

Gateway College Preparatory School Mission, Vision & Values

Address recorded for Gateway Prep School employees by Founder/CEO Richard Norman Rickey

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As you get closer to your retirement years, as I am, you begin to reflect more on your legacy. Any founder, author, or creator who is being honest, will tell you that they care deeply that people understand the why and the wish of their creation. One of my fears, is that long after I'm long gone, the people who come after me will not know the why and the wish of this school, or forget, or ignore my vision and just make up their own interpretation.

If you are [slide 1] a teacher, administrator, or support staff working at Gateway Prep School, you should know what makes this school special and unique, and understand, protect and promote its founding values.....never losing sight of what those are. So I want to go on record and tell you Why I started this school, and What I hoped to accomplish?

My vision for this school actually came from my concern for boys. Most of you know I have two children, my first born a girl, and six years later, a son. I was super excited to have a girl, and I was just as excited to have a boy. Like all parents of multiple children, you soon learn how very different and unique your own offspring can be. Each child is different in personality, interests, cognitive abilities, motor skills, learning styles, and each has different challenges to overcome.

When my son came along I started to do more research on raising and educating a boy. I soon learned about the "boy crisis" here in America as evidenced by the following statistics: that boys do much worse in school, compared to girls, in all K – 12 grades, that college attendance for boys has dropped significantly below girl's college attendance, there is enormous growth in Ritalin prescriptions given to more and more boys; and a growing percentage of young men are spending more and more time on screens playing video games and will not be prepared for the future economy.

My own antidotal experience parenting a son, coaching youth sports teams, and volunteering in the school and classroom, was that most of the boys I knew in our neighborhood were absolutely not on a path for future success as earners and providers. Most were on the academic track of mediocrity, and were not going to reach their God given potential. In the book titled The Rise of Women, Columbia University author and researcher Thomas DiPrete states that, quote "young men are overly optimistic about their ability to earn a livable salary, even though they're less educated than women", closed quote.

We now live in a rapidly changing world where the single most important asset is your mind and not your muscles. We automate almost everything now. Robots now do what men and women use to do on the assembly line. More and more workers are needed who can figure out and operate complex systems. Unfortunately, many of our boys are totally unprepared for this shift. They don't even know what's going to hit them when they graduate from high school.

Now please remember I have a girl and a boy. I don't favor one gender over another, but with these trends in mind, my vision for our Gateway College Preparatory School was to make sure we offered an academic program and extracurricular activities that would attract boys and get our male students just as college and career ready as our females.

The first thing I did, before we ever had a physical campus, was come up with a motto that best summarized what I had in mind. [Slide 2] Citizen – Scholar - Athlete is our school motto. As I looked at the landscape of public charter school offerings in Williamson County, and the greater Austin area, I found a huge unmet need. While there were almost 40 charter schools in the greater Austin area when we started Gateway Prep, and another charter school was about to open in Round Rock at the same time as our Gateway campus in Georgetown, no charter school offered a UIL extracurricular program with athletics for students in junior and/or high school. [Slide 3] The University of Texas Scholastic League, the "UIL", is the largest youth organization in the world. Here in Texas 800,000 public school students in grades 7 – 12 get to participate in UIL activities and compete against other students in academic, athletic and performing art competitions. Before Gateway Prep came into existence, if you were looking for a strong academic charter school that also offered UIL activities and athletics for your son or daughter, well, you were fresh out of luck. Sorry! No charter school in the greater Austin area was a UIL member, even though they could be if they applied for UIL membership. Charter school enrollment as a percentage of all public school students in Texas is about 7%, but less than 1% of UIL participants were charter school students. That needed to change, especially if you had a deep concern for reaching more boys, as I did!

My first thought was to offer a boys only high school, but after more research, I came to realize that was not a good idea. Numerous community meetings we held at the Georgetown Community Events Center listening to families, had convinced me that what was needed was a K through 12 co-ed school with a college preparatory focus, and UIL membership. That was the very first thing that made this Gateway College Prep Charter School unique and special.

When you ask families why they are looking at leaving a traditional public school in search of a charter school, you also hear them talk about finding a school that is safe for their children to learn, and that teaches and expects good citizenship among its' student body and faculty. Nobody wants to send their children to a school where there are lots of discipline problems, or where the values of the family are disrespected.

So I wanted to offer a public charter school choice where [Slide 2] Citizenship was expected. Where rude and disruptive behavior by students would not be tolerated. Inside this ideal of citizenship, we placed the action of generosity. I wanted to offer a school that taught our students to be more than just consumers, but rather how to be generous and giving, so that each student came to understand they had value and were needed, and were counted on. This is why Gateway Prep has a Service Learning Requirement that must be met in order to graduate.

[Slide 2]. Scholarship. To be a school that has, and maintains, high academic standards, and where students learn how to learn, by teaching them organizational skills, time management, how to take notes, to take ownership over their own learning, and become critical thinkers. In other words, where it is cool to be scholarly.

Let me now address the role of Athletics in our Motto. I believe UIL athletic activities complement our academic offerings. There are skills students gain from athletic participation that enhance their academic and personal development. Athletics helps to build character, discipline, healthy habits, and gets kids away from their phones and screens. There is no conflict between the best in academics and the best in athletics. But given the financial realities of charter schools who do not receive as much revenue as traditional public schools, we had to carefully pick and choose what we would offer in UIL extracurricular programming. We quickly ruled out Football. Football consumes most of a school's athletic budget, requiring the most coaches, facilities and equipment. The sports we chose to offer were ones we felt we had the resources to be competitive in. Each sport we offer is equally valued and resourced. Now, such an offering comes with a cost, but we have never deviated from our commitment to do so in a cost-efficient manner, thus our requirement that student-athlete families pay an athletic fee to play, helping to defray our athletic costs, and thereby keeping our athletic department budget at a much lower percentage of our total school budget than our UIL public school competitors.

A quick word about the arts. While my first priority for extracurricular offerings was athletics, I also wanted to offer some performing arts. Not all our students are into athletics. I played three sports in school, but I also sang in a youth choir that traveled and performed throughout the Northeast. Some of my fondest memories were those choir trips and performing for a large audience. So I wanted to offer choir.

With my professional training and graduate education in public health, I also want to see more kids moving their bodies, so I wanted us to have a strong dance program. The visual arts and theater were also programs I thought we could offer. On the other hand, I did not think we would have the additional resources to also offer a strong Band program. I don't want us to be mediocre in anything we offer. If we're going to offer a program, we should have the resources to develop the interests and talents of our students in that chosen endeavor. Just like football, band has not been offered for those financial reasons.

Let me address the physical campus and what I had in mind. I remember driving up to our current location on Westinghouse Road in 2008, [slide 4] to what was a large corn field at the time. Many a Sunday afternoon I would come and walk between the corn stalks and visualize my 'Field of Dreams' for this school.

[Slide 5] When I was designing the master facilities plan for our campus I wanted to incorporate some of my Mom's "No Child Left Inside" philosophy on raising children. She knew, and I learned as a child, I'm happiest outdoors. In fact, public health research confirms that even small doses of nature improve our moods and wellbeing, but also our ability to think, remember, create and

daydream. So with this in mind, we designed an open campus setting, like a small private college, where the students could get outside several times during the day for some sunlight, fresh air, to walk in a court yard amongst some native plants, and to see and hear some water. Inside I wanted lots of natural light with some open collaborative learning areas.

The physical structure [Slide 6] turned out exactly the way I visualized it many years before it was built, with a court yard connecting all the buildings. It truly is a beautiful campus.

But a school is not just buildings, it is a learning environment filled with educators, mentors, coaches, instructors, support staff - human beings who come together with a shared purpose, mission, vision and values that make up a school culture.

When I told our architect and engineers I wanted a water fountain [slide 7] in the middle of the court yard, they kind of looked at me like I was crazy. Public schools don't do that they said -- for all the obvious reasons. Basically, it's because adults just don't trust their students around a water fountain. But for me, the water fountain is a symbol of the kind of school culture I hoped our educators would create. Where beauty was valued and respect for people, and property was evident everywhere you looked. It pains me every time I see adults or students not taking proper care of our physical campus. Our students should learn from us adults, how to respect, nurture and take care of things.

When you have worked as hard as we have to create a certain type of school culture, one of high expectation, and academic excellence, you will want to proclaim and protect your school brand. It's your reputation. I can't emphasize enough how important this is, especially for a charter school like us, because parents freely chose to send their children to us. Their positive perception of our school is what drives them to us, and keeps them here. We are never going to be as well-known as the big district public schools surrounding us. They get all the free press. [Slide 8] We must carve out our own niche. Our school green and orange colors, logo, crest, and Gator mascot are unique to us. No other public school in the greater Austin has them. Do not compromise or change them. Every time we are out in public we should be promoting Gateway Prep in our uniforms and attire. Wear the green and orange colors [slide 9] and our unique "G" proudly. Let no one be confused about who we are, and what we represent.

[Slide 10]. I started this school to get more boys, and girls, into the professional fields and careers that require a college degree, and that pay well. There are some good paying jobs that do not require a college degree, so we are not for everybody. And of course, we don't expect our elementary or middle school students to be laser focused on college just yet. As a general rule, by the time a student enters the 9th grade it should become pretty evident if they have the intelligence, cognitive ability, and desire to attend college. Not all of our 8th graders will still be with us through high school graduation because of this, and that is OK.

Let me quickly address this growing sentiment that states "too many kids are going to college". I don't agree, but I would say too many are ending up with too much student debt, and college

degrees with low value. That can be avoided, and we should be very good at helping our students and parents navigate all of that.

For our Instructional Methods I leaned on some education experts to help guide us in our choices. Charter schools are supposed to be innovative and creative, reaching families who don't want the cookie cutter traditional standardized approach. [Slide 11] The innovation I wanted to see was in the use of blended-learning, combining great in person teaching with student-centric technology, allowing the educator to better customize instruction to the students learning style and interests. This technology is still evolving, but I want our school to remain an early adopter of technology, and teaching our students how to properly use it.

To get our students ready for college level [Slide 12] academic work we chose the American Board Advanced Placement and Pre-AP curriculum..... and the [Slide 13] AVID College Readiness System. We believe these methods work best for its intended purpose – creating the habits for success in college.

Now you know the answer to the question, why did I start this school? But what was my wish? That Gateway College Preparatory School would have the same reputation for a public school as Stanford University has in higher education. To be consistently ranked as one of the top ten academic schools in the greater Austin area. And, at the same time, to be ranked in the top ten in the UIL Lone Star Cup that ranks UIL schools based on their performance in UIL extracurricular activities. To date no charter school has come close in both of these measures.

Oh you say, "Mr. Rickey that is just impossible". I say, no, you are wrong, it is possible. Why not us? We have so much going for us. We are in the best position of any charter school to accomplish that. A great location, a strong foundational school culture, a sound set of values in our Circle of Courage Philosophy, a core group of educators who have been with us since our early days. [Slide 14] And we have a strong nucleus of great kids and many families who give generously to help close our funding gap.

Our best years are in front of us.

And nothing is more gratifying for me than to see young men, and young women, graduate from our stage and go on to be significant adults, forever proud to be a Gator, and grateful for this school choice. And that is only possible because of all of you who chose to join me in this critical endeavor to influence and educate a growing number of Central Texas learners. [Slide 15] Gateway College Preparatory School. Start Here. Finish Here. Citizen, Scholar, Athlete. Go Gators!!!!