Providence Country Day (PCD) School on reinventing the tuition model:
Prioritizing Fit Over Finances

A Q&A with Kevin Folan, Head of School, Providence Country Day School
A decades-long steady increase in private school tuition has left many questioning the accessibility of an independent school education. While some schools have considered new or alternative tuition models, few have made the step toward a full tuition reset. Providence Country Day (PCD) School, located in Providence, RI, is one of these few. It has made the bold decision to prioritize fit over finances by decreasing tuition by nearly 40% starting in the fall of 2021. We asked Kevin Folan, Head of School, to reflect upon some questions regarding the process behind—and the response to—PCD’s decision to set a new standard for independent school education.

**EMA: Describe Providence Country Day School’s “Quest” and how it provides support for your tuition reset model.**

**KF:** At PCD, we’ve seen a growing chasm between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” We recognize that, by and large, public schools struggle to serve a broad range of students simply because it is difficult to reach 25–30 students in a classroom. Independent schools, in contrast, have developed the ideal educational model, but the exorbitant tuition makes this option beyond reach for the vast majority of families. As a community that celebrates knowledge put into action, we felt compelled to do something.

On October 1, 2020, we launched the PCD Quest, a strategic initiative that aims to build the ideal educational environment around three pillars: school must be accessible, personal, and relevant.

**Accessible:** To be accessible means that families can afford the opportunity for their children to attend PCD and that PCD is viewed as a place of belonging. Over the past generation, PCD’s tuition grew nearly 400%, while median household income has increased only 15%. That is not sustainable for our school or for the families we serve. With that in mind, we are resetting our tuition at Providence Country Day School. I am proud to say that, in a world full of escalating prices, our tuition will be decreasing by nearly 40%. Starting in the fall of 2021, PCD’s annual tuition will be reduced to $25,000 for Upper School and $22,000 for Middle School.

**Personal:** Across the country, education has become increasingly standardized and streamlined. As I look around the city of East Providence, the PCD student body, and even my own house, I am amazed at the differences that enrich these communities. No two students are alike, and education is not one size fits all. Every student deserves a tailored plan. To that end, we have devised the PCD Playbook. The PCD Playbook is an evolving portfolio that will grow and adapt just as students do throughout their time at PCD. The PCD Playbook will include notes from student advisers and teachers, personal goals for the year ahead, and insights regarding academic and personality styles that will help teachers and students better understand and adapt to what each student needs to reach their fullest potential. The Playbook will also leverage the extensive PCD alumni network to foster connections for college ambitions, internship opportunities, and career development.

**Relevant:** We are preparing our students for jobs and industries that may not currently exist. A relevant education means that we provide our students with the flexible skills and reflective knowledge necessary...
to thrive and to adapt to our ever-changing world. Especially this past year, we have seen the immediate need for high-quality digital education. While one cannot replace the interpersonal experiences of being on our campus, throughout the world there is a demand for exceptional academics and a personalized approach, all available online. To that end, we developed the PCD Online Academy. Through a strategic partnership, PCD has already been providing high-quality academics to international students who are unable to attend PCD in person. We are expanding our online academy to students located within the United States but not geographically close enough to attend on campus. These students will benefit from the superior curriculum that PCD offers, which will contribute in positive ways to the experience of our students on campus.

Kodak, Tower Records, Blockbuster Video—once iconic brands—were unable, or unwilling, to read market trends and ultimately became irrelevant. PCD Knights, in contrast, are ever-evolving and timelessly purposeful. The PCD Online Academy is a way for us to adapt to this evolving landscape to better serve the needs of students, not only in the United States, but also globally.

EMA: What was the “why” behind the idea of a tuition reset?

KF: The “why” is a conversation that has been had in the PCD Board Room for about a decade. While I have only been at Providence Country Day for 18 months, the Board and my predecessor recognized that tuition growth was outpacing the Providence market and, more specifically, the typical PCD family. While many schools have spent time discussing and questioning the independent school “business model,” we were compelled to do something now. While the conversation and ultimate decision was made before the COVID-19 pandemic, this crisis provided further confirmation that now was the right time to act and to be bold.
EMA: Please describe how this concept was received by your internal community.

KF: The Board has partnered with me every step of the way. The biggest hurdle we had to overcome was the fear of the psychology of the independent school consumer. Since we are, in essence, selling a luxury service, how will families respond to a significantly lower price? Will they falsely assume that we are now “less than” our peer schools in Providence? With this challenge in mind, we wanted to make sure that when we rolled out our tuition reset, it was in conjunction with the other strategic initiatives we were launching concurrently. Thus, the PCD Quest was born.

Initially, the faculty and staff were concerned, particularly about the tuition reset. A few of them immediately jumped to fears about personnel cuts, salary reductions, and other negative news. I assured them that this initiative was born from a place of strength and not desperation.

Our families, as I’m sure you can imagine, are absolutely thrilled!

EMA: What kind of programming changes did you implement to subsidize the reduction in tuition?

KF: The most important change is the PCD Online Academy. This will continue to generate a substantive alternative revenue stream for us. As a school that has historically focused on our day market, it has been exciting to shift our recruitment strategy from just the greater-Providence market to a nationwide and global enrollment pool.

Our donor base is thrilled with the PCD Quest. This innovative thinking and approach has signaled to our most dedicated constituents that we are taking a bold step forward during the global pandemic.

Like many schools, we have been very generous with our financial aid dollars, perhaps a little too generous. We recognize that our tuition discount rate is too high, and we are confident that we will build a more sustainable student enrollment at this new price point.

EMA: What has the external community response been to your tuition reset announcement? More precisely: What has the response been from your local market?

KF: Particularly in light of the announcement while in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, our local market has expressed appreciation and recognized PCD as a school that is in touch with economic realities.

EMA: How has this changed your enrollment strategy/practices (if at all)?

KF: Yes, it has. We are now able to pull from a broader array of feeder schools, particularly parochial schools.

EMA: Any feedback from prospective families as you are now into the 2021–22 admission cycle?

KF: While the tuition reset has garnered much attention, a number of families provided feedback that the personalized learning emphasis and focus on a relevant education resonated with their family’s values and beliefs. To date we have doubled the number of applications for Fall 2021 enrollment.

Kevin Folan is the Head of School at Providence Country Day School, a private college-prep school serving middle and high school students in Providence, Rhode Island, and more than 45 surrounding communities.

Learn more about the PCD Quest: www.providencecountryday.org/pcd-quest