

## A Message from the Head of School

# Waiting for a Valid GPS Signal and Its Relevance to Strategic Planning

By Robb Gaskins, Ph.D.



The other day I was leaving a meeting in Philadelphia on my way to another engagement northeast of the city. Consequently, I entered my destination into the navigation system to determine the best way to get where I was going. In my urgency to begin, I must admit that despite my mindfulness training, I was a bit frustrated that after a few minutes of waiting, the device had yet to present directions. Then, I looked a little more closely at the screen and I had to laugh at the message displayed: “Waiting for a valid GPS signal.” In other words, the problem wasn’t a matter of where I was going—it was a function of understanding where I was right now! After being immersed in strategic planning for over a year, I couldn’t help but appreciate the relevance of the current message to that process. The universe is a funny place. Let me explain.

If you want to find the best way to get to a particular destination, what do you need to know? I would argue that you need to know at least four pieces of information:

1. You need to know where you are going. You can’t plan an excursion without a clear end point in mind.
2. You need to know your goal for the journey. Is your objective to get there as quickly as possible? Do you want to take the most scenic route? Are there locations you want to visit along the way? Decisions such as these affect the path you take.
3. You need to know the current road conditions. The route that best accomplished your goal yesterday may not be the same route that is best today. You need to know what is happening out there presently and plan accordingly.
4. Finally, as my experience with the navigation system reinforced, you need to know where you are right now. This may seem so obvious that it does not merit recognition, but it is the most fundamental piece of information of the four, and, as I can attest, you won’t get anywhere without it.

### Know Thyself

In aspiring for growth in business or one’s personal life, the same points hold true. The only difference is that, in these realms, the most fundamental issue of determining “where you are right now” is best described by the age-old appeal to “know thyself.” For a business, in order to

meaningfully and successfully move toward the goals to which you aspire, it behooves you to begin by engaging in a self-evaluation process that gathers a wide range of internal and external perspectives on your organization. If the collection of these perceptions is followed by a thoughtful reflection on the patterns in the data and an objective analysis of the knowledge, beliefs, systems, processes, attachments, and actions that explain these findings, you will arrive at a deep understanding of your institution that helps you establish the most productive course of action as you head into the future.

In the case of Benchmark School, our self-evaluation served just such a function and, consequently, it provided an invaluable foundation for our strategic planning process. First and foremost, we received a wealth of exciting feedback specifying what people value about Benchmark School. A recurring theme across respondents was that we have an exceptional instructional program led by superb teachers who do an unparalleled job of preparing students to meet with success in high school, college, and life. One administrator from a receiving school commented that,

“Benchmark prepares students better than any other school to return to the mainstream. They instill work habits and teach organizational strategies that help children be successful.”

Our consultants reported that they had never seen stronger alumni data in all their years in education. Our graduates consistently expressed that they owe their academic and professional success to the confidence, strategies, knowledge, and personal characteristics they learned at Benchmark School. Time and again the alumni passionately shared some variation of the same sentiment—“Benchmark changed my life.”

In addition to the overwhelmingly positive comments about Benchmark, the self-evaluation process also provided some constructive feedback about where people felt we could improve. What we heard most prominently is that we need to do a better job of getting out there and clarifying who we are, what we do, and the powerful impact of a Benchmark education on our graduates’ lives.

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## Moving Into the Future

Our analysis of the results of our self-evaluation process was central to the creation of our strategic plan. It was readily apparent what community members appreciate the most about Benchmark. People not only value our commitment to excellence and innovation, but they recognize that this commitment produces extraordinary results that they experience first-hand in their lives. Consistent with these findings, our strategic plan asserts that we will build on the

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As part of Benchmark's new marketing campaign, the School launched its new, mobile-friendly website in early February. Take a look at [BenchmarkSchool.org](http://BenchmarkSchool.org)



aforementioned commitment by remaining dedicated to serving as leaders in the education of bright students who learn differently, being on the cutting edge of educational research, and developing students who are globally aware and prepared to excel in the complex and ever-changing world of the 21st century.

Related to the feedback that we need to more broadly and powerfully share with the community about our school and the tremendous outcomes we produce, we plan to systematically connect, collaborate, and engage with groups and individuals throughout the community so that we might work together to help us serve as many students as possible who fit our mission. Our new marketing and branding campaign that has resulted in a new logo, tagline, and website, as well as new marketing materials, goals, strategies, and tactics is certainly a part of this effort. In order to support the pursuit of all of these goals, we endeavor to create a flexible and sustainable financial model that will ensure the continuation of Benchmark's mission for generations to come.

Without question, it is a particularly exciting time at Benchmark. We are writing a new chapter in the history of the School. It is a chapter that we could not have meaningfully constructed without a clear understanding of where we were when we started. I look forward to the journey ahead! 