

The Ripple Effect: Turning Missions Into Motion Through Public Purpose Partnerships

On a bright summer morning in Westport, CT, Christina Whittaker walks the halls of the Greens Farms Academy (GFA) campus. She knows these corridors well—first as a student, later as a volunteer at Horizons GFA, and now as the Executive Director of this program celebrating more than 25 years at the school. Hundreds of miles away in Chicago, David Rupright sets up for another day with his ninth-grade computer science students at Curie Metropolitan High School, a school where 87% of the student body is low-income. His student-centered, community-focused teaching style traces back to lessons learned not only in college, but also as a high school student volunteering at Horizons at San Francisco Friends School (SFFS).

Both Christina and David are living proof of the public purpose ripple effect—when independent schools open their doors to partnerships like these, they animate and amplify their mission and values creating lasting impact for all. Through this work schools do not merely give—they grow.

The phrase “private school with a public purpose” has become a touchstone in independent school circles and for many it’s not just a slogan—it’s a practice. In an era where independent schools are seeking tangible ways to live their missions and deepen their relevance in the wider world, public-purpose partnerships offer a compelling and catalyzing path forward. These programs are more than a “nice to have” feature—they are a strategic way to bring a school’s values to life, strengthen communities, and cultivate deeper purpose within and beyond school walls.

Summer Matters

While many see summer as *time off* for students, the exact opposite is true. It is actually an important *time on*—for learning, growth, connection, and joy. Every summer, schools and classrooms across the country buzz with a different kind of energy. There are countless summer programs out there, all with different themes, audiences, and settings, and all designed to foster learning and growth. For those enrolled in Horizons—a national network of summer enrichment programs serving under-resourced public school students—these months are not simply a break from the school year; they’re a time of discovery, exploration, and possibilities. And for the independent schools who host these programs, it’s a chance to live their values, build lasting relationships, and create change.

And the need has never been greater. As public education systems continue to grapple with persistent post-pandemic learning loss and face significant reductions in federal support—such as the recent \$6.8 billion cut to the Department of Education—students from under-resourced communities are experiencing widening opportunity gaps. Recent studies indicate that students require nearly five additional months of instruction in reading and over four months in math to catch up to pre-pandemic levels, with the most substantial deficits among low-income and historically marginalized students. For Horizons students, this means a summer filled with

learning and belonging. For independent schools, it means their own students and alums—whether as volunteers, teaching assistants, or interns—gain new perspectives, skills, and meet this moment with a shared sense of purpose.

Christina and David's stories are shining examples of this—formative experiences that helped shape their values, career paths, and understanding of what it means to contribute to the common good.

Coming Home to Lead

Christina's connection to Horizons began in middle school at GFA. As a volunteer, she discovered the value of building authentic relationships with younger students. It was these relationships that demonstrated the power and purpose of Horizons. As Christina shared, "HGFA showed me that it is possible and, honestly, necessary to build an effective and joyful learning community in order to support each student in becoming the most successful version of themselves."

That early engagement planted a seed. At GFA, Christina was surrounded by the school's mission-driven ethos and approach—a commitment to engage students as partners in an innovative, inclusive, and globally-minded community to prepare them for lives of purpose. "I certainly found my purpose attending GFA and volunteering at Horizons GFA" said Christina. For her, Horizons became a living example of those values in action.

After college, Christina returned to Horizons GFA, this time as a program director. "It felt like coming home," she says. She eventually stepped into the role of executive director, overseeing growth, deepening community partnerships, and mentoring the next generation of volunteers—some of whom are GFA students just like she once was.

She now gets to witness and support not only the Horizons students grow over the years, but also her volunteers and interns as well. As Christina shared, "In my role... I try to honor our past and preserve that culture that kept bringing me back year after year. My hope is that we can continue to evolve to meet the needs of our students, but that the strengths of our community will remain the same."



Christina with a Horizons GFA student she has mentored for years, celebrating the student's college graduation — a full-circle moment reflecting Horizons' enduring relationships

Values In Action

For David, the story begins in the hallways of San Francisco Friends School, a Quaker institution rooted in values known by the acronym SPICES: Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, and Stewardship. For David, these weren't just lofty words hung from banners in the gym. As he recalls, "My own grounding in the SPICES... had a formative influence on my personal and professional goals and values."

When Horizons SFFS launched, David signed up to volunteer, assisting in small reading groups and helping with various activities throughout the summer. Those experiences stayed with him through high school at Lick-Wilmerding, another mission-driven school committed to being a "private school with a public purpose." There, he deepened his commitment to service and equity, which steered him in the direction of education.

He pursued the path to become a teacher in college. "I made the choice to pursue education," David shared, "...knowing, in part, because of my work at Horizons that I had strengths in working with young people." Now in his fourth year as a public school teacher in Chicago that serves a similar population, David draws on lessons from Horizons daily. "My time at Horizons gave me a framework to understand service, community, and purpose put into practice through profession." That kind of throughline is no surprise to San Francisco Friends School Head of School Pankti Sevak. "It is a gift to see our alumni return to SFFS each summer to volunteer with the Horizons program and to witness the significant role that service plays in the choices our alumni make as they grow," she reflects. "To us, it demonstrates the enduring impact of our mission as a Quaker school."



David volunteering with Horizons at SFFS students during his high school years

Seperate Journeys, Shared Threads

Despite different paths—one to nonprofit leadership, one to public education—Christina and David’s stories stem from their time in independent schools and share common themes:

1. **Early Engagement with Purpose-Driven Work:** Exposure to and engagement with meaningful, community-centered programs gave them a clear sense of how education can advance both justice and joy.
2. **Values Made Tangible:** Horizons transformed their schools’ ideals into lived experiences—lessons that stayed with them long after their time on campus.
3. **Relationships at the Core:** Connections between students, teachers, volunteers, and families shaped their belief in the power of community and shared values.
4. **A Lasting Ripple Effect:** Impactful experiences as young volunteers guided their choices in life, and now shape the lives of the students they teach and mentor.

The Win-Win Proposition

Christina and David’s stories underscore a truth too often overlooked: the impact of public purpose programming flows both ways. Through programs like Horizons, public school students gain academic confidence, joyful experiences, and trusted relationships. Independent school students gain perspective, connection, and in many cases, a lifelong sense of purpose. Faculty deepen their teaching practice. Alumni carry lessons into professions and communities beyond the school walls. As Christina shared,

I carry all of this into my role as Executive Director. I prioritize relationships because I know that will lead to a strong, responsive, and inclusive community. The core values of Horizons GFA are partnership, community, excellence, integrity, and the belief in the potential of all children. Everything that we do centers our students and families and is grounded in these values. I believe that is what makes us successful, and it all started with GFA.

David agrees. “Volunteering at Horizons helped me see education as something that’s collaborative and community-based. That’s a perspective I carry with me every day.”

Through experiences like Christina and David’s, schools learn with and from the communities they serve. Independent schools also gain deeper ties to their local communities, living out their public purpose mission in ways that are concrete, visible, and transformative for everyone involved.

Continuing the Cycle

It’s a warm summer afternoon at Horizons GFA. Christina watches as a group of high school volunteers help second graders conquer their fears in the pool—a mix of nervous energy and excitement not unlike what she felt when she was in their shoes.

In Chicago, David prepares his classroom for another school year, committed to providing young people with opportunities to engage in work grounded in values—fostering a community of care and connection, much like the one he experienced at both SFFS and Horizons.

These are the moments, rooted in their past, that now shape and sustain Christina and David’s shared commitments to students: building community, sparking curiosity, and igniting joy.

Independent schools are uniquely positioned to meet this moment—not as saviors, but as partners. Opening their doors each summer is far more than an act of charity. It is an invitation to put their missions into motion—building authentic relationships, fostering mutual growth, and living school values in powerful and lasting ways.

When private schools live their public purpose, students learn within and beyond their walls, expanding communities of care and commitment. Christina and David’s stories remind us what’s possible when independent schools turn the espoused into the lived: connections deepen, communities strengthen, and missions come alive.

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