



# Balancing Autonomy and Alignment

Case Studies in Academic Leadership  
by R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> Discussion

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## “The Art of the Academic Initiative”

Launching and leading an academic initiative in an independent school can feel like walking a tight rope: what is the balance between fostering alignment and preserving autonomy for faculty? Alignment ensures mission fulfillment, equitable student experiences, and consistent curriculum delivery – especially in an era of increased teacher turnover. Yet faculty autonomy is in the DNA of most independent schools, and skilled teachers delight in the creative process of building their own curriculum and responding authentically to their students’ needs.



**“The tension between alignment and autonomy for faculty is a defining challenge facing Academic Leaders today.**

**Striking this balance is an art — one that can only be honed through practice, reflection, peer engagement and increasingly strategic initiative management.”**

**Sarah Hanawald, Executive Director,  
Association for Academic Leaders**





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## R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> Discussion Case Studies

At R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> Discussion, we have partnered with Academic Leaders to launch and lead discussion skills initiatives across seventy independent schools since 2021. We have had a front row seat as our Program Leads have navigated complex school cultures, generationally diverse faculty, eye-watering teacher turnover, initiative fatigue, and the often-opaque mandate to translate a strategic plan into pedagogical reality.

Here are two case studies exploring how Academic Leaders we admire have managed the alignment-versus-autonomy dynamic in launching and sustaining R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> Discussion at their schools. **The defining takeaways?**

- >> From **William Penn Charter School** (PA), we learned the importance of grounding a departmental initiative in school-wide goals and thinking beyond annual objectives to a multi-year strategy that allows faculty time to grow.
- >> At **Hutchison School** (TN), we saw a leader listen closely to her faculty and maintain a bird's eye view of the School's strategic priorities, ultimately designing an initiative that simultaneously met student, faculty, and school-wide needs.

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# William Penn Charter School



## The Opportunity

William Penn Charter School is a PK-12 day school outside Philadelphia that, like many visionary schools, recently codified a Portrait of a Learner. English Department Chair Nora Landon was especially excited about the Portrait's commitment to teaching students to be "Constructive Communicators."

An experienced Academic Leader, Nora saw this new language as a moment for alignment – between her department and the school's strategic direction, across the middle and high school divisions she supervised, and across English classrooms at each grade-level. She spotted R.E.A.L.® Discussion at a Pennsylvania Association of Independent Schools event and asked members of her school's 8th and 9th grade teams to join her in piloting R.E.A.L.® in their classrooms.

## The Challenge:

### Aligning Across Divisions – and Classrooms

One challenge Nora faced from the beginning was how to differentiate R.E.A.L.® Discussion for middle school (using the R.E.A.L.® Junior curriculum) and upper school (using the R.E.A.L.® Classic curriculum): the divisions have different cultures and teaching styles, and the school is always on the lookout for opportunities for cross-divisional academic programs.

Another reality Nora contended with was that her upper school faculty was full of veteran, expert teachers – most of whom prized their autonomy and already facilitated discussions frequently, though often without an explicit focus on skill-building.

## The Solution:

### A Phased Roll-Out with Opt-In Moments for Faculty

Nora staged the R.E.A.L.® initiative over multiple years - by year three, everyone had to be on board. In the middle school, everyone wanted to start at once as a team, but in upper, there was a slower opt-in. She also gave guidance on the number of R.E.A.L.® Discussions expected to happen during a given semester, but she allowed faculty to choose when to implement those discussions. Her team rose to the challenge, and many used R.E.A.L.® language to codify what they had already been doing instinctively as individual teachers. They used this new common language to deepen their collaboration, even creating department-wide Google docs to log their R.E.A.L.® Discussion Questions!

Today, R.E.A.L.® is the school's go-to discussion method, and faculty across departments and divisions rely on the R.E.A.L.® skills students build in middle and upper school English.



“As an Academic Leader, R.E.A.L.® has been an amazing opportunity to tie the daily work of English teachers to our school mission – but, also to the defining challenges of today’s world. ✨



Nora Landon,  
English Department Chair

My team now has a **common language** and **shared vision** in using the English classroom to **cultivate the skills and habits students need to thrive** as citizens in a democracy and humans in a tech-centered world.

They have received positive feedback from fellow faculty, parents, and most importantly, students. An added bonus is that this shared vision and scaffolding supports the quick onboarding and integration of new faculty members into the Department, too.”

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## Hutchison School



### **The Challenge:** New Faculty and a New Approach to Civil Discourse

Hutchison School is an all-girls, PK2-12 school in Memphis, TN, committed to leading boldly and launching girls prepared to lead in the world. Like many independent schools during the pandemic, Hutchison saw significant faculty turnover and refreshed their longstanding commitment to teaching civil discourse skills.

Academic Dean Dr. Alyssa Villarreal realized that many of the new middle school teachers had come from schools where aligned curriculum was the norm – and they now felt siloed because Hutchison didn't have a unifying curriculum around which they could collaborate. Additionally, while the Upper School had clear tenets for Civil Discourse, the middle school didn't yet have a comprehensive and developmentally-appropriate approach. When Dr. Villarreal took a Tennessee Association of Independent Schools workshop with R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> Discussion, she knew it aligned perfectly with Hutchison's commitment to civil discourse and was exactly the kind of shared pedagogical framework the new middle school Humanities team was craving.

### **The Solution:** A Customized Framework to Create Alignment and Civil Discourse

We partnered with Dr. Villarreal to design a customized, mid-school-year training for her English and History middle school teachers, then coached each teaching team through their individual launch plans. This required attention to both horizontal (across departments) and vertical alignment (across grade levels) – a consistency that students spotted and appreciated immediately.

Two years in, R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> Junior unlocked new levels of collaboration across the English and History faculty and built a shared understanding of civil discourse skills. The teachers are rightfully proud of their impact and have shared their experiences at national conferences and webinars! Alyssa has cultivated two faculty leaders to own the initiative in the middle school and is now focused on cross-divisional expansion into the lower and upper divisions. Hutchison third and fourth grade teachers were among the first in the country to pilot R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> Basics, a program for elementary school-aged learners, last spring.



“R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> is amazing for the students – ✨ the discussion skills take off almost overnight! – ✨ but the common language also **builds camaraderie** and **deepens pedagogical conversation** among the faculty.

As an organization, R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> is not just committed to supporting student and teacher success – they also really get the entire implementation process.

I am profoundly grateful for the tools, community, and platform R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> has offered me as I manage change.”



**Dr. Alyssa Villarreal,  
Academic Dean**



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## Work with R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup>

R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> Discussion partners with academic leaders to equip teachers to explicitly teach discussion skills to students growing up in a tech-centric, polarized world. Our methods are research-based and proven across thousands of classrooms at leading independent schools.

R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> was initially designed by Liza Garonzik, who has served as an independent school teacher, administrator, trustee, and thought leader.

Each year, we work with a select number of independent schools to design and implement customized discussion skills programs for grades 2-10. Programs are generally at least three years long and include professional development, student materials, and impact assessment. As you can see from these case studies, we work with you to design a change management strategy and align R.E.A.L.<sup>®</sup> to your culture, program, and priorities.



**We know that the first step in ensuring a mission-aligned, equitable, and real-world-relevant student experience is building shared language, purpose, and practice among faculty.**

**We do not believe in “one-and-done” PD, and we stick with Academic Leaders until impact is realized and every student’s voice is heard, every day on your campus. Reach out to start the discussion about discussion with us!**

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