



Rigor, Respect, Responsibility
VANGUARD
COLLEGE PREPARATORY SCHOOL

VANGUARD'S EDUCATIONAL OUTLOOK SY 26-27

Wednesday, January 14, 2026

6:00 PM - 8:00 PM

State of the School - Transcript from Mr. Graham

1/14/2026

Dear Vanguard Community,

In 1973, Dr. Louis Bright, President of the Western Institute for Science and Technology, and Dr. Jerry Vincent, Vice President for Education at WIST and Associate Dean of Baylor University's School of Education, began exploring the idea of founding a school in Waco grounded in Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning. Developed in 1956 and widely adopted by the 1960s, Bloom's framework emphasized a hierarchy of learning objectives, skills, and curricular design. By the early 1970s, it stood at the cutting edge of education—and today, it still serves pedagogical foundation, one we will revisit later this evening.

Dr. Bright and Dr. Vincent acted on their vision and invited a young man in his twenties, Joe Flowers, to teach mathematics and computer programming at the new school, one that would include its own computer system for students, an extraordinary innovation for its time. Dr. Abner McCall, then President of Baylor University, became the first President of Vanguard's Board of Trustees.

The moment we now occupy represents the most transformative period in Vanguard's history. Names such as Dr. Jerry Vincent, Ed Wucker, Linda Goble-Tinsley, and Bill Borg helped establish a firm foundation during the school's first five decades. Undoubtedly, there were seasons when survival itself was the primary goal. Because of their leadership, perseverance, and foresight, we are beyond today's survival and now have the privilege—and responsibility—of growing Vanguard College Preparatory School into a sustainable institution for all time.

Although we will unpack a few of our strategic opportunities later in this address, I want to first celebrate Vanguard's finest product—its teachers. While there is much to extol about our program and its lasting impact, Vanguard's name cannot be spoken without honoring the iconic educators, past and present, who symbolize its commitment to the pursuit of excellence: names such as Leslie, Perdichi, Richie, Flowers, Kelly, Johns, James, Johnson, Lieber, Allman, Livingstone, Ferretter, *et alia*. They represent some of the most formidable secondary educators in Central Texas, and their investment in your children is unparalleled.

Beyond our faculty, there is much for which we are deeply grateful: a healthy and vibrant student culture; engaged parents; a dedicated and ever-present support staff; strong administrators; outstanding athletic leadership and coaches; alumni whose giving exceeds national averages for independent schools; and loyal donor-friends of Vanguard. We do not take these blessings lightly, and we recognize our shared responsibility to steward this school well.

While we rightly celebrate Vanguard College Preparatory School, we also acknowledge that—like any healthy organization—we have opportunities for growth. Every person has a love language, and mine is an amalgamation of coaching, challenging, stretching, intentional preparation, and accountability. With that in mind, I want to highlight several key opportunities ahead.

Faculty Compensation & Comprehensive Professional Appraisal

Vanguard's teachers are deeply committed to students and rank among the finest educators around. Regardless of whether they serve in public or private education, they deserve a peerless compensation model within our region. Vanguard must also be able to recruit top talent from Waco ISD and Midway ISD through competitive salaries.

To be clear, Vanguard already offers the highest teacher pay among Waco's private schools. However, our investment in our most important resource—our faculty—must continue to grow.

Since the Board's February 2025 meeting, I have worked closely with Governance to develop a forward-thinking compensation model. I am personally holding myself accountable for securing major gifts to support the sustainability of this initiative so that tuition remains affordable for families and any increases remain modest. While we do not yet have a launch date for this plan's implementation, the proposal is fully developed and documented, and we look forward to bringing it to fruition within the next few years.

Aligned with enhanced compensation, we are also restructuring our teacher evaluation and appraisal system into a two-way, formative model. Each instructor will formally document a year-long reflection on pedagogy, preparation, and delivery. Students are not the only lifelong learners—teachers grow, too. Professional growth must be a shared commitment among administrators, faculty, coaches, and staff.

To support this work, I have directed Mr. Seifert to ensure that our forthcoming block schedule includes dedicated professional growth days each month. If you have a passion in this realm, I invite you to join the **INVESTING IN PEOPLE** Strategic Planning Task Force. Simply scan the QR code on the bottom right-hand corner of Page 28 in your Parent Packet to sign up.

Research Writing

Our students write well, and we have a meaningful opportunity to strengthen research writing across the institution. This includes sharpening media literacy; distinguishing between general internet sources and scholarly databases, engaging with peer-reviewed journals, and mastering APA and Chicago documentation standards. These skills are essential for success at the university level and beyond.

Curriculum & Instruction Director

Two things are simultaneously true at Vanguard:

- Excellent instruction occurs daily.
- We have opportunities to strengthen our written curriculum, use appropriate data to inform pedagogical strategies, and facilitate more interdisciplinary collaboration.

These opportunities include refining our written curriculum; implementing teacher reflection tools; expanding transdisciplinary co-teaching; and helping students apply knowledge to real-world challenges—higher-order learning as defined by Bloom's Taxonomy. We must also improve curriculum documentation, use data more intentionally, enhance professional development, and implement a collaborative system of classroom observation and reflection.

To that end, we are introducing a role common in thriving independent schools: **Curriculum & Instruction Director**. Since early September, we have vetted more than three dozen candidates, both nationally and internationally. Since December 8, we have hosted four finalists for full-day campus visits, with one additional finalist scheduled next week.

A natural question arises: *Isn't this Mr. Seifert's role?*

Mr. Seifert manages academic operations—scheduling, reporting, parent communication, and teacher professional accountability. The Curriculum & Instruction Director, by contrast, focuses exclusively on universal curriculum design, data-informed instruction, faculty development, and reflective practice. These are distinct specialties. Just as one would not mistake a primary care physician for a cardiologist in the medical world, effective academic leadership requires specialized spheres.

Academic and Campus Stewardship Student Responsibility Emphasis

Academics

Vanguard's students are talented, capable, and central to our mission. One area in which we seek continued growth is accountability. We must cultivate habits that sustain long-term academic success and meaningful adult lives.

Beginning August 11, 2026, teachers will incorporate habits such as punctuality, etiquette, metacognition, respect, and self-reflection into daily formative assessments. Weekly formative grades will carry greater weight, underscoring that excellence is built through a disciplined process, not solely on assessment outcomes. Daily consistency and dependability are important components of rigor and among life's most valuable lessons. We know that many students at Vanguard work hard but don't necessarily test well, and I have asked all academic departments to work with Mr. Seifert to increase the weight of weekly class participation rubrics and grades while re-examining our current test weighting. We must have balance in this arena.

Beginning in the 2026–27 school year, Vanguard College Preparatory School will implement a revised academic retest policy. While we will always consider extenuating circumstances, an unrestricted retest policy does not align with collegiate expectations and can unintentionally diminish academic urgency. Our goal is to prepare students not only for success in high school, but for the realities of college and life beyond.

Under the revised policy, retests will require a brief written appeal. These appeals will be reviewed by the Head of School to reinforce that retest requests should be infrequent

and purposeful. This change is **not** intended as a “gotcha” system and will not negatively impact students who prepare consistently and engage fully in their coursework.

The appeal process will provide meaningful insight that helps us better support students and strengthen instruction. A short retest form—taking only a few minutes to complete—will allow academic leadership to thoughtfully review important questions such as:

- Does a retest request point to a student support need, or does it suggest an opportunity for growth in assessment or grading practices?
- Do a student’s participation and preparation habits leading up to an assessment show positive or concerning trends?
- Were clear standards, expectations, and rubrics provided to students in advance of the assessment?
- How does retest performance compare to the original assessment?
- Beyond low scores, what factors are contributing to retest requests?
- How can this information guide us toward stronger alignment with our mission and values in the formation of graduates?

When used appropriately, data is a valuable component of effective instruction and responsible leadership. At Vanguard, we are committed to reflective practice rather than relying on tradition alone. As legendary UCLA coach John Wooden famously said, *“Never mistake activity for achievement.”* Just because a practice has existed in the past does not mean it cannot be improved.

This thoughtful approach is also essential as we prepare for our upcoming Cognia reaccreditation. The accreditation team will carefully review evidence to determine whether our practices align with what we profess about our mission and values. This process helps ensure accountability and continuous growth.

As Head of School, I take my responsibilities to students, families, and faculty seriously. Thoughtful evaluation of our academic practices is not optional—it is essential to student formation and to the integrity of our school community.

In May 2027, I will guide the faculty, subject department heads, Mr. Seifert, and the Curriculum & Instruction Director through the process of drafting a permanent retest policy that coalesces with Vanguard's values and is grounded in the data that we've assessed. Ultimately, we will use data at different levels to assess whether the habits we intend to imbue in learners are developing.

Student Campus Stewardship

In the Student Life area of campus stewardship, we hold students accountable for keeping the grounds, commons areas, and lounges clean. We've been blessed with an amazing campus, and we all must take excellent care of it. We can be better stewards of our spaces, and there are inordinate amounts of trash left behind by students on school grounds during lunch. If we observe a pattern of half-eaten bowls of Ramen and half-empty cans of Dr. Pepper left on the floor in the Senior Lounge, it is our duty to take an appropriate brief respite from its use and mandate that those who have been afforded this privilege take responsibility for their space, which we have done. More importantly, seniors met my challenge and rejoined their space following a closure that spanned a few school days. We unapologetically require our students to respect others and their spaces, and to control their own controllables. Of the eight types of curriculum, the above examples are known as the **HIDDEN CURRICULUM** among professional educators.

Alumni Mentorship & Networking

We are integrating alumni networking into our curriculum to bridge academic experiences with future professional and personal success. No other independent secondary school in Waco has an alumni base as large or as diverse as Vanguard's, and this is a strategic advantage we must leverage.

Our alumni network will be ensconced in our curriculum and include career-affinity workshops, networking groups, internships, job shadowing, and interview symposia. These initiatives cultivate meaningful, lasting relationships between students and alumni, helping students translate classroom learning into real-world insight.

Beyond career development, this work strengthens Vanguard's culture by fostering lifelong engagement. Alumni mentorship builds loyalty, pride, and community while reinforcing Vanguard's legacy across generations.

Endowment Growth

To weather future financial headwinds, we must grow and sustain our endowment. I am pleased to announce that the Vanguard Foundation—a separate entity from the school—is strategically planning to expand its Board to 25 members and grow its endowment to more than \$12 million. This will generate an annual draw to support need-based financial aid.

Fully funded financial aid represents a critical milestone for Vanguard, as historically the school has had limited capacity in this area. I extend my sincere thanks to Scott Rogers and Melli Wickliff for their partnership in this effort. If you are interested in supporting endowment growth, I invite you to join the **SUSTAINABILITY** Strategic Planning Task Force this fall.

School Safety

Over the next fourteen months, we will engage the community in a comprehensive conversation about student well-being. Page 18 of your parent packet outlines six major categories of school safety. Nothing we do is more important than the cultural, mental, emotional, social, and physical well-being of your children.

We have begun modest but meaningful work, including trauma-responsive school education, Incident Command Team preparedness and response, recovery, AI safety training, and an intermittent law enforcement presence. While parents may always deliver lunches to Jaworski for their children, beginning **May 21, 2026**, we will no longer allow food delivery services on campus. For the safety of all students, it is imperative that they don't meet parents at their cars when dropping off their lunch.

We have made no decisions regarding permanent campus security, but I am gathering fencing estimates and assessing the cultural feel of the law enforcement presence so that the Board and I have important quantitative and qualitative data when we have tough conversations about all aspects of Vanguard's safety and security throughout next year. Additionally, the officers on campus this semester are auditing all aspects of operations and our emergency procedures, which further prepares us for focused strategic conversations next year. Many aspects of my role require intentional preparation that must take place months and sometimes years before the community is ready to fully digest the concept. While we don't yet know exactly how we will proceed in the realm of safety and security, it would be a dereliction of my duties if we weren't prepared for the comprehensive feasibility study of this vital aspect of campus life.

Regardless of where you stand on security enhancements, we invite you to join the **SAFETY & SECURITY** Strategic Planning Task Force, which will convene from Fall 2026 through Spring 2027. Our aim is balance—preserving Vanguard’s open culture while responsibly addressing real risks.

Parental Use of the Who To Contact List

Parents rightly verify what they hear from their children. At times, however, adults can also be influenced by rumors circulating through text threads, social media, or informal conversations. To help prevent confusion and ensure accurate information, the school published a comprehensive *Who to Contact* list in July 2025. This resource allows parents to connect directly with the most appropriate school official in charge of the matter at hand to address their operational concern.

Given the many responsibilities the school manages daily, Vanguard officials will not respond to rumors. Instead, parents are expected to use the *Who to Contact* list—particularly when encountering serious or concerning claims—so questions can be addressed promptly and accurately. A strong school culture depends on trust, thoughtful communication, and a commitment to verifying information before drawing conclusions.

We are affable, accessible, transparent, and present within the community. Parents are encouraged to email **HOSmtg@vanguard.org** whenever they need to have an important conversation with school leadership to better understand or confidentially discuss a concern.

In addition, the school publishes four *Coffee & Conversations with the Head* transcripts and one *Educational Outlook Night* transcript each year. These communications are rare and openly discuss the school’s direction, priorities, and decisions. Transcripts are distributed via Parent Alert text messages and email, and prior transcripts are consistently shared alongside new ones. Since the Head of School’s arrival, parents will find a clear and traceable record of transparent communication through these publications. Families are encouraged to thoroughly review these significant messages, which are shared only five times a year.

As is typical in the second year of an independent school headship, adjustments may be needed. While Vanguard’s mission and core values remain unchanged, refinements in how the school delivers its educational program may be made. *Educational Outlook Night* provides parents with advanced insight into planned adjustments—approximately eight months before the start of the following school year—so there are no “late July

surprises.” The above practice has been a staple wherever I have served as Head of School across the country.

Closing Comments

In 2000, Blockbuster Video declined the opportunity to purchase Netflix for \$50 million. Blockbuster was already successful—but it failed to adapt. Today, only one Blockbuster remains in Bend, Oregon, while Netflix’s market capitalization exceeds \$408 billion. Blockbuster Video taught us that strong organizations must embrace growth, because stagnation invites replacement. For this reason, leaders are required to reimagine our opportunities when their organizations are doing well.

With sober eyes and hopeful hearts, we owe it to our students—and those who follow them—to examine our opportunities honestly. Recognizing growth areas makes us wise, courageous, and strong.

As I survey this room tonight, I see some of the most brilliant minds in Waco. We are formidable because of you. I am grateful for our Board of Trustees, our ever-present parents, our generous donors, our gifted faculty, and our dedicated administration and staff. Because of you, the state of our school is strong.

Together, we will ascend and embrace our future with intention. Vanguard is not only Central Texas’s premier independent school—we are positioning ourselves to become a national beacon of excellence in private secondary education.

Thank you for spending your evening with us. This concludes our program. I will remain afterward to answer questions, or you may contact HOSmtg@vanguard.org to schedule a meeting. It is my distinct pleasure to serve as your Head of School. Other than a few things we’ve noted here this evening, there is absolutely nothing going on at Vanguard College Preparatory School.

Good night.