



SCOTT A. NELSON

A Leader of Quiet Confidence and Deep Integrity

By Lori Ferguson

In 1994, just a year after stepping into his position as Head of School, Scott A. Nelson, with help from Trustee Michael Murr, drafted a letter to the State of New York seeking consent for Rye Country Day to procure a nine-acre parcel across from the campus on Boston Post Road. This past January—nearly 30 years and countless letters and meetings later—Mr. Nelson’s request was granted.

To those who know and have collaborated with this quiet leader for the past three decades, the accomplishment comes as no surprise. Instead, it is simply yet another achievement appended to a lengthy list of many that Mr. Nelson has realized during a tenure defined by academic excellence, outstanding faculty recruitment and retention, visionary campus expansion, and strategic financial management.

The episode also offers a wonderful illustration of Mr. Nelson’s steady yet transformative leadership style. “Scott has vision—he’s always had the larger picture in mind—and there’s no one more persistent,” observes former Associate Head and Director of Admissions Bill Buck P ’89, P ’95. “He was an extraordinary force at Rye Country Day ... pervasive as gravity. I was at the School for 28

years before he arrived and then for 17 years with him. Once he was there, his vision took hold. He was a point of action for the School, and it advanced in every dimension under his leadership.”

A Visionary

Scott Nelson began his role as Head of School in 1993 with a deep appreciation for the opportunities inherent to an independent school education. A scholarship student at Hackley School, he had experienced firsthand the personal growth that such an environment makes possible and was resolved to make it feasible for others, too. Michael Murr P ’98, P ’06, GP ’29, GP ’32, the Chair of the search committee that hired Mr. Nelson, remembers the young candidate well. “Scott had an extraordinary resume,” Murr recalls. “He was an All-American football player at Brown and inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. It was clear in our interviews with him that

Scott had an unwavering moral compass, a thoughtful manner, and a steel trap mind. He was a living example of the kind of academic and athletic balance the trustees wanted to achieve for the school.” There was, however, one small problem, Mr. Murr continues. “Scott was very, very young. Fortunately, we had a trustee group that would not abide a ‘play it safe’ candidate. The trustees wanted more for the school; the status quo was not an option. We knew there would be a faculty risk with a young leader, but the trustees made a leap of faith, a decision I consider to have been the most important and rewarding in the history of Rye Country Day School.”

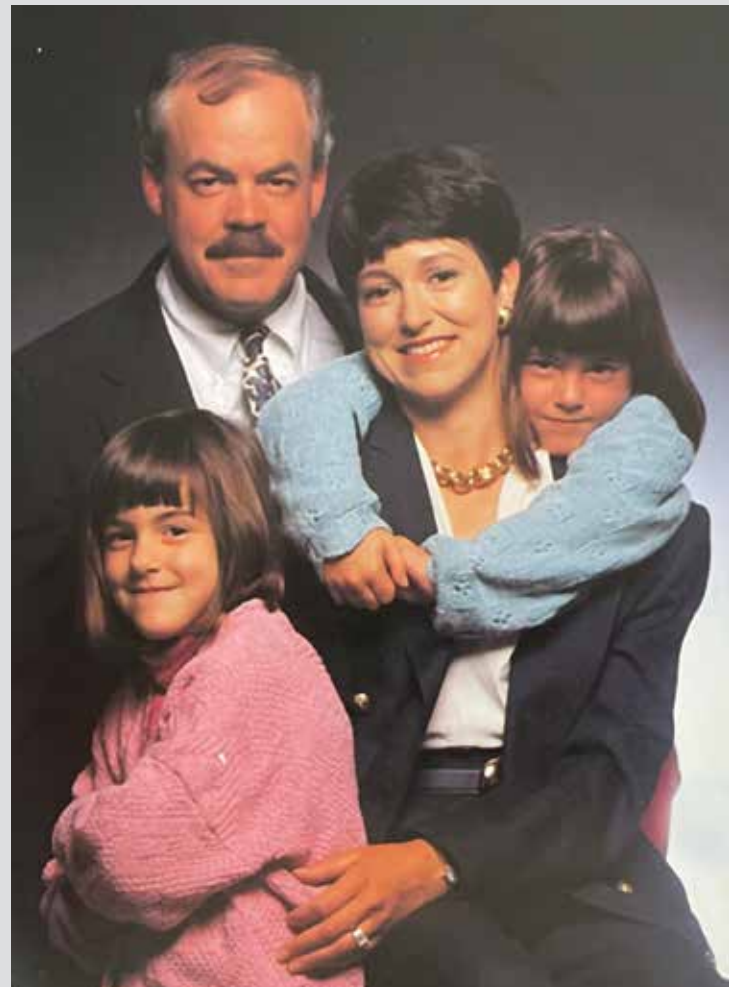
Fellow trustee and search committee member Ed Wachenheim III P ’84, P ’89, P ’97, GP ’14, GP ’16 strongly concurs. “When I met Scott, I found him to be a quiet leader, highly caring to do a good job, full of wisdom and good judgment, and solid as a rock,” he says, “and in retrospect, the committee made a brilliant decision [in hiring him]. From the day he became Head, Scott established goals to aim for. He wanted RCDS to be academically rigorous, yet supportive.

He wanted to develop the whole student through athletics and other extracurricular activities. And he wanted to educate students to be confident, deeply caring, and intellectually curious.

In my opinion, Scott excelled at reaching each of these goals, and as a result, thousands of RCDS graduates are leading more worthwhile lives.

He has made a difference ... a huge difference.”

Those employed by Mr. Nelson in the intervening years are similarly enthusiastic. Alexis Wright H ’08 was hired by Mr. Nelson as a Middle School science teacher and principal straight out of college. “He saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself,” says Mr. Wright, who departed RCDS in 2004 for a position as a Middle School Principal at Chicago Lab Schools and later returned at Mr. Nelson’s urging to serve as Assistant Head of School and Director of Financial Aid.



Mr. Nelson and his family on the cover of the RCDS Summer Bulletin in 1993.



“Scott was always clear and consistent about where the school needed to go. He’s got an incredible ability to articulate a vision and empower a team of staff, faculty, and volunteers who can share that vision and garner support.” Now a head of school himself at New City School, St. Louis, MO, Mr. Wright is doubly appreciative of Mr. Nelson’s foresight and skills. “Being a head of school is like being the mayor of a small town,” he observes with a chuckle. “You need to be able to work it out, and Scott has done just that for 29 years. He has overseen significant changes in the faculty, curriculum, and profile of the School—it’s a remarkable achievement. Very few heads of school fit that profile.”

A Mentor

Scott Nelson is equally renowned for his cultivation of the next generation of leaders. Meredith deChabert is Rye Country Day’s Assistant Head of School for Academic Programs and has been by his side for 17 years. “Scott has always taken a keen interest in mentoring the next set of leaders,” she observes. “He has certainly

been instrumental in helping me to carve out new leadership opportunities at RCDS—who I am as an administrator today is because of him. He continues to encourage me to stretch myself as a professional as much as I desire,” she asserts.



Bill Buck agrees. “I worked with Scott in a variety of positions, and he always gave me the independence to do my job within the directions he had set forth. He

could live with your mistakes. He didn’t encourage them, but his sense of self wasn’t tied up in the actions of others.”

Alexis Wright, too, has realized the benefits of Mr. Nelson’s skillful guidance. “The lessons I learned from Scott were invaluable. He allowed me to make mistakes and taught me to be disciplined and deliberate in my decision-making process.”

And he is constantly seeking to better himself as well, adds Dr. deChabert. **“Scott models the idea of being a lifelong learner. He takes advantage of every opportunity to learn, and once he learns about a thing, he knows it. His toolkit just keeps expanding.”**





A Decision Maker

Scott Nelson's toolkit wasn't the only thing to grow during his tenure at Rye Country Day. The School progressed through three highly successful capital campaigns, the endowment increased from just under \$5 million to over \$77 million, the financial aid budget grew to over \$6.3 million, every building on campus was built or renovated, and admissions hit new benchmarks for competitiveness and selectivity.

It hasn't always been easy, but he has consistently achieved his goals, says Dr. deChabert. "Scott's had to weather some tough storms, but he loves the school so much that his desire to see it succeed surpasses any challenges that might come with the job," she observes.

"He's a very strong person, and not just in personality," agrees Mr. Buck. "He wasn't chatty or a glad hander, but you always knew he was in charge. His leadership came from his vision and personal strength. The goals he chose were worthy goals for the institution—they weren't selected to boost his ego and hard jobs were not avoided. **In fact, the School's motto, *Not for Self, but for Service*, is really apt for Scott—he never acted for himself. Always for the School.**"

Mr. Nelson admits he has overseen tremendous evolution at Rye Country Day, yet he absorbs the community's praise with trademark modesty and

reserve. "I prefer to be understated; my father always said, 'Don't put yourself on a pedestal,'" he responds with a soft chuckle. Yet of the many transformative cycles he has witnessed over the past 29 years, perhaps none was more poignant than the first day of classes this year, the last he will witness as Head of School. "I walked onto campus with our daughter Julie (RCDS Class of 2003), who now works here, and our granddaughter Lillie, who just started Pre-K, and it reminded me that the work continues. From my first year here, I've said that schools need to be evolving and that the people who teach need to be reflective practitioners. This philosophy has become part of the fabric of the School, and I'd like to think it's my legacy, but the work is never done."

Dr. deChabert characterizes Mr. Nelson's contributions more succinctly. "Rye Country Day simply wouldn't be the school that it is today without Scott Nelson. He's a legend and at the core of the School in so many ways. His impact and contributions will endure, and those of us who remain will continue his work proudly."

FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT

At the 2022 State of the School presentation, I shared that all institutions have chapters. Our School's last chapter has spanned nearly three decades, during which we have enjoyed the great privilege of Scott Nelson's transformative leadership. Over the past 29 years, Rye Country Day has evolved and flourished into a school that exemplifies excellence: academic excellence, personal excellence, and community excellence. This was by design. For Scott, reaching maximum potential—for individuals and for the School—has always been not just a goal but a guiding principle.

As the Board President, I have had the honor of working with Scott through both standard and unprecedented circumstances—from the upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic to the excitement of the recent approval to purchase the Thruway Property and everything in between. His calm, determined leadership and his unwavering commitment to always doing what is best for the School and our students, families, and employees have been exemplary.

Because of Scott's strategic leadership, the School is fortunate to have the resources to achieve exciting new goals. With outstanding teachers, students, and staff; a sprawling campus with state-of-art facilities; and a robust financial outlook, the future for RCDS is bright.

On behalf of current and former RCDS trustees, thank you, Scott, for leading Rye Country Day School with such heart and inspiring dedication for 29 incredible years.

With gratitude,



Leigh Geller
President, RCDS Board of Trustees

SUPPORT MR. NELSON'S VISION
Donate to the Scott A. Nelson Scholarship Fund at www.ryecountryday.org/ScottNelson

TRANSFORMING RCDS (1993-2022)

With Mr. Nelson at the helm, the School has soared.

Scott Nelson's transformative tenure leaves a legacy defined by academic excellence, outstanding faculty recruitment and retention, visionary campus expansion, and strategic and growth-bearing financial management.

ACCREDITATION

Mr. Nelson led the School through obtaining New York State Association of Independent Schools Accreditation in 2002, in addition to the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools accreditation.

ADMISSIONS

Over the course of Mr. Nelson's tenure, admissions has hit new benchmarks for competitiveness and selectivity. Financial aid has grown significantly, enabling dedicated students to participate fully in the life of the School regardless of financial status. College matriculations showcase the consistent presence of RCDS alumni at the finest institutions of higher education.

FINANCIAL AID

Growing financial aid is an initiative that is near to Mr. Nelson's heart, as receiving aid to attend an independent school proved life changing for him. His commitment to expanding educational access has been memorialized in the Scott A. Nelson Scholarship Fund established in his honor by the Board of Trustees.

2022:
\$6.3 Million
(146 students receive aid)

1993:
\$878,000

4.9%
RCDS

ATTRITION RATE

12%+
National Independent School Average

ENROLLMENT

2022: 940 Students



1993: 768 Students

YIELD

2021: 78%



2018: 65%

SELECTIVITY

2022: 29% Acceptance Rate



1993: 65% Acceptance Rate

DIVERSITY

2022: 39%



1993: 13%

The diversity of the student body has increased. And, a commitment to create an aware, united, and empathic community has been centered as a core value and priority.

FINANCIALS

29 YEARS OF BALANCED BUDGETS | ZERO DEBT

ENDOWMENT

Over the last 29 years, the endowment has grown more than seventeen-fold through capital and Senior Parent Gift campaigns, as well as prudent management of the Endowment Fund.

2022:
\$78M



1993: \$4.5 Million

CAPITAL CAMPAIGNS

\$77M

raised by three very successful capital campaigns:

—
Advancing a Tradition of Excellence (2016-2021)

\$35.5M

—
Building on Excellence (2005-2011)

\$26.3M

—
Opening Doors (1998-2003)

\$15.7M

ANNUAL GIVING

Annual Giving has increased five-fold since Mr. Nelson began leading the School.

2021:
\$4.26M

The largest annual giving tally in the School's history.

1993:
\$827,503

95%+

parent participation for 15 consecutive years

During Mr. Nelson's tenure, the RCDS Annual Giving Program has raised over **\$75 MILLION** for the School, including over **\$14 MILLION** for the RCDS Endowment Fund through the Senior Parent Gift program.



Niche, a leading resource for researching U.S. colleges, schools, neighborhoods, and companies, has given high marks to Rye Country Day School. For the third year in a row, RCDS was named the #1 Best Private K-12 School in Westchester County. In both New York State and the New York City area, RCDS was ranked as the #6 Best Private K-12 School. Nationally, Rye Country Day was ranked as the #8 Best Private K-12 School in America.

ACADEMIC PROGRAM

- Created Lower and Middle Divisions.
- Added Lower School full-time science, computer, and library positions.
- Extended French and Spanish to Grades 2 through 5.
- Added Mandarin for Grades 5 through 12.
- Added Advanced Placement courses in chemistry, physics, computer science, statistics, Mandarin, and environmental science.
- Launched the YPT course/program.
- Added multi-variable calculus and algebra courses.

STUDENT SUPPORT

- Increased learning specialists in all three divisions.
- Added Lower School math specialists.
- Shifted to full-time psychologists in all three divisions.
- Increased Health Office staffing.
- Increased college counselors from one to three.
- Added two full-time athletic trainers.

EMPLOYEES

- Invested time and care in recruitment, retention, and professional development to ensure that all RCDS employees recognize and build on the School's vision of academic excellence and service to others.
- Hired 98% of all current employees
- Increased employee diversity.
- Established competitive salaries and benefits including dental insurance, childcare stipends, vacation grants, and endowed faculty chairs.

SIGNATURE INITIATIVES

Over the years, Mr. Nelson envisioned and created eight school initiatives, which are essential in the ongoing process of delivering the RCDS mission and achieving the School's vision. These signature initiatives answer the question *How can we make our school better?* They enable RCDS to maintain its tradition of excellence and its position at the forefront of education.

- DIVERSITY & INCLUSION
- PUBLIC PURPOSE
- SUSTAINABILITY
- HEALTH & WELLNESS
- GLOBAL STUDIES
- EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY
- STEAM
- THE INSTITUTE FOR INNOVATIVE TEACHING & LEARNING

Mr. Nelson has guided the School with honesty and integrity. He has created an ethos of excellence among employees and students and made sure that community spirit and strength of character are RCDS's resounding hallmarks. The result is an environment that is both academically rigorous and nurturing, a school where each student is known, valued, and celebrated.

TRANSFORMING CAMPUS

Every building on the RCDS campus has been constructed or renovated during Scott Nelson's 29-year tenure.



PROPERTIES ACQUIRED TO MOVE GRANDVIEW AVENUE

- 1 Grandview Avenue (1997)
- 11 and 17 New Street (1997)
- 25.5 New Street (1999)

PROPERTIES ACQUIRED TO EXPAND THE ATHLETIC FIELDS

- 86 Grandview Avenue (1998)
- 60 Grandview Avenue (1999)
- 86 Hillside Road (2002)
- 84 Grandview Avenue (2002)
- 50 Grandview Avenue (2007)



MAJOR FACILITIES IMPROVEMENTS

- LS/MS Science Renovations (1998)
- New Pre-K Addition (1998)
- Relocation of Grandview Avenue and Creation of Pedestrian Campus (2000)
- Scott A. Nelson Athletic Center (2000)
- US Science Renovations (2000)
- Main Building Addition Providing New K-5 Classrooms (2001)
- Pinkham Building Elevator (2003)
- Artificial Turf Athletic Fields (2005-07)
- Pinkham Building Addition and Renovation (2010)
- New Senior Parking Lot (2010)
- Klingenstein Library Renovation (2014)
- LS Dining Room and MS/US Dining Room Renovation (2014)
- US Art Room Renovation (2014)
- PAC Renovation (2018)
- The Cohen Center for the Creative Arts (2018)

As Scott Nelson prepares to retire as Head of School, we proudly honor his focused, consistent, and consensus-driven leadership for it has enabled RCDS to evolve into one of the most highly regarded schools in the country.

THANK YOU, Mr. Nelson!

RCDS is the excellent, wonderful school it is because of you.