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Too Good to Be True?

We had been doing character education for years and it did not do a thing. When I first started telling people about the leadership option, there were several nay-sayers who thought it all a bunch of “fluff.” But now they are believers.

—Leslie Reilly, *Seminole County Public Schools, Florida*

Today’s young people, our children, belong to the most promising generation in the history of the world. They stand at the summit of the ages. They also stand at the crossroads of two great paths. One is the broader, well-traveled path that leads to mediocrity of mind and character, and to social decline. The other is a narrower, “less traveled” uphill path leading to limitless human possibilities—and the hope of the world. EVERY child can walk this latter path, if shown the way.

But who will show them the way, if not you and me? Where will they learn how, if not in their home or at their school? When will it happen, if not now?

Join me in an unfolding story of great hope.

When Drs. Rig and Sejjal Patel moved their family to Raleigh, North Carolina, they were, like most parents, interested in locating a good school—a place where their children could learn in a wholesome, safe, and mind-stimulating environment. As they sought the advice of colleagues, the name of one school kept popping up: A.B. Combs Elementary.

On paper, A.B. Combs Elementary was quite ordinary. A public school located in a quiet neighborhood, it was home to more than eight hundred

students, of whom 18 percent spoke English as a second language, 40 percent received free or reduced lunches, 21 percent were placed in special programs, and 15 percent were considered academically gifted. The building that housed them was fifty years old. Some teachers had been there for years.

But while the paper version of A.B. Combs appeared to be nothing too unusual, the stories the Patels kept hearing exceeded what even their loftiest expectations would allow them to believe. They heard accounts of high and sustained test scores, friendly and respectful students, an engaged staff, and a principal who had been named Principal of the Year. Discipline issues were minimal. Students who had severe problems at other schools were progressing well at this school. Even the teachers were happy. It all sounded pretty good.

In fact, the more the Patels heard the stories, the more they began asking themselves, “Could such a place really exist?” They did not say it to people’s faces, but the thought that kept drifting through their minds was “This place sounds too good to be true!”

The Patels decided to see the school for themselves, and what they discovered was that just entering the front doors at A.B. Combs can be quite an engaging experience. There is a feeling there that is not felt in many schools. It is a feeling a person can see, can hear, and can touch. In fact, if you happen to be at the school for its annual International Food Festival, you might even be able to taste a bit of the feeling, since the students there represent fifty-eight countries and twenty-seven languages. The school is clean. Students passing in the halls look adults in the eyes and greet them. Things on the walls are cheery and even motivational. Students treat one another with respect, and diversity is more than just valued, it is celebrated.

During their visit, the Patels learned of the mission and goals of A.B. Combs. They learned of the school’s traditions, particularly the tradition of caring. They walked the hallways and saw quotes and murals promoting high standards. Inside classrooms they spotted empowered, hardworking teachers. They discovered that all students are assigned leadership roles and that many decisions are made by students, not teachers. All this the Patels found quite remarkable, and they departed from that first visit determined to enroll their children.

So What About for You?

So what about for you? Are the descriptions of A.B. Combs sounding “too good to be true”?

I believe the main reason the Patels (and perhaps even you) found the reports about A.B. Combs “too good to be true” is that they are in such stark contrast to what we are used to hearing. We are so inundated with stories of bullying, poor teachers, graffiti, rude manners, low test scores, disrespect, lack of discipline, campus violence, poor graduation rates, and so forth, that we have become calloused skeptics when hearing of anything so positive. Either we find it flat out too hard to believe or we question its sustainability.

I must admit that if I had not seen A.B. Combs with my own eyes, or if it were the only school enjoying such successes, I too might doubt the viability, transferability, and sustainability of the school’s approach. But a growing number of other schools have now replicated its approach and are enjoying equivalent successes. As a result, I have wholeheartedly joined other business leaders, parents, and teachers across the globe in becoming a firm believer in what these schools and great educators are doing.



A.B. Combs Elementary is located in a quiet residential neighborhood of Raleigh, North Carolina.

In short, what these educators are doing is teaching basic leadership principles to young students—as young as five years old. They are teaching oft-neglected skill sets for making good choices, for getting along well with others, and for managing time wisely. In addition, they are providing authentic opportunities for students to *apply* them by giving students leadership opportunities in the classroom, in the school, and in the community. All this they are doing in a way that is improving student achievement and restoring discipline and a character ethic in the classrooms and on the playgrounds. What delights teachers is that they are doing it in a way that does not create “one more thing” for them to do, but rather offers a methodology that many describe as “a better way of doing what we were already doing.”

This is not a school that is about making nine hundred little business leaders. This is a school about creating a well-rounded student who knows their strengths. We are here to help them find their strengths and unleash their potential to influence others.

—Michael Armstrong, Magnet Coordinator, A.B. Combs Elementary

As the book progresses, you will learn why schools like A.B. Combs have chosen to teach these basic leadership principles, how they go about it, and what results they are achieving. But in preview, what these schools are reporting in near unison is:

- Improved student achievement
- Significantly enhanced self-confidence and esteem in students
- Dramatic decreases in discipline problems
- Impressive increases in teachers’ and administrators’ job satisfaction and commitment
- Greatly improved school cultures
- Parents who are delighted and engaged in the process
- Business and community leaders who want to lend support

What has adults who have visited or worked in these schools talking most is the visible increase in students’ self-confidence, their ability to get along with each other, and to solve problems. A sharp reduction in discipline problems is one of the most frequent outcomes that teachers are quick to point out. Having fewer quarrels and acts of disrespect to deal with has

allowed teachers to focus more on academics and is restoring a sense of vigor to their jobs. Parents are ecstatic about what is happening at these schools. They not only speak highly of what is happening at school but also report improved behavior at home. In fact, after observing their children, many parents have sought out training in the same leadership principles so that they can integrate the principles into home activities. Most of these results are being reported within the first year of implementation.

Of course, in education circles the biggest question has been, What has this done for test scores? Naturally, that answer will differ from school to school. Some of the schools mentioned in this book were already high academic achievers prior to engaging in the process, so their test scores had limited room to improve. But even with that, essentially all of the schools are reporting improved test scores. Perhaps the most encouraging data is coming out of A.B. Combs, which has been implementing the approach the longest. They first piloted the approach using one teacher per grade level, and that year the percentage of students passing end-of-grade tests jumped from 84 percent to 87 percent, primarily due to the improved scores of the pilot students. The next year the entire school took on the leadership approach and the percentage of passing students took another significant leap, this time to 94 percent. That was no small feat, given its widely diverse student population. What makes the increase in scores truly validating is that A.B. Combs has been able to maintain those elevated scores for a steady sequence of years, ultimately peaking at 97 percent, which certainly was one

People often ask us, "Does our child have to be a leader to go to this school?" We tell them absolutely not. This school is for all children, regardless of ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, or academic ability.

This morning a special needs student was assigned to be the first person to welcome visitors to our site visit. He may not run a huge corporation one day, but he has unbelievable interpersonal relationship skills and there will be a job somewhere out there for him. He sees himself as a leader in manners. He feels so good about who he is despite his academic limitations. That is what this leadership model does for all children.

—Muriel Summers, Principal, A.B. Combs Elementary

of the primary factors in their being named the top magnet school in America. But awards aside, the real importance of what this suggests is that the leadership approach is indeed sustainable.

All these results are promising signs in the ever-challenging world of education.

Greatness to Match Today's Realities

But something is happening at these schools that I believe is greater than any of the results mentioned above, including the rise in test scores and the smiles on parents' and teachers' faces. Students coming out of these schools are equipped with a type of "greatness" and the skills they will need not just to *survive* but to *thrive* in the twenty-first century.

Let me explain.



Students representing fifty-eight countries and twenty-seven languages unite to create a diverse population at A.B. Combs.

It is no secret that we are at the forefront of one of the most exciting and promising of all ages in human history. The exploding advances in technol-

ogy and the globalization of markets have created unprecedented opportunities for growth and prosperity for individuals, families, organizations, and society as a whole. Of course, there are also many problems and challenges—there always have been and always will be—but gaze in any direction and opportunities to progress and make a difference are everywhere. Yet amid this climate of opportunity, a question tenaciously nags at the minds and hearts of parents, educators, and employers alike: Are today’s young people being adequately prepared to take advantage of the expanding opportunities and duly equipped to deal with the accompanying challenges?

Until recently, we were living in an era known as the information age. In that era, individuals who had the most information—the most “facts” in their heads—were the ones who became the fortunate few to ascend to the tops of their professions. During that era, it only made sense that the primary focus of parents and schools was on pumping as many facts into students’ brain cells as possible—assuming they were the right facts for the right tests. After all, “facts in the head” is what allowed students to score high on the right “fact-based” tests, which got them into the best “fact-based” universities, and that in turn set them up for an accelerated climb up the right “fact-based” career ladder.

But that era is now being transcended as the global economy has entered another phase of speed and complexity. While factual information remains a key factor for survival in today’s world, it is no longer sufficient. With the massive spread of the internet and other digital resources, facts that at one time were closely guarded trade secrets and only available from the top universities can now be accessed in most every nook and cranny on the globe at the click of a mouse. As a result, many of the so-called elite professions that once required extensive schooling are today being passed on to computers or to people at far lower education levels and wages across the planet. Factual knowledge alone is thus no longer the great differentiator between those who succeed and those who do not.

The last few decades have belonged to a certain kind of person with a certain kind of mind—computer programmers who could crank code, lawyers who could craft contracts, MBAs who could crunch numbers. But the keys to the kingdom are changing hands.

—Daniel Pink, *A Whole New Mind*

Instead, the individuals who are emerging as the new “winners”—the new *thrivers*—of the twenty-first century are those who possess above-average creativity, strong analytical skills, a knack for foresight, and—surprise, surprise—good people skills. As Daniel Pink and others are asserting, it is the right-brainers who are taking over the present economy. They are the inventors, the designers, the listeners, the big-picture thinkers, the meaning makers, and the pattern recognizers—those who know how to optimize and creatively maneuver the facts, not just memorize or regurgitate them. All this they do while knowing how to effectively team with others. And, in case you have not noticed, people with such talents are popping up on every continent, even in remote villages. As Larry Sullivan, former superintendent of schools for the Texarkana (Texas) Independent School District, points out, “Today’s students are no longer merely competing for jobs against students in neighboring towns, states, or provinces, they are competing with students in China, India, Japan, Europe, South America, Madagascar, and every island and continent in between.”

Yet while these are the new realities, how often do I hear today’s business leaders grimacing about the new MBA or PhD they just hired who has “no clue” how to work with people, how to make a basic presentation, how to conduct themselves ethically, how to organize their time, or how to be creative—much less how to inspire creativity in others? How many times do I hear executives talk about how their company is poised to pursue a great new opportunity but cannot get out of the starting blocks because they are mired in ethical breeches or infighting between employees or sub-contractors? How many times do I hear parents bemoaning the fact that their newly crowned high school graduate excelled on all the college entrance exams yet does not know how to take responsibility for their actions, to vocalize their thoughts, to treat people with respect, to analyze a decision, to empathize, to prioritize, to resolve conflicts maturely, or to plan? If you were to ask these people if they felt students were being properly prepared for the present reality, I think you would hear an unequivocal, unified, and boisterous, “No!”

The more I have such conversations, the more my own thoughts turn to my grandchildren, and their future children. I find myself asking, “What does the future hold for them? What can I do to prepare them better for the new reality?” Indeed, in this age, when they read far more text messages

than they do textbooks, I find myself worrying less about what facts my grandchildren are studying in school than I do about what their peers—and even their teachers—are telling them about life and how to handle it. I have spent more than half of my career as a teacher and know all too well how a teacher can either cement mediocrity or inspire excellence in a student, regardless of what subject is being taught.

As I struggle to distill the essence of what the new business environment is telling me, what educators are telling me, what parents are telling me, and what my own heart is telling me, the concept that keeps surfacing in my mind is *primary greatness*. I recognize that “greatness” is a term that is intimidating to many people. To some it is even a negative or arrogant term. I think this is because many people equate it only with what I call *secondary greatness*. Secondary greatness has to do with positions or titles, awards, wealth, fame, rankings, or rare accomplishments. Almost by definition, secondary greatness can only be attained by a select few, an extremely small percentage of a population. Secondary greatness is largely determined by comparing one person against another.

Primary greatness, on the other hand, is open to everyone. Every single person can have it; there are no bell-curve limits. Primary greatness has to do with a person’s integrity, work ethic, treatment of others, motives, and level of initiative. It also has to do with a person’s character, contributions, talents, creativity, and discipline. It represents who people are—every day—as opposed to what they own or temporary achievements. Primary greatness is measured not by comparisons with other people, but by adherence to timeless, universal principles. It is humble.

If we are putting all of our efforts on the almighty test score alone, I am quite afraid that we are going to create a generation of children who know how to do nothing but take a test well.

—Muriel Summers, Principal, A.B. Combs Elementary

Sometimes, primary greatness is a precursor or companion to secondary greatness. In other words, a person having primary greatness ends up also having secondary greatness. Other times, secondary greatness comes alone. We all know of people, for example, who have secondary greatness but who

lack any semblance of primary greatness. At the same time, many people with primary greatness never achieve secondary greatness, and even prefer to avoid the limelight of secondary greatness.

The reason primary greatness keeps coming to my mind is that I sincerely believe it is what business leaders, parents, and educators are begging for in their employees, in their children, and in their students. I will lay out *why* this is so in far more detail in chapter 2, but suffice it here to say that, truly, today's realities present a new and global playing field, one that demands far more than just having a set of facts lodged in one's head. It requires new skills, though in reality some of them turn out to be quite "old" skills. And it requires a new level of primary greatness, with a firm character foundation.

So, yes, it *is* nice that the schools mentioned in this book are reporting improved achievement scores and increased student self-confidence, and, yes, it *is* good that parents and teachers are reporting higher satisfaction ratings. But higher test scores and happier parents are not what is going to enable students to survive and thrive in this new reality. They need more. And that is what excites me most as a grandparent, as a business leader, and as a member of society about what you will read in this book. Students are exiting these schools far better prepared with the mind-sets, the skill sets, and the tool sets they will need to meet today's new realities.

A Moral Imperative?

After completing the initial year of teaching the leadership principles to students, the pilot teachers at A.B. Combs stood before their peer teachers and administrators and declared, "Every child deserves this."

Dewey Elementary in Quincy, Illinois, was the first of ten elementary schools in Adams County to model its approach after A.B. Combs. When the decision was being made, the school's principal, Christie Dickens, says most of the teachers were strongly in favor. But one particular teacher was quite reluctant and displeased. So in the beginning she mostly sat back and observed from a distance as her colleagues engaged in teaching the leadership skills. But once she saw how the approach was impacting students' lives both in and out of the classroom, she readily came on board. In fact, at the start of the second semester, she approached Christie and said,

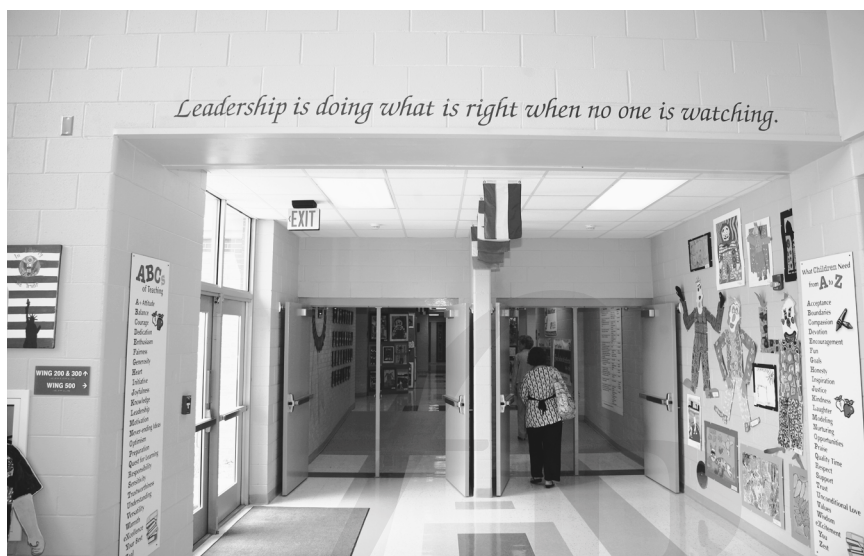
“I know you are trying hard to collect data and monitor this to see if it is working, but I could care less about the test scores or what the data says. This is the *right* thing to be doing!”

After visiting A.B. Combs, Peggy and Andrew Cherng, founders of the highly successful Panda Express chain of restaurants, determined to start out by sponsoring six Southern California schools with the specific purpose of helping them implement the leadership approach before expanding to additional schools. However, a key leader in one of the school districts voiced strong objections. It was the term *leadership* that was causing him to react. “Let’s face it,” he vehemently announced, “not every one of these students is going to grow up to be a CEO or prominent leader. It is just not going to happen!” But then he visited A.B. Combs and observed their students, and once he realized that the leadership principles were focused on helping students to take responsibility for their lives, to work with others more effectively, and to do the right thing even when no one is looking, he quickly became one of the leading advocates for the approach. “This is the *right* thing to be doing for students,” he now insists.

In Guatemala, years of civil strife and economic turmoil left many young people (and teachers) without any sense of hope or vision. This was very apparent and disturbing to María del Carmen Aceña when in 2003 she took over as minister of education. She knew that if the country’s students and educators had little hope, then the entire country had little hope of elevating its standards of living or cultural ambitions. So she assembled a research team and after careful investigation they initiated a “Path of Dreams” program that teaches many of the same leadership and life skills that A.B. Combs teaches, only their focus is at the high school level. Today, more than two hundred thousand high school students have been taught the leadership principles, and it is with a refreshed smile that María now reports that “students are leaving school with skills for life, and committed to changing Guatemala.” All along, her team’s resolve was “We simply felt this was the *right* thing to do.”

When asked to identify the biggest pain educators are feeling these days, one outstanding elementary school principal narrowed her reply to a single word: “Regret.” When asked to explain, she said, “Educators are feeling enormous regret from the realization that over the past decade so much emphasis has been placed on raising test scores that it has come at the ex-

pense of students not learning some of the most basic skills needed for everyday life. They also regret that in the process of focusing on academics they have failed to pass on to students more of a love of learning and a love of life. And that is why,” she noted, “our school decided to teach these leadership skills. It is simply the *right* thing to be doing.”



Leadership is not seen as a position at A.B. Combs. It is a way of living and leading one's own life.

In these few examples, did you notice the common phrase . . . the *right* thing to be doing? As you delve into what the schools mentioned in this book are doing, here are questions I hope you keep at the forefront of your thoughts: Do we as adults have a moral imperative to be teaching these leadership principles and basic life skills? Is this the *right* thing to be doing? Do you think young people are being adequately prepared for today's realities? If not, what do you think ought to be done to prepare them better? What do you think are the *most* important things to be teaching them? How would you go about doing it?

Keep those thoughts and questions in mind as you go through the pages of this book.

Three Themes to Look For

Of course, my wish would be that parents, educators, and business leaders of all types—especially skeptical ones—could travel to A.B. Combs or any one of the other schools to see, hear, and feel for themselves what is happening. But not even a school like A.B. Combs could absorb such an onslaught.*

So as you might surmise, one objective of this book is to share enough of what these schools are doing so that you can gain a feel for what is happening without having to travel any farther than a comfortable chair. Indeed, this book will take you to English Estates Elementary in Fern Park, Florida, which was named the most academically improved school in its district after only one year of implementation. It will take you to Chestnut Grove Elementary in Decatur, Alabama, where a local business leader has funded the school into becoming a top leadership campus. It will take you to Dewey Elementary in Quincy, Illinois, where the school's progress has motivated the local United Way to lead the charge in getting the same caliber of training to all ten thousand students in their county. It will take you to Texas, California, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and other U.S. states. Furthermore, it will take you to Canada, Guatemala, Japan, Singapore, Australia, and Europe. It is more than a heartwarming story. It is a pragmatic, creative approach that is giving rise to a new level of hope in the world of education.

As you journey from location to location, I challenge you to observe three overarching themes that I feel are foundational to the results these schools are achieving:

First, observe **the universal nature of the leadership principles** that are being taught at the schools. The principles are timeless and, in most cases, commonsensical. I did not invent the principles; they have been around for ages and are familiar to all cultures. So whether a student is stepping out of a sizable home in an upscale neighborhood or out of a thatched hut in a rain forest, the principles will enable them to make better choices today and improve their tomorrows. You will notice, however, that while the principles being taught are basically the same at each school, *how* the principles

* Video of some of the schools can be viewed at www.TheLeaderInMeBook.org.

are put into practice will vary—sometimes significantly—since each school has applied the principles according to what is the best fit for its specific needs, abilities, and resources. Yet as you observe the uniqueness of each school’s approach, I challenge you to keep your keenest eye on the *principles*, not the *practices*. If you do, I am convinced you will discover more similarities than differences in the schools’ equations for success. People and practices come and go, but principles of effective leadership will always remain the same—everywhere.

All children smile in the same language.

—Quote displayed in an A.B. Combs hallway

Second, observe **the universal nature and unique potential of children**. Children are born global. No matter where I travel, as I look into the eyes of children, particularly infants, I see the same kinds of energies and sparkles of hope. There is something common in them all. They are also born with great potential, some of which is unique to them. No two are born completely alike. Yet almost immediately following birth, their environment begins to shape them, and they begin taking on a sort of cultural DNA, or *sameness*. Much of that cultural DNA is good and even necessary for survival, but in too many cases it contains mutations that can ultimately rob them of their unique identity. I refer to them as “mutations” because they can *mute* a child’s true potential. What a tragedy. In contrast, *The Leader in Me* is aimed at preventing or overriding some of these culturally embedded mutations. *The Leader in Me* assumes that all young people are good and that within each child are gifts to be unleashed. *The Leader in Me* assumes that every child is important and has something of worth to contribute. *The Leader in Me* assumes that within every child (and every educator) there are to be found true leadership qualities. Many such qualities are already visible and fully engaged in students’ attitudes and behaviors, while others wait to be nurtured. These assumptions are not only foundational to the philosophy behind *The Leader in Me* but to the successes of these schools.

Third, observe that **the same principles and approach being taught at these schools can also be taught at home**. One of the great things about the



A.B. Combs has created a unique approach that has greatly enhanced the school's culture and improved student achievement, but, more important, is preparing students for life.

leadership approach is what it is doing to enhance the parent-school partnership. For starters, it is bringing more parents into the schools to volunteer and support school and classroom activities. But even more important is what is occurring as students apply the principles to their daily tasks and behaviors at home. In other words, it is not just teachers who are reporting better behaviors and reduced discipline issues. Parents are reporting the same kinds of positive results. This is particularly true in families where parents have come to know the principles for themselves and have made conscious efforts to reinforce and teach them. Bottom line: this book is not just about what schools can do, it is about what you can do in your own home. If you are a parent, I promise that if you open your mind to it, you will have endless ideas of how you can apply what these educators are doing to your home. So regardless of whether your child's school applies the leadership approach, you can apply it within the walls of your own home. (See chapter 10: Bringing It Home.)



Schools across the United States and various parts of the world, such as Chua Chu Kang Primary School in Singapore, are now implementing the leadership approach.

How the Book Is Organized

You may note by the book's size that it is not intended to pour out extensive detail. Rather, it is a starting place.

Since the leadership approach originated at A.B. Combs, and since it has the longest history of success, I have focused the first few chapters—chapters 2 through 5—on A.B. Combs. The biggest advantage of this is that it allows you as the reader to focus on one school and one overall approach without being forced to track multiple scenarios and strategies. These four chapters highlight why A.B. Combs chose to pursue the leadership approach and how it got under way, and provide key insights that they have learned along their journey. But do not let this emphasis lead you to think this is in any way a one-school or a one-country phenomenon. It is happening in multiple schools and in multiple parts of the world.

It is primarily in chapter 6 that I will give a sampling of what other elementary schools are doing to place their unique signatures on this evolving

story. It is intriguing how creative the teachers and administrators have been at these schools.

While this book is intentionally centered on elementary schools, in chapter 7 we will briefly preview what is happening in some middle and high schools. I will also introduce what some creative districts are doing to use the leadership principles to redefine their cultures. In chapters 8 and 9, I provide a framework and insights for any school or district to consider when contemplating how it might go about implementing and localizing such a leadership approach. Finally, in chapter 10, I share some thoughts on how to bring the principles home.

So, yes, I must forewarn that some parts of what you are about to read may sound a bit “too good to be true.” But I make no apologies because I am convinced that the stories coming out of these schools are not only *true*, they are *good*. And though none of the schools claim to be perfect or to have all the answers to the many dilemmas facing schools today, I also firmly believe that what these schools are doing is indeed bringing us closer to the *right* thing to be doing in preparing young people for today’s realities and tomorrow’s challenges.