether their stated values are actually experienced by students, staff, and families.

Research has shown that clarity and alignment of organisational values significantly enhance institutional effectiveness (Collins & Porras, 1994). In education, this means that when staff and students are clear on what the school stands for, they are more likely to contribute to its success.

The idea of Vision and Mission Integrity is not just a philosophical stance; it is a leadership imperative. It calls for congruence between aspiration and action, and it positions leaders as the custodians of cultural and operational alignment.

The timing for this conversation is critical. As schools worldwide face increasing accountability, competition, and stakeholder scrutiny, authenticity has become a strategic necessity. Families, teachers, and regulators increasingly expect schools to demonstrate, not merely state, their values. Vision and Mission Integrity provides a timely framework for addressing this challenge.

Evidence and Approach

This paper draws on three sources of evidence:

- A synthesis of established educational leadership literature, particularly works on organisational culture, mission clarity, and change leadership.
- Empirical evidence from organisational and education research, including NAIS parent research, McKinsey teacher retention analysis, Gallup's engagement meta-analyses, RAND leadership studies, and two decades of behavioural integrity scholarship.

- Case studies from internationally recognised schools, selected based on the public availability of evidence demonstrating alignment between mission statements and lived practices.

Together, these sources ground a practical framework in evidence rather than aspiration.

What We Already Know About Words and Deeds

Over the past three decades, scholarship in educational leadership has consistently highlighted the importance of organisational coherence, cultural alignment, and the lived enactment of values. Early work by Deal and Peterson (1999) emphasised that a school's culture, its rituals, norms, and shared meanings, is a powerful determinant of whether mission statements become authentic practice. Fullan (2001) further argued that meaningful change occurs only when deep cultural shifts accompany structural reforms. Similarly, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) found that professional capital flourishes when staff perceive a strong connection between stated values and daily experiences.

The gap between stated and lived values is among the most studied phenomena in organisational theory. Argyris and Schön (1974) distinguished the espoused theories organisations proclaim from the theories-in-use that govern actual behaviour, and demonstrated that the two routinely diverge. Schein (2017) placed espoused values at the middle of a three-level model of culture, between visible artifacts and the deeper assumptions that actually drive behaviour; coherence across the three levels is what makes a culture authentic. Simons (2002) gave the gap a measure: behavioural integrity, the perceived alignment between what leaders say and what they do, which subsequent research has linked to trust, employee retention, and organisational performance (Simons, 2008; Simons, McLean Parks, & Tomlinson, 2018). Collins and Porras (1994) argued from their study of visionary companies that institutions with clearly articulated core values outperform peers over time, a theme Sinek (2009) popularised as the organisational “why”. In education specifically, Bryk and Schneider (2002) demonstrated that relational trust is a core resource for school improvement, while research on school mission statements finds they vary systematically in the values they emphasise and argues they remain an underused resource for institutional reflection (Stemler, Bebell, & Sonnabend, 2011; Stemler & Bebell, 2012). Meta-analytic evidence points the same way: the direct relationship between mission statements themselves and organisational performance is positive but small (Desmidt, Prinzie, & Decramer, 2011). Statements alone do little, which is precisely why enactment, not articulation, is the variable this paper addresses.

Vision and Mission Integrity stands deliberately on this lineage; it does not claim to discover the gap. Its contribution is the operationalisation of alignment for schools. Where organisational theory diagnoses the divide, this framework specifies what closing it looks like in a school: Signature Experiences as the designable unit through which values become observable, and a five-stage leadership cycle that makes alignment a repeatable discipline rather than a standing aspiration. In Schein's terms, Signature Experiences are deliberately engineered artifacts, the visible layer of culture, designed so that what students experience daily expresses the values the school claims to hold. Collectively, the literature establishes mission enactment not as an aspirational ideal but as a measurable determinant of organisational effectiveness; this framework turns that finding into leadership practice.

This body of research underscores the need for a practical, action-oriented framework that links aspirational mission statements with lived experience. The following sections introduce and apply such a framework.

Section 02

Defining Vision and Mission Integrity

At its core, Vision and Mission Integrity means that a school's vision (its aspirational purpose) and mission (its roadmap to achieve that purpose) must be authentically reflected in everything the school does.

Vision answers the question: *Why do we exist?* Mission answers: *How do we realise our vision day by day?* Integrity means that every strategic decision, classroom interaction, staff initiative, and community partnership embodies these answers.

When alignment is achieved, the benefits show up in family behaviour. NAIS's Jobs-to-be-Done research found that parents "hire" a school to do a specific job for their family, and judge it on the experience delivered rather than the position stated (NAIS, 2020; 2021). A school's mission earns loyalty only when families can see it working. Schools that lack this clarity often fall into the Promise–Practice Divide, losing their sense of identity and direction.

Section 03

What Are Signature Experiences?

Signature Experiences are the daily practices, routines, and traditions that visibly express a school's values. They are what students remember, what parents talk about, and what staff feel proud to deliver.

These experiences should be:

- **Deliberate:** Strategically designed to support the vision and mission.
- **Consistent:** Repeatable and sustainable over time.
- **Authentic:** True to the school's identity, not borrowed or superficial.

Examples:

- A school that values global citizenship incorporates structured intercultural experiences across the curriculum.
- A school that promotes innovation ensures that project-based learning and design thinking are embedded in pedagogy.
- A wellness-focused school creates daily rituals around mindfulness and emotional literacy.

Parent research reinforces the importance of these visible practices. ISC Research (2020) found that parents choosing international schools weigh what they can observe: teaching quality, school culture, and the daily experience of their child. NAIS's parent research reaches the same conclusion from a different market: families judge a school on the job it actually does for them, not on its published statements (NAIS, 2020). Signature Experiences are therefore not optional embellishments; they are the primary evidence stakeholders use to decide whether a school is authentic.

Fullan's (2001) synthesis of change leadership ties successful reform to deep cultural change, where the school's ethos is not only articulated but felt. Signature Experiences represent the felt side of this ethos.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS: ALIGNMENT AND PERFORMANCE

- **Accreditation treats enactment as the standard:** “purpose and direction” heads the CIS accreditation framework (CIS, 2024).
- **Word-deed alignment is measurable, and it pays:** behavioural integrity predicts employee turnover, customer satisfaction, and profitability (Simons et al., 2018).
- **Engaged teams stay:** top-quartile employee engagement predicts 18 to 43 per cent lower turnover across sectors; connection to mission is one element of engagement, not separately isolated (Gallup, 2020).
- **Mission-aligned work keeps teachers:** among US teachers citing meaningful work as a reason to stay, 89 per cent say their school’s mission and purpose align with their values (Bryant et al., 2023).
- **Structure beats intention:** schools led by principals from deliberately designed hiring, evaluation, and support pipelines outperformed comparisons by 6.2 percentile points in reading (Gates et al., 2019).
- **Parents judge schools on delivered experience,** not stated position (NAIS, 2020; 2021).
- **Retention is the sector’s weak point:** most international schools keep teachers for only one to six years (ISC Research, 2024).

These realities make the risks of misalignment even more significant. Section 4 explores how the Promise–Practice Divide affects culture, trust, and performance.

Section 04

The Cost of Misalignment

When vision and mission are not authentically reflected in daily life, the resulting mismatch between stated values and real experiences creates the Promise–Practice Divide, a condition with serious consequences for school culture and trust.

- **Loss of trust:** Students and parents perceive the school as inauthentic.
- **Staff disengagement:** Educators feel disillusioned or unclear about their purpose.
- **Reputational risk:** Word-of-mouth contradicts marketing narratives.
- **Operational drift:** Decisions become inconsistent, reactive, and misaligned.

These patterns are consistent with the broader evidence. McKinsey’s 2023 survey of US educators found meaningful work the single strongest retention factor, and among teachers who cited it as a reason to stay, 89 per cent said their school’s mission and purpose aligned with their own values (Bryant et al., 2023). A meta-analysis of person–organisation fit research links value congruence to commitment and intention to stay (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). And in the most direct test of the Promise–Practice Divide to date, Simons and colleagues found that employees’ perception of alignment between managers’ words and deeds predicted staff turnover, customer satisfaction, and profitability across 76 hotels (Simons et al., 2018). When people conclude that the words are not real, they disengage or leave.

The strongest objection to this argument deserves stating plainly. Some selective, well-resourced schools thrive for decades with ornamental missions, and many parents choose schools on results, price, and proximity rather than values. Both points are true. Neither rescues the ordinary school. Selectivity and reputation can substitute for authenticity only where demand comfortably exceeds supply, and most schools do not enjoy that position. For the majority competing for families and teachers in contested markets, alignment is the margin between being chosen and being passed over. The cost of misalignment is, in that sense, regressive: it falls hardest on the schools least able to afford it.

Many schools unintentionally allow their strategic documents to remain symbolic, rather than functional, creating a widening gap between written intentions and lived reality.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) highlight that professional capital in schools is eroded when mission statements are divorced from reality. Disillusionment sets in, and turnover rises.

Section 05

Embedding Vision and Mission Integrity

To close this gap, leaders must deliberately embed vision and mission into every aspect of school life through consistent strategies and behaviours.

- **Leadership Behaviours:** Leaders must embody the values they promote. Their decisions, language, and presence should reflect the school's purpose. Kouzes and Posner (2002) place modelling the way, leaders visibly doing what they ask of others, first among their practices of exemplary leadership.
- **Curriculum Design:** Curriculum should be mapped to the mission. This requires integration, not just alignment. Schools can use tools like Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) to backwards-map learning outcomes to core values.
- **Recruitment and Onboarding:** Staff should be selected and trained based on their capacity to deliver and extend the school's mission. Cultural fit must be weighed alongside qualifications.
- **School Culture:** Signature rituals, language, events, and symbols should reinforce key values. Deal and Peterson (1999) argue that shaping culture is among the most important work school leaders do.
- **Measurement and Reflection:** Schools must create tools to regularly audit whether they are living their mission. Surveys, walkthroughs, and reflective practice are essential. Section 8 of this paper proposes a practical instrument for exactly this purpose.

Evidence from an adjacent domain supports the value of structured systems over good intentions. RAND's evaluation of principal pipelines, districts' systems for hiring, evaluating, and supporting school leaders, found that schools led by principals from these deliberately designed pipelines outperformed comparison schools by 6.2 percentile points in reading and 2.9 in mathematics, and retained their leaders longer (Gates et al., 2019). The study measured leadership systems rather than mission alignment, but its lesson transfers directly: discipline, not aspiration, is what converts intentions into practice.

Section 06

The Vision and Mission Integrity Cycle

These embedding strategies can be organised into a clear, repeatable process, the Vision and Mission Integrity Cycle, that guides schools from intention to sustained practice. To operationalise this concept, GSE proposes a simple cyclical framework:

- **Define:** Craft a clear, aspirational, and actionable vision and mission. This should be a collaborative and inclusive process.
- **Design:** Build systems, curriculum, and culture that embody these aspirations. Align policies, training, and environment.
- **Deliver:** Consistently execute these strategies through Signature Experiences. Monitor fidelity and quality.
- **Reflect:** Use evidence and feedback to evaluate impact. Include student voice, staff feedback, and community perception.
- **Refine:** Adapt to ensure continued relevance and authenticity. Allow for organic growth while holding true to core identity.

This cycle is not a one-time process. It is an ongoing commitment and a leadership discipline.

The cyclical approach reflects the wider school-improvement evidence. Chapman and Sammons (2013) found that disciplined self-evaluation cycles act as a catalyst for improvement. Bryk and colleagues' longitudinal research in Chicago showed that schools with coherence across essential supports, including school climate and instructional guidance, were far more likely to improve over multi-year periods (Bryk et al., 2010). The cycle is not theoretical; it mirrors the operational patterns of improving schools.

Case Studies: Vision and Mission in Action

The Vision and Mission Integrity framework becomes most compelling when examined through real examples of schools that have operationalised its principles. Across GSE's global projects, and others reviewed by leadership, schools that embraced Vision and Mission Integrity stood out in performance and perception.

CASE STUDY 1 • INDONESIA

Green School Bali: Sustainability Lived, Not Stated

Green School Bali is internationally recognised for its founding mission “to be a community of learners making our world sustainable”. What distinguishes the school is the degree to which sustainability is not merely taught but genuinely lived. Bamboo architecture, open-air learning spaces, permaculture farming, and student-run environmental initiatives form the daily fabric of school life.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- Student-managed permaculture gardens and composting systems
- “Green Studies” curriculum embedded across the school
- Campus powered partly by renewable energy, including micro-hydro projects
- Hands-on sustainability projects linked to real ecological challenges

IMPACT

Green School Bali was named a Top 3 Finalist for the World's Best School Prize for Environmental Action (T4 Education, 2022). Families consistently cite the authenticity of sustainability practice, not marketing, as the school's greatest differentiator.

CASE STUDY 2 • UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Dubai College: Excellence Through Coherent Practice

Dubai College is widely regarded as one of the highest-performing British curriculum schools globally. Its mission focuses on academic excellence, holistic development, and strong values. Independent reviews and inspection reports consistently observe that the school's culture, teaching practices, enrichment systems, and professional development structures work cohesively to support this mission.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- An extensive co-curricular programme with over 200 distinct weekly activities
- Teacher professional development aligned with mission-driven pedagogy
- Annual exhibitions and public performances that celebrate academic, artistic, and sporting excellence

IMPACT

Dubai College publishes sustained outstanding GCSE and A-Level results comparable with leading independent schools in the UK, and has earned Outstanding ratings across more than a decade of consecutive KHDA inspections. High teacher retention and strong university placement outcomes further reinforce that the school's reputation is grounded in genuine practice rather than aspirational language.

CASE STUDY 3 • WALES

UWC Atlantic College: Mission-Driven Global Citizenship

UWC Atlantic College exemplifies the UWC movement's mission: "to make education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future". This mission is visible throughout the school's academic programme, residential life, student governance, and service expectations.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- Student participation in humanitarian, marine rescue, and environmental action groups, including the Atlantic Pacific International Rescue Boat Project based on campus
- Service-based learning integrated throughout the IB Diploma
- Deliberate intercultural living arrangements in boarding houses
- Student leadership programmes focused on peacebuilding and conflict resolution

IMPACT

The college's service commitment is tangible rather than symbolic: it historically operated its own RNLI lifeboat station and is the birthplace of the rigid inflatable boat, a legacy of students solving real rescue problems. Many alumni have gone on to influential roles in international development, diplomacy, and environmental leadership, direct evidence of a mission lived beyond schooling (UWC International, 2023).

CASE STUDY 4 • UNITED STATES

High Tech High: Project-Based Learning as a Daily Reality

High Tech High (HTH), a public charter network in San Diego, is one of the world's most studied models of project-based learning. Its design principles emphasise equity, authentic work, and collaborative design. Published student work, exhibitions, and interdisciplinary design projects form the backbone of its instructional programme.

SIGNATURE EXPERIENCES

- Interdisciplinary, teacher-designed projects showcased publicly
- Student exhibitions attended by families, professionals, and community members
- Workshops and maker spaces enabling design thinking and engineering challenges
- Teachers collaborating in project design using internal "project tuning" protocols

IMPACT

Longitudinal research by the American Institutes for Research documented improved collaboration and communication skills, higher graduation rates, and stronger college enrolment among students at deeper-learning network schools, including schools in the HTH network (AIR, 2014; Rickles et al., 2019). Its practices have become global exemplars for mission-aligned innovative learning.

Closing the Divide: An International School in the GCC

The preceding cases show what alignment looks like at maturity. This final case, drawn from GSE's advisory work and anonymised, shows the route: how a school recognised its own Promise–Practice Divide and set about closing it.

The school served students of more than 80 nationalities, taught by staff from 24 countries. Its promise was ambitious and specific: an international education pairing academic achievement with genuine international-mindedness; holistic development built on service leadership, practised inside and outside the classroom; and Arabic programmes of a quality that would allow Arab families to trust the school with their children's heritage and identity through the spoken word.

Two of those promises quietly broke. The Arabic programme drew mounting criticism from the audience best placed to judge it: native-speaking parents and the wider Arab community. And service leadership had drifted into its easiest form: hefty financial donations stood in for action, sweat, and hard work. Neither gap appeared in any strategic document, but both were felt by the community, and each eroded a different part of the school's credibility. The Arabic shortfall broke a promise of identity; the donation habit quietly taught students that service could be outsourced.

The leadership response followed the logic this paper formalises as the Vision and Mission Integrity Cycle, though no one used that label at the time. The school returned to Define, revisiting and refining its vision and mission rather than defending the existing wording. It then built the Design layer: a set of guiding questions and practices applied across the school, so that every significant decision and action had to answer to the espoused values before it proceeded. The core practice was disarmingly simple. In every meeting or forum where a key decision was deliberated, the group asked aloud: "Will this action, activity, decision, project, purchase or direction...", completed each time with the school's own vision and mission language. The question cost nothing and required no system or consultant, but it made misalignment difficult to ignore, because it had to be answered in front of colleagues. Under that discipline, service that involved no effort or presence no longer counted as service leadership, and Arabic provision was tested against the promise made to families rather than against compliance requirements.

The measure of the change was not a new document but a new discipline. Decisions that could not be justified against the mission did not proceed. That is what closing the Promise–Practice Divide looks like from the inside: not a rebrand, but the re-alignment of daily choices with stated values, made systematic through questions everyone can ask.

A Note on the Limits of These Cases

The schools profiled here were selected because public evidence of alignment exists, which means they are examples of success rather than a test of the framework. Three limitations follow, and they are worth stating plainly. First, selection: misaligned schools rarely publish the evidence of their misalignment, so this sample can show what alignment looks like, not how common it is. Second, causation: coherent practice and strong outcomes travel together in these schools, but the influence runs in both directions; Dubai College's coherence, for instance, is easier to sustain because of the results and selectivity it already enjoys. Third, the four published cases did not consciously apply the Vision and Mission Integrity Cycle; they illustrate the destination, not the route. The fifth case shows the route, but as anonymised practitioner testimony it cannot be independently verified and should be weighed accordingly. Testing whether the cycle reliably closes the Promise–Practice Divide in ordinary schools, without selective intake or exceptional resources, remains the empirical work this framework invites.

These examples nonetheless align with the broader evidence. Bryk and colleagues' Chicago research found that schools with coherence between values, climate, and instruction were significantly more likely to achieve sustained improvement over multi-year periods (Bryk et al., 2010). Schools that approach mission as a lived identity rather than a symbolic statement demonstrate higher engagement and greater organisational resilience.

Authenticity is a brand advantage. Investors, parents, and regulators are increasingly drawn to institutions with a clear identity and consistent delivery. Schools that align their strategic intent with real outcomes are:

- More attractive to high-quality staff
- Better positioned to engage community stakeholders
- More resilient in the face of change
- Stronger in their marketing and growth potential

In a competitive education market, schools with Vision and Mission Integrity stand out as beacons of trust. The behavioural-integrity and relational-trust evidence reviewed in Sections 1 and 4 applies with full force here: schools compete for families and talent on exactly the trust that alignment builds.

Section 08

From Question to Instrument: Auditing Vision and Mission Integrity

Section 1 identified a measurement gap: accreditors formally assess mission enactment, yet no sector-wide instrument exists for measuring it. This section proposes one. It is built outward from a practice that began in the field, the alignment question described in Case Study 5, rather than from a framework designed on paper. It has three tiers, in ascending order of discipline, and a school can adopt the first of them at its next leadership meeting.

Tier One: The Alignment Question

“Will this action, activity, decision, project, purchase or direction...”

asked aloud in every meeting where a key decision is deliberated, and completed each time with the school's own vision and mission language.

Three rules make the question work. It is asked aloud, in the meeting, before the decision is taken, not reflected upon privately afterwards. It is completed with the school's actual words, because generic values invite generic answers. And it is answered with evidence, not assurance: “yes” must be followed by “because”. The question costs nothing and requires no consultant, but it changes the social physics of a leadership team. Misalignment stops being an abstraction in a strategy document and becomes something a colleague has just said out loud.

Tier Two: The Alignment Audit

The second tier applies the same question systematically rather than meeting by meeting. Each commitment in the vision and mission is crossed with five domains of school life: curriculum and learning; people, meaning recruitment, onboarding, and professional development; culture and rituals; resources and spending; and the promises made to families through admissions and communication. For every intersection, the school answers two questions. What do we currently do that demonstrates this value in this domain? And what evidence would a sceptical parent or accreditation visitor accept? Cells that produce assertions but no evidence are not failures of the audit; they are its findings. They mark precisely where the Promise–Practice Divide runs through the school.

The audit gains its honesty from triangulation. Leadership's answers are checked against what staff, students, and parents say when asked the same questions, because the earlier evidence is unambiguous on this point: stakeholders judge the school on delivered experience, and their perception is the measure that matters.

Applied across the Vision and Mission Integrity Cycle, the audit reduces to five diagnostic questions, one per stage:

- **Define:** Could every member of staff state what the school stands for without reading it from the wall?
- **Design:** If a stranger examined only the timetable and the budget, could they infer the school's values?
- **Deliver:** What are our Signature Experiences, and would students name the same ones we do?
- **Reflect:** Where do leadership, staff, student, and family perceptions of the school diverge?
- **Refine:** What have we stopped doing because it no longer aligned? A mission that has never stopped anything is not governing decisions.

Tier Three: The Integrity Maturity Scale

The third tier locates a school on a five-level scale. Its purpose is to give boards, investors, and accreditors a shared language for a question they already ask in private: is the mission real here? Placement is scored, not self-declared: leadership and board rate the school against the Tier Two audit evidence, checked against stakeholder perception data, and where leadership's rating exceeds stakeholders', the lower rating stands.

LEVEL	STAGE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
1	Ornamental	The mission exists on the website and the wall. Decisions are made on other grounds. Staff cannot recite it, and would not use it if they could.
2	Declared	The mission appears in planning documents and speeches, but no mechanism connects it to decisions. Where alignment exists, it is coincidence.
3	Ritualised	The Alignment Question is asked at the point of decision. Misalignment is visible and discussed, but the discipline depends on particular people and fades when they leave the room.
4	Systematised	The Alignment Audit runs on a cycle. Evidence is required, stakeholder perception is measured, and recruitment, development, and budgets are aligned by design rather than exception.

5

Embodied

Values govern decisions without prompting. Students, staff, and parents name the same Signature Experiences unprompted, and the school declines opportunities, income included, that do not fit.

A candid note on the instrument's status. Tier One has been used and sustained in the school described in Case Study 5; Tiers Two and Three are its formalisation and await systematic application across schools. That is stated openly for the same reason the case study limitations are: an instrument for measuring integrity should not overstate its own evidence. One further disclosure belongs here: GSE applies this framework in its advisory work, and readers should weigh that interest. It is also why the Tier One practice is published in full, free to any school that wants it. Schools, school groups, and accreditation bodies willing to apply and refine it are invited to do so.

When Mission Meets Money: Integrity in Investor-Owned Schools

Most writing on mission drift treats it as a failure of attention: schools forget their values under operational pressure. In investor-owned schools, particularly across developing markets, the reality is harder and more interesting. The divide is not created by neglect but by structure: the mission and the business model can pull in different directions, and the tension is felt not in classrooms but in board meetings. Vision and Mission Integrity is ultimately decided where money is allocated, which is why this framework belongs in the boardroom as much as the staffroom.

Consider the most common version of the tension, familiar to anyone who has advised school investors in developing countries. Three commitments sit around the same board table. The first is an aspirational mission to be premium, which investors often perceive to require a predominantly overseas teaching faculty. The second is a legitimate desire to maximise profit and control operating costs. The third is the knowledge that overseas teachers are the most expensive people in the building, carrying housing, flights, relocation, and insurance benefits on top of generally higher salaries. Any two of these commitments can be reconciled. All three, as stated, cannot.

Schools usually settle the triangle in one of two ways, and both are integrity failures. The first is the two-tier faculty: overseas teachers concentrated where parents will see them, at open days and on the website, while lower-cost colleagues carry much of the school on lesser packages. Staff notice immediately and students soon after, and the arrangement betrays both the premium promise and every stated value about equity and respect. The second is quiet substitution: shifting to cheaper hires while the marketing continues to sell an overseas faculty. That is the Promise–Practice Divide in its purest commercial form, and, as the evidence in Section 4 suggests, families eventually price it in through attrition and word of mouth.

The deeper problem, though, sits inside the first commitment, and this is where the mission, taken seriously, changes the economics. Look at what the aspiration actually contains: an assumption that premium means teachers from the UK, the US, Australia, and Canada. Yet the same schools espouse international-mindedness: cultural sensitivity, the embrace of global perspectives, and an explicit rejection of the idea that quality education belongs to native English speakers from the traditional “classics”. Held against the school’s own stated values, the equation of premium with four passports is not a mission commitment at all. It is an inherited market assumption that quietly contradicts the mission it claims to serve. A school that means its internationalism defines premium by the quality and deliberate diversity of its teachers: excellence recruited from anywhere, including the region the school serves.

That redefinition can also relieve the cost pressure, and this is precisely where integrity is won or lost, because the direction of travel matters. A school that diversifies its faculty because its mission demands it, and can show families the teaching-quality evidence behind every appointment, is closing the divide. A school that cuts costs first and then reaches for the language of global-mindedness to dress the decision is opening one, and the fee-paying parents to whom premium was sold can tell the difference. The Alignment Audit’s test applies exactly here: what evidence would a sceptical parent accept? If the answer relies on the brochure, the school has its finding.

The board-level discipline is the same Alignment Question used in Case Study 5, asked where budgets are set: will this staffing model, this package structure, this hiring decision deliver what our mission promises, in the words everyone at the table has agreed to? Integrity does not require boards to ignore economics. It requires the mission and the money

to answer to each other in the open, and it requires that what is promised to families is what is actually funded. For investors, this is not sentiment but risk management. The evidence assembled in this paper points consistently in one direction: alignment builds trust, trust drives retention and reputation, and retention and reputation are what protect margin. That evidence is, admittedly, largely cross-sector, drawn from hotels, corporate engagement research, and US district systems; direct tests in international schools remain to be run, and the instrument in Section 8 exists to invite them. Still, the highest level of the Integrity Maturity Scale, a school that declines income inconsistent with its mission, is not commercial naivety. It is what pricing power looks like from the inside.

Section 10

Implications for School Leaders and Policy Makers

The evidence presented in this paper points to several implications for school leadership, accreditation bodies, and policymakers.

- **Mission alignment should be treated as an accountability indicator.** Given the demonstrated links between word-deed alignment and organisational performance, accreditation and inspection frameworks should prioritise observable alignment rather than the existence of strategic statements.
- **Recruitment and professional development must be mission-driven.** Schools with high alignment consistently hire and develop staff based not only on qualifications but on their capacity to embody and extend the school's mission.
- **Leaders must allocate time and resources to cultural work, not only operational work.** Schools drift into the Promise-Practice Divide when cultural stewardship is neglected in favour of day-to-day administrative management.
- **Stakeholder voice should be systematically collected.** Students, parents, and teachers are most aware of whether the vision and mission are visible in daily experience. Their feedback should be collected through structured audits and walkthrough tools.
- **Policy frameworks should incentivise authenticity over branding.** As competition in private and international schooling increases, some institutions risk using vision and mission as marketing. Regulatory bodies can counter this trend by emphasising evidence of lived values.

Section 11

Conclusion and Call to Action

The responsibility for maintaining Vision and Mission Integrity ultimately rests with leadership. It is a responsibility that demands courage, discipline, and clarity, and it requires leaders to constantly ask: are we living what we say we believe? The reward is a school community that trusts its leadership, students who experience deep and meaningful learning, and a brand that stands the test of time.

The evidence reviewed here consistently ties trust, engagement, and long-term performance to the degree to which a school's mission is made visible in daily practice. The future belongs to schools that demonstrate coherence between what they claim and what their communities experience. Vision and Mission Integrity is therefore not optional. It is a leadership imperative that determines whether a school's promise becomes a lived reality or remains an unrealised aspiration.

Translating that insight into action requires intentional next steps from every member of the educational community.

- **For school leaders:** Start with the Alignment Question at your next leadership meeting, then audit your school against its mission. What do you see? What do others experience?
- **For investors and partners:** Ask the hard questions. Where is the alignment? Where is the evidence? Consider how Vision and Mission Integrity reduces reputational and operational risk, while strengthening long-term value.
- **For educators:** Be the daily link. Bring the vision to life in every lesson, every interaction, every choice.

To explore more on Signature Experiences and Vision and Mission Integrity, or to schedule a consultation, visit www.gsineducation.com/blog/signature-school-experience.

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Section 12

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