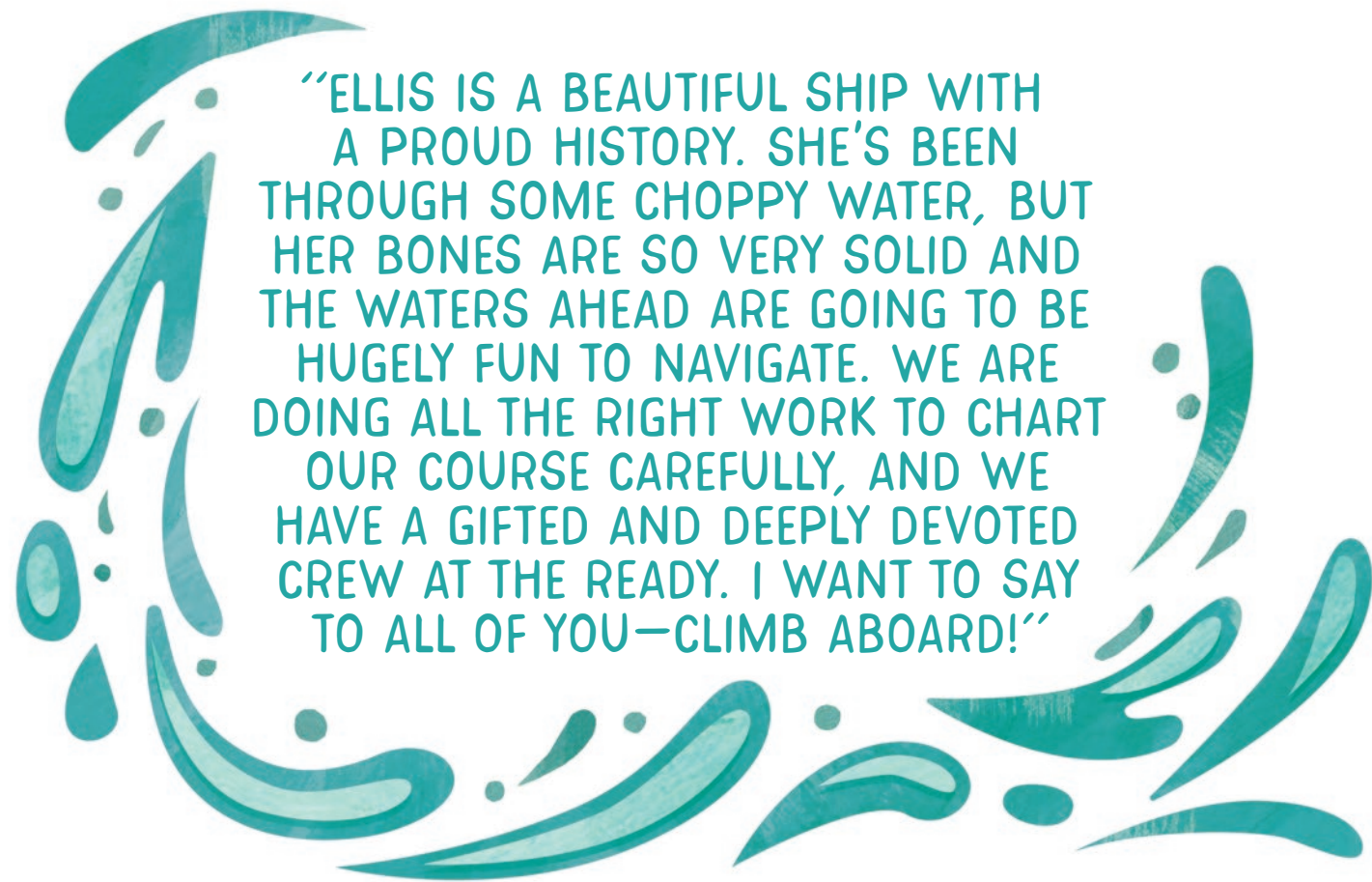




# ELLIS ON THE MOVE

A GUIDING STRATEGIC PLAN



“ELLIS IS A BEAUTIFUL SHIP WITH A PROUD HISTORY. SHE'S BEEN THROUGH SOME CHOPPY WATER, BUT HER BONES ARE SO VERY SOLID AND THE WATERS AHEAD ARE GOING TO BE HUGELY FUN TO NAVIGATE. WE ARE DOING ALL THE RIGHT WORK TO CHART OUR COURSE CAREFULLY, AND WE HAVE A GIFTED AND DEEPLY DEVOTED CREW AT THE READY. I WANT TO SAY TO ALL OF YOU—CLIMB ABOARD!”

When Head of School Macon Finley shared this message to faculty and staff at the end of the 2018 school year, she delivered it with gusto as she announced the School was beginning a new strategic planning process. After spending her first year at Ellis listening to and learning from the community, she felt prepared to steer the School into new, uncharted territories and was eager—and ready—to pull up the anchor and set sail.

Fast forward to October 2019 when Macon and the Board of Trustees debuted the School's new strategic plan, “Ellis on the Move.” Essentially a map that charts the School's course for the next five years, the strategic plan is the result of 18 months of research, feedback, and conversation with various internal and external stakeholders. It outlines strategic priorities to guide the School's work in the coming years, and in the first year of setting sail, the ship's faithful “crew” has come together to brainstorm, revamp, and implement work in support of the following five priorities.

## ENHANCING AND ENRICHING OUR VISIONARY PROGRAM

The most compelling and unique aspects of an Ellis education are the spectacular attributes girls develop because of their experiences at the School. Ellis students graduate with a remarkable sense of agency, empathy, and purpose that not only prepares them well for college, but prepares them with the vibrancy and resilience to face the challenges of life. It is within Ellis' interdisciplinary and innovative programs that students uncover and practice these critical skills. The Middle School experience builds on them, and the Upper School experience strengthens them, but it is in our Lower School where the foundation is laid and the evolution begins.

Under the leadership of Lower School Head Ann Martino, faculty are teaming up to collaborate and reimagine how they can foster these unique qualities in Ellis' youngest students. Their work began by reconfiguring the curricula in pre-kindergarten through grade 4 to focus on identity development, the social-emotional process of forming healthy self-awareness including high self-esteem and self-efficacy. With this idea as their guiding light, Lower School teachers updated practices to bolster self-expression, encourage reflection, and emphasize culturally-sustaining pedagogy.

“From day one, we set an expectation that we will learn from each other, support each other, and serve as an example to one another,” shares Ann Martino. “Each girl is encouraged to be her unique self, to be seen and celebrated for who she is as an individual and as one part of the whole. We cultivate a culture of responsibility by engaging students in learning tasks that require them to communicate their ideas, listen to each other, challenge each other's thinking, and problem solve together.”

Starting as early as pre-kindergarten, students are encouraged—and even challenged—to voice their perspectives, form connections across differences, and develop a sense of shared responsibility. One instance of this occurs weekly, right on schedule, at 8:45 a.m. on Friday mornings, when girls in pre-kindergarten through grade 4 meet in the auditorium for a Lower School assembly. Over the course of the school year, you might hear first grade students giving a prepared, group presentation—complete with rehearsed lines and coordinating posters—about overcoming fear, or perhaps the third grade class leading the audience in song.

Girls at every grade level have the opportunity to stand up in front of their peers and share their opinions, passions, and voices with the Lower School community. Practicing these skills is accessible to all students, from our youngest learners who are just three years old to our sophisticated fourth grade students, poised and ready to thrive in Middle School. These moments can be individual triumphs like saying their names into the microphone during a birthday month celebration or group victories like the entire second grade class working together to imagine, organize, and deliver a presentation on what it means to be an Ellis girl. With the guidance of their teachers, classes determine the content and structure of their presentation or performance, leveraging the strengths of each individual, while still nudging girls outside their typical comfort zones. Students feel the encouragement and support of the whole Lower School as they try out new roles and explore their interests.

In the classroom, students also practice building their confidence and sense of self in daily team meetings. Whether they're meditating as a class to set the tone for the day or sharing their favorite instrument, teachers use this communal time to cultivate community among their students and work on specific age-appropriate skills like cooperation, empathy, self-control, inclusion, and respect. Specific routine elements to the team meeting are used to empower girls to learn about each other, set expectations for how they will interact, and enable them to build real bonds.

“The team meetings support positive relationships between the girls and their teachers,” said Betsy Gianakas, Grade 1 Teacher. “Whether offering thoughts about new endings to a story or imagining adventures in a tropical rainforest, when sharing aloud, emphasis is placed on listening to and accepting others. In this space, highlighting our students' vast array of ideas is a great strength.”

The Lower School is not the only part of the School focusing on prioritizing programming around girls' growth and the four pillars now found in Ellis' vision statement. This year, the English Department started reviewing and updating their curriculum, changes to how clubs are run in the Upper School allowed them to become more student driven, a changemakers curriculum was developed to provide more real-world learning experiences in the Middle School, and the Mathematics Department is next in line to begin their own curricular review.

## BUILDING AN EXEMPLARY SCHOOL CLIMATE

In order to build an exemplary school climate, Ellis is committed to creating a culture of inclusivity and allyship. To support this priority, the Board of Trustees formed and launched the Board Committee on Diversity and Inclusion (BCDI) this year. The committee is chaired by Tomar Pierson-BROWN '97, a current board member and 2016 Ellis Centennial Laureate.

“The formation of the BCDI was a way for the Board of Trustees to institutionalize the work happening at the student, faculty, and parent levels within the Ellis community, and it formalizes the School's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion at all levels,” says Tomar. “The BCDI is one of several board committees and is made up of trustees representing Ellis' alumnae and parent communities; the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; and the Head of School, as well as the Chair of Ellisians for an Inclusive Community (EFIC), Ellis' faculty and staff committee.”

The BCDI has undertaken three strategic principles to guide their work. First, the committee strives to support the work students, faculty, and staff currently have underway at the School. Second, the committee is meant to assist in putting infrastructure in place to support said work. Finally, the committee works to fuel the fluency and support of the broader Board of Trustees. Essentially, the committee will act as advisors and ambassadors to support Ellis' diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives on campus and within the broader Pittsburgh community.

In addition to the formation of the BCDI, Ellis' faculty and staff engaged in a book study that guided their growth and development around DEI issues this year. The book *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi has been a catalyst for meaningful dialogue and was used as a tool for members of the book study to develop a deeper understanding of racism and inequality.

Gina Kilpela, Academic Support and English Teacher, leads the EFIC and proposed the idea of a book study based on her previous experiences facilitating multicultural education work and educator-focused professional development. Because

## MISSION

The Ellis School educates girls and young women to become bold, authentic, and intellectually vibrant changemakers.

## VISION

We are a leader in developing girls and young women who tussle creatively and boldly with real-world problems and who are ready, excited, and committed to making a positive change in the world.

working through a text, discussing common themes, and sharing insights within a group are second nature to most teachers, Gina believed that hosting a book study at Ellis would be a constructive way for faculty to do DEI work together. After hearing Ibram X. Kendi speak locally, and at the recommendation of Visual Arts Teacher Tim Israel, Gina and the EFIC steering committee decided on the book *How to be an Antiracist*. With the support of a generous Ellis Parent Association community grant, books were purchased for the group at no cost to faculty and staff. Participation was voluntary and it was originally anticipated that roughly 15 to 20 people would join, but the group quickly grew to include 33 faculty and staff members spanning all three divisions.

The group met five times throughout the year, and continued to prioritize their meetings even as the School transitioned to remote learning. The vulnerability, trust, and openness required of group members to engage in this challenging work has proven to be beneficial for individual participants and the Ellis community. Faculty and staff have used this time to reflect on their own positions of power in the classroom and in the broader world, with the hope that stronger connections with their students and colleagues will cultivate a warmer and more welcoming learning environment for all Ellis students and their families.

Inclusivity has been at the center of goal-setting and decision-making for other critical groups, as well. For instance, the Ellis Parent Association (EPA) has made intentional and deliberate steps to bolster parent participation in the EPA and to ensure that all Ellis parents feel welcomed as valued members. They have revisited and revised their mission statement and guiding principles, as well as made adjustments to their meeting structure to provide additional ways for parents to participate in the planning of events and fundraising initiatives. Additionally, educational programming for parents in all three divisions was reimagined this year. Ellis' "How to Raise a Changemaker" event series provided parents with valuable insight into what their child may be experiencing at each developmental stage, best practices around health and wellness, and a look ahead at what both students and parents can expect in future grades at Ellis. Throughout the School, work has been done to further enhance the climate and ensure that Ellis continues to be a place where students and their families feel welcome and known, and can fully be themselves.

## 3 SUPPORTING FACILITIES THAT ENHANCE OUR PROGRAM

While the The Ellis School has lived at 6425 Fifth Avenue since 1958, there have been numerous changes to campus over the years since the original two houses, part of the Charles and Thomas Arbuthnot estate, were procured by headmistress Dr. Marion Hope Hamilton. The Middle School was constructed in 1959; the Fine Arts Building in 1974; the Fred C. Babcock Library in 1980; the Alice S. Beckwith Building which houses the Lower School in 1988; the Hillman Family Building which houses the Upper School, Alumnae Hall, and Janet's Gym in 2000; and the athletic field in 2014. Since moving to Fifth Avenue, the School has established a long history of making the most of and improving its home at the intersection of the Shadyside, Point Breeze, Homewood, Larimer, and East Liberty neighborhoods.

Ellis' physical metamorphosis continues into the new decade: the School is renovating and refurbishing facilities to support the strategic plan's guiding priorities. Ellis girls of all ages have been particularly excited about recent updates to two of the School's core spaces, the library and the auditorium, both of which play a central role in the experiences of students and families—and in the cherished memories of Ellis alumnae.

If Ellis were a sea vessel, the Fred C. Babcock Library, with its central location on campus, would be akin to the School's main hull—a space designed to provide shelter and buoyancy. Part of the Middle School building constructed in 1959, the Fred C. Babcock Library saw its last revitalization efforts in 1980 when funds were raised to enlarge and renew the space because its literary collection had grown from 4,000 to 33,000 volumes since 1961. Fast forward to 2017 when in-progress plans to renovate the library took on additional urgency as water damage from a leak in the library's roof impacted the upper level. Led by generous donations from Ellis trustee Dr. Anita Courcoulas and Ira Gumberg, parents of Tessa, Class of 2025, and the Babcock family, the library transformation was made possible through a collaborative effort from various community members, including design and project management leadership from trustee and Ellis alumna Jill SWENSEN '87.

The new classroom space is large enough to host an entire grade level and features integrated



technology and a collapsible glass wall that can be closed off for privacy or opened up to accommodate larger groups. The revamped common area outside of the classroom has flexible furniture including a mixture of moveable chairs, high-top tables, and comfortable lounge seating conducive to small group or independent work. A less visible yet highly impactful improvement to the space is the addition of a new heating and cooling system, which now means that the entire space benefits from air conditioning and is temperature controlled for students' comfort, making the space more practical and inviting.

The space has since seen heavy use by faculty and students across divisions, been a host to guest speakers like *New York Times* bestselling author Julie Lythcott-Haims, and acted as a gathering space for board members, alumnae, and prospective students and their families. When asked what they think of the remodeled library, students shared that they enjoy and appreciate having added space on campus to learn and study in—with one student even adding that it had the look and feel of Carnegie Mellon University. Library Media Specialist Sara Brooke echoed the students' sentiments and shared how she has witnessed a positive change in students' learning experiences in the library.

"The interdisciplinary and research-focused nature of Upper School classes means that they utilize the library often. Throughout the duration of projects and student-conducted research, classes are now able to meet in the library and utilize the larger, private classroom spaces with flexible furniture to accommodate varying group sizes," Sara shares.

With the strategic intention to create a space that was flexible enough to accommodate a wide variety of uses by classes and groups of all age-levels across campus, the library project has ultimately increased the use of one of Ellis' most beloved spaces and ensured that the library is once again a central learning hub for classes.

If the Fred C. Babcock Library is Ellis' central hull, the auditorium is its main deck—a large, open space meant to facilitate large-scale community congregation. At the same time improvements to the library were being imagined and implemented, updates were underway in the auditorium. With

the strategic plan's commitment to putting resources toward maintaining physical spaces that optimize student growth and further the goal of being an inclusive school community, it was clear that Ellis' central communal gathering place was in need of attention.

The first step in this incremental project was to move all of the sound and light equipment from the back production room into the auditorium itself to make it easier for student-led production teams to control performances. Technical Theater Director Brian Krugle notes, "Running a show from an essentially sound-proof room in which students could not see the lights or hear the sounds they were trying to run proved to be incredibly challenging, so this improvement was a welcome change to Ellis casts and crews."

After this initial "moving out" phase, performing arts faculty began the process of removing the entire sound system and replacing speakers above the stage as well as installing a new subwoofer underneath the stage. The 20-year-old sound board was also replaced with a top-of-the-line digital Yamaha sound console.

"The number of girls interested in theater tech has really grown over the past few years," shares Brian. "The interest in learning how to produce shows has doubled. The new equipment gives students the opportunity to gain relevant technical experience that they can continue to use at the collegiate and professional level. The enhancements have also provided more flexibility for non-theater events and improved the overall production value of Ellis shows."

With the support of funds distributed from an Ellis Parent Association community grant and a generous grant from a family foundation, much needed updates to the lighting system were also accomplished. The lights were replaced with state-of-the-art LED lights which are more efficient, safer, and can now be run by students from the central control board.

In addition to the larger, technical projects to upgrade Ellis' auditorium, several aesthetic upgrades have made the space more warm and welcoming to audiences thanks to several generous donations from Ellis alumnae and a family foundation. A new stage curtain was installed and dedicated to Charles

Altman, former Theatre Director and Performing Arts Teacher, in 2018. New carpet was also installed, and the auditorium's beloved benches have been reupholstered—but rest assured, their makeover doesn't conflict with students' ability to pound furiously on them in shows of support and appreciation.

Another update to the Ellis campus that was completed specifically to enhance current programming is the redesign and expansion of the pre-kindergarten space. Over the last several years, enrollment in Ellis' early childhood program has been trending upward, and a larger space was required to accommodate growing class sizes. Thanks to a gift from Leslie and Hans Fleischner, grandparents of a current Ellis student, contractors opened up the wall of the original pre-kindergarten room and connected it to two additional rooms in Arbutnot House, creating a suite of three interconnected classrooms.

With this renovated space, pre-kindergarten now has three "magic carpet" areas where students meet for team meetings, a large block and building area where students collaborate, a discovery station where students engage with challenging activities related to their unit of learning, a large dramatic play area that changes with the focus of each discovery unit, an arts and crafts area, a space for getting messy at the sensory table or at the painting easel, a "home away from home" corner with a pretend kitchen and living room, and a peaceful "woodlands" library and writing center. The pre-kindergarten team is taking full advantage of their updated space and has worked hard to create a learning environment that cultivates community and encourages meaningful learning.

## 4 RECRUITING AND RETAINING A VIBRANT STUDENT BODY

A vital part of the strategic planning process was revisiting the School's mission and vision statements to ensure that they continue to accurately capture the full value of an Ellis education. To align with the plan's priorities, the statements were updated to reflect the tenets of our programming and the unique advantages our school community and program provide for students.

The revised vision and mission statements are rooted in Ellis' four pillars—the four guiding principles that were identified through extensive conversation and collaboration with faculty, staff, and board members—and define how an Ellis education is an unparalleled experience. Ellis students are challenged to be intellectually vibrant, ambitious, and creative thinkers. They are not limited by traditional gender roles and outdated expectations. They are confident and brave agents of change who stand steadfast in their beliefs and in their commitment to shaping the world for the better.

"One of the greatest gifts of an Ellis education is the ability to develop creative solutions to tricky problems, something that makes Ellis alumnae distinctively confident in their approach to challenges and committed to having a real impact as adults in the world," says Macon. "Ellis girls and women are intellectually alive, warm and genuine, fearless in speaking up for themselves and others, and prepared to make a difference."

An Ellis education is a transformative experience, and all students who are bright and curious, principled in their beliefs, eager to make a difference, and ready to make the very most of their school experience should be Ellis girls. But data doesn't lie, and research has shown that a significant number of potential families do not pursue an Ellis education for their daughters because they believe it is out of their reach financially, despite the School's generous financial aid program. To remedy that notion, Ellis launched a new initiative within the strategic plan to make Ellis more attractive and affordable to all Pittsburgh families.

"We want nothing to stand in the way of our students, including the cost of an exemplary education in an all-girls environment. Tailored Tuition is an inclusive affordability initiative designed to make an Ellis education accessible to a wider range of families and to make it easier for families to get a clear picture of the level of tuition they would likely pay if their daughter attended Ellis," says Bayh SULLIVAN '02, Director of Enrollment Management.

Tailored Tuition shifts away from the blanket approach that explains financial aid as a discount from full tuition, employing a more individualized approach that takes each family's





unique financial profile into account to ensure enrollment is a long-term investment. Just as in our previous financial aid model, a family's best fit may be the Top Tuition for their daughter's grade level or a rate of Tailored Tuition that is calculated based on the family's financial profile.

"We know from our research that a significant number of families do not pursue an independent school education because they believe it is out of reach financially. This new approach will ask each family to pay a rate of tuition that is a sustainable stretch for them while taking into account their other significant financial variables," says Macon.

## 5 ENSURING LONG-TERM FINANCIAL HEALTH

The Ellis School has educated thousands of girls over the course of its 104 year history; this longevity and strength comes from the generations of generous community that have supported it. Looking to stay strong far into the future, Ellis would be remiss not to include a focus on the financial future of the school in a strategic plan. With the onset of COVID-19 and the financial impact both on the School and community members, the imperative to ensure the long-term fiscal health of the School and provide financial support to families in need has never been more relevant.

A number of major gifts in recent years will aid in supporting current and prospective Ellis families now and long into the future. Endowed gifts like the Patsy GRABLE Burke '46 and Jojo SEAMAN Bradshaw '47 Friendship Fund (pg. 7) which provides three full scholarships through Ellis' Tailored Tuition program, and the Love Like the Boys for the Girls Fund (pg. 54) which provides discretionary funds to cover the cost of extracurricular activities outside of the classroom, create an immediate and transformative impact on real students' experiences.

"It is an exciting time to be at Ellis and we are deeply grateful for all the ways in which our extended Ellis community has supported the School, and we take our role as stewards of that support very seriously," says Director of Development and Alumnae Engagement Carly REED Carstens '02. "We want giving to Ellis to be as meaningful to the donor as it is to the School. We are committed to developing clear and sustainable plans for the funding and operations of the School that will support Macon and the Board of Trustees' dynamic vision for the program and school community."

In addition to monetary gifts, generous benefactors have also donated their time and talents in innovative ways, which include interior design services in the renovation of the Lower School lobby and upgrades to the Benjamin R. Fisher Gallery, architectural renderings and project management services to the renovation of the Fred C. Babcock Library, expertise in

consulting work on behalf of the School, and countless visits and on-campus interactions from alumnae willing to mentor generations of Ellis girls who have come after them.

Building a strong culture of philanthropy is instrumental in strengthening the sense of connection and community among those who love this life-changing school. As we navigate the unexpected and far-reaching implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the strength and generosity of our community has been more important than ever. By coming together as a community and providing robust support to the Tailored Tuition program through the Ellis Fund, the School has been able to respond to families who are experiencing difficulty meeting tuition obligations, doubling down on the School's commitment to partnering with families to ensure that the cost of tuition is not a roadblock for any Ellis student.

While the pandemic has been a recent and pressing catalyst, our community's long-standing commitment to ensuring Ellis continues to be a cornerstone for girls' education in Pittsburgh is evergreen. Whether it's current or former parents, alumnae, faculty, board members, or friends of the School, the warm nature and giving spirit of the Ellis community remains strong and steadfast. Looking ahead to Ellis' next five years, the long-term financial health of the institution will be fortified by these creative thinkers who so willingly band together to solve hard problems and spark change.

## THE NEXT HORIZON

When Sara Frazer Ellis founded The Ellis School in 1916, her vision was to create an environment for girls and young women in which they would thrive and from which they would emerge poised and ready to tackle the most exciting opportunities then open to women in the world of higher education. For over 100 years, the School has evolved as the world has changed, but we have maintained our fierce focus on being a place where girls grow and learn in all the best ways, preparing them to soar in the world into which they will graduate.

*Ellis on the Move* will guide that continued evolution by being a leader in developing the remarkable qualities that not only prepare girls for college, but that transcend academic excellence and shape truly remarkable women. All who love Ellis are invited to climb aboard for the next phase of this remarkable school's adventures. Ellis is truly on the move.